The Traitors of Olympus III: Attrition of Peace

by jflashandcrash

Summary

Percy ends up at a Mayan temple while searching for a group of demigods that have gone rogue. He finds out they might be a bit more dangerous than the average homicidal teenager. Leo doesn’t remember reforging Kronos’ Backbiter… but he may have goofed and let it fall into the wrong hands. Reyna receives a mysterious package with a loving note from one of the darkest gods. All their paths connect in the third volume of The Traitors of Olympus, where the Heroes of Olympus clash with the demigods of the Traitors’ Prophecy.
After climbing the 91st step of a Mesoamerican temple, Percy decided something: if the Mayans were so smart, they should have invented the elevator. He may have been a demigod with super strength and endurance, but he figured he deserved a lift after saving the world a couple dozen times.

At least it was a beautiful day to die from exhaustion. There was a warm breeze drifting in from the San Francisco Bay, keeping the December air comfortable... unlike the freezing chill they left in his hometown, Manhattan. He had half a mind to travel to Canada to punch Boreas in the face and demand summer back. But the God of Winter probably wouldn’t take kindly to some surprise sock ‘em bop ‘em from a rogue demigod.

As they approached the boxlike top of the temple, Percy was impressed Annabeth wasn’t winded, especially since she hadn’t stopped talking since they got to Berkeley Hills. She was too giddy about the architecture.

The mortals walking by on their lunch breaks must have thought she was crazy, gesturing towards a supposed warehouse and talking about Mayan stelea. However, it was California. They might have just thought she was an art student.

Mortals had a hard time seeing through the Mist, a magical camouflage that kept them from panicking every time a wild minotaur grazed through their backyard. While those mortals might have thought his blonde, grey-eyed girlfriend was crazy, he thought she was wonderful.

Annabeth kept a few paces ahead of him the whole time, going on about the nine tiers in the temple, the jaws of Xibalba, and something about corn. He wasn’t sure he’d heard that last one right.

As much as Percy hated climbing this temple, he had to give it a fair chance. Anything that made Annabeth smile like that and made the sunlight sparkle along the curls of her ponytail was worth giving a fair chance. Except homework. Especially when she tricked him into thinking they were doing something fun outside and “fun” really meant “study session.”

At the last tier of the temple, they were greeted with a familiar face.

“You two are so slow,” Grover said. He had his hands on his hips. He tried to smile about getting to the top first, but his lips twitched with worry. His horns—oh yea, Grover was a satyr and had horns—peeked out of his curly brown hair, casting shadows on his goatee. He wore a Rastafarian hat and a shirt that said *Pick Flowers, Not Fights*, though Percy was pretty sure the nymphs said that was the same thing.

Annabeth gave Grover a half-grin. “We’re not exactly built for climbing mountains like you are.”

“Not without proper snacks,” Percy agreed. “Do you think you can magic us up some blueberries and a coke with your reed pipes?”

Grover sighed and touched the instrument in his pocket. “I wish. A tin can does sound delicious right now. But we shouldn’t relax here. That new grove is under our feet and Rosen was right—it feels weird.”

Some of the nature spirits in the area—or traveling to the area in Rosen’s case—had reported
sensing a new grove. Normally, Percy might shrug it off, but he’d seen how dangerous trees could be. Both in the Battle of Manhattan and one of the times he ticked off a Camp Half-Blood nymph named Olive. She could throw a platter of brisket with precision.

Along with his dislike of getting whacked in the head with dinner trays, the nature spirits said there was another reason to investigate this grove. They sensed it sprouted up overnight about three weeks ago. Around the same time the seven new members from Camp Half-Blood had gone missing.

Chiron, their camp counselor, thought it must be connected. Plus, a friend of one of the missing campers, a child of Hephaestus named Mathias, put a tracker in their Donkeymobile—yea, Percy didn’t ask about that part of the story—and the last coordinates before it broke were located here.

Percy took a deep breath. He was going to have nightmares of climbing stairs for weeks. “Lead on Goat Boy.” He motioned Grover towards a rectangular window in this tier. It must have been some kind of dome that dropped into the room below.

“Ba!” Grover bleated. “I’m not going down first. What if there’s another jaguar? That girl bullied me!”

For being a Lord of the Wild, Grover was surprisingly startled by the animal they met by the caved-in front entrance. Percy thought he might have been acting overdramatic. Juana—the jaguar’s name according to Grover—had only tried to rip out Percy’s throat once before Grover gave her the satyrs sanctuary blessing and released her into Berkeley Hills.

Don’t worry. It wasn’t the first time they’d released a wild animal into the city. Last time it was a lion in Las Vegas and that seemed to work out okay for the locals.

Annabeth strode past Grover. She took off her backpack and fished a grappling hook out. After testing one of the rocks on the edge of the window, she hooked it on and tossed a rope into the opening.

“Are you two coming along or are you going to have a picnic up here?”

If Percy ever forgot he loved Annabeth—which he couldn’t, even with godly intervention—he’d remember after seconds of watching her. She looked awesome while disappearing into the void.

But after his moment of awe, he had a moment of panic. He scrambled to the edge to make sure her descent was steady, controlled, and had an end to it.

Annabeth gripped the rope to pause, glanced up, and gave him a gentle smile. “It’s okay, Seaweed Brain,” she said shakily.

He tapped his pen and nodded for her to continue. “Be safe, Wise Girl.”

They both hated falling now. Even the rock and lava wall at Camp Half-Blood sometimes made him hesitate, and he could forget any of Jason’s “free fall” tricks that the son of Zeus occasionally did if the younger campers begged him long enough.

That past summer, Percy and Annabeth had an unfortunate vacation to Tartarus, complete with complimentary monsters, a continental breakfast composed of fire river, and angry gods. The whole thing had started with a fall into darkness.

Let’s just say Percy was happy when he heard Annabeth’s feet hit the floor below and he calculated it to be the specific distance of not-very-far.
Percy slid down seconds after.

Weird is the word all the nature spirits used. Creepy is what Percy would call this place. But at least it was no Tartarus.

There wasn’t any light in the room, only the dim rays that crept down from the rectangular ceiling dome. The temperature dropped at least twenty degrees, way colder than it should have been, even with those openings. Other than his feet brushing against the stone floor, the room was unearthly silent, like the descent had shifted them out of a busy metropolitan town and into the middle of the woods. As a New Yorker, he found it a crime against nature if he couldn’t hear at least one car horn every ten minutes.

They’d landed on a fallen tree. Percy had always found the California decoration style a little hippie, but he’d have to ask the Romans about fallen foliage decor. Annabeth had already stepped off the tree, narrowly avoiding some kind of pit buried underneath the rotting branches.

There were a lot of other trees. Again with the new age décor. A dozen of them were clustered against the far wall, around a long oak table and a smaller one beside it. Those and the upturned chairs around them looked like they’d been abandoned for years, not weeks. The branches of the trees smashed up to the lower portion of the ceiling, seeming to support it more than the walls themselves.

On the other side of the room, there was a throne made from bones. Percy wanted to groan. He hated thrones made from bones. They usually entailed some jerk who thought those kind of thrones were the best way to pick up ladies and henchmen. Percy really needed to ask his friend Piper, a daughter of Aphrodite, to give seminars on *The Myths of Being a Villain* to dispel such nonsense.

Dust trickled through the little light they had. The corners were completely dark. He’d have to warn Grover that mean jaguars could be lurking anywhere.

As Percy went to check out the throne and Annabeth went to investigate the tables, Grover crashed from the roof opening into the fallen tree. Hooves: great for climbing temples, not for scaling ropes.

There was a single portrait on the wall to the side of the throne, in between some extinguished torches. Percy went to take a closer look as Grover clopped up behind him.

“Oooh! Percy! This isn’t good. These trees don’t feel natural,” he said.

Percy had been trying to calculate exactly how long it took Grover to eat furniture when he got nervous. Now would be a good time to start counting.

“Aren’t all trees natural?” Annabeth mused.

Grover whined, “You know what I mean!”

Percy wanted to tease him, but he knew what Grover meant. Maybe it was their empathy link, but Percy could tell these trees were more the *Die Intruder!* type.

Once Percy got close enough, he realized the picture on the wall was a family portrait: a father and five children. Percy couldn’t imagine that big a family. He only had one infant sister and he was still trying to figure out the big brother thing. Although anyone forced into a photography studio had a right to look unhappy, these smiles looked particularly fake. There was something else a little weird about the photo. All the children seemed to be different ethnicities from the Hispanic father, except one: Ajax Pax. One of the campers who went missing.
Percy had only seen the unclaimed kid a few times—mostly while Ajax… or did he go by Pax? But mostly while Pax was helping the Stoll brothers terrorize the Ares cabin. That earned him a gold star in Percy’s book.

Another missing camper was in the photo beside the Stoll minion: Axel Pax, Ajax’s older half-brother. Annabeth and he suspected they were ex-members of Kronos’s army. But their group had convened and decided: just because the Pax brothers tried to destroy all of Western culture, didn’t mean they didn’t deserve a second chance.

Percy didn’t recognize the other children or the father, but something felt off about the photo.

“I found something!” Annabeth called.

He and Grover stepped, and clopped (respectively,) back towards the oak table and whatever Annabeth had there.

As they passed the fallen tree, Percy felt something crunch under his shoe.

He withdrew his foot to find a human jaw bone. Great. Exactly what he needed. More bones. He’d stepped on bones before, but that didn’t mean he was excited about it.

“Di Immortalis!” Grover cried. “That looks like a satyr’s jawbone!”

Percy wanted to argue, but realized he didn’t actually know the difference between satyr and human dentistry and didn’t care to learn. After a quick scan of the room, he could tell there were bones littered around the grove, like the world’s most unnerving fallen leaves.

“Let’s stay away from the man eating trees?” Percy suggested, giving this one a wide birth the rest of the way to Annabeth. Yea, they’d landed on it, but maybe that meant it would have a taste for some demigod milkshake and a satyr salad, since satyrs were probably on the healthier side of things for monsters trying to watch their figure.

When Percy got to Annabeth’s side, she was flipping through a notebook with one hand and holding her iPhone up with the other. There was another smartphone on the table, though that one was an older model. The screen was locked, presenting a number pad for password entry.

“Did you find out this grove was into ancient technology?” Percy asked. “What model is this? The *Clunky Brick 9,000*? I’ll bet it can’t Snapchat.”

“I don’t think the trees are interested in Snapchatting, Percy,” Annabeth said as she flipped to the front of the notebook.

Percy gave Grover a grin. “I don’t know. I think some nymphs are pretty into it.”

Grover’s face went bright red. “Percy! You promised never to talk about that!”

And the Stoll brothers had promised never to steal anyone’s phone again, print out conversations and embarrassing images, and hang them all over the forest, but Percy could guarantee they would repeat the actions faster than you could cry, “For Hermes!”

Percy grinned and wrapped an arm around Annabeth’s shoulder. “So, what did you find?”

The journal in her hands was covered with vertical columns depicting birds, odd half-circles, and tiny people. With Percy’s dyslexia, he was lucky if he could read English, let alone other languages. He wasn’t well versed in Avian Script, but he recognized it from one of their friends.
“It’s a journal in Egyptian. I think this first page has the number code for this phone. I recognize them as numbers, but I can’t remember what they mean.” Her brow furrowed. She sighed and shrugged. “I sent a picture over to Sadie to see if she can give us a general idea what this is.”

“Is Sadie someone who works at your dad’s university?” Grover asked.

Both Annabeth and Percy bit back smiles. They’d promised to keep the Greeks half-bloods and Egyptian magicians separate, but they’d have to let Grover in on it at some point.

“No,” Annabeth said calmly. “She’s a friend.”


“Let’s just say she was born with it,” Annabeth said.

“If we’re going to be waiting for a translation, I guess that means we’ll be missing that tour group. Darn,” Percy said.

That was the real reason they went to Cali. Yea, Chiron needed someone to look into the missing campers, but—as soon as the child of Hephaestus pinpointed it to Berkeley—Annabeth and Percy were the natural pick.

They were supposed to be doing a tour of the University of New Rome. But you know how it is when you’re a demigod, Percy thought. One minute you’re on a bus to try some cafeteria cheese and wieners and the next minute you’re looking at an Egyptian journal in a Mayan temple, searching for Greek half-bloods. He was just shocked he hadn’t almost died yet. The jaguar didn’t count.

Normally, Percy would have been excited to visit his friends in New Rome. But Reyna had assured Annabeth that the University wouldn’t take Percy unless he actually passed his exams. No slack for saving the world or anything like that.

Fortunately, Rome did their test in Latin, to decrease dyslexia problems, but it didn’t come as naturally to him as Ancient Greek did. Strangely, a lot of Romans didn’t want their entrance exam translated into Camp Half-Blood’s home tongue. Something about not wanting “that Greek life” on their campus.

He wanted to study and do well. It made Annabeth and his mom happy. But it could also make a guy wanna scream when the excuse, “but monsters ate my homework” didn’t work.

Annabeth scowled at him. “Percy,” she snapped in a voice that said she wouldn’t bring him a surprise blue Slurpee after his next swim meet. She knew how to wait for it to hurt the most.

Fortunately, that’s when Annabeth’s phone pinged back.

In proper Sadie fashion, the girl had attached a picture of her brother, Carter Kane, with a shabti attacking his hair. Shabti were little people made out of clay… yea, Percy thought they were weird too. But Percy could totally see her using clay people for sibling warfare. If they ever found Leo, one of Percy’s good friends, he’d have to introduce the two. Leo would fall head over heels.

Percy tried not to frown at the thought of Leo as Annabeth punched in the number code. Leo had gone missing after the war against Gaea. Gone missing, Percy thought. Not dead.

“Sadie says it’s some kind of tracking journal on two people named Wheel and Peace,” Annabeth reported, a slight grin forming at the edge of her lips. The picture must have distracted her from her
prior irritation. Percy would owe Sadie a stick of gum.

Annabeth punched in the numbers for the phone.

“Axel and Pax,” Percy said. He might not have been as smart as Annabeth, but he could figure out the basics.

“So, this grove does have to do with the missing campers,” Grover said. He nibbled nervously at the ends of his shirt. His eyes darted around the ominous trees. “That’s great, but can we learn more about them outside? These trees make me anxious.”

Normally, Percy might point out that everything made Grover anxious, but he did have a particular dislike for places that felt underground. And apparently for unfriendly foliage.

“Oh my gods! Percy!” Annabeth shouted and grabbed his arm.

Percy gripped the fountain pen in his pocket, scanning the room for what Annabeth saw. “What?!?”

“The video—there’s two of them—this can’t be a fake—it looks like it’s—”

Percy glanced down at the old phone’s screen. His eyes widened. “That’s Leo! He’s alive!”

Sure enough, on the tiny, unlocked phone screen, Percy could make out the unmistakable elfish features of their Latino friend. As per usual, the son of Hephaestus was dusted with soot and in workman’s clothing. Unlike usual, his face was twisted in a grimace. He looked exhausted and worried in the freeze frame. There was some kind of sword half-slipping out of a beach towel in his hands.

“Where is he? Do you think—”

“Let’s see,” she cut him off.

Annabeth pressed play eagerly.

Leo took several steps diagonally away from the camera, towards a forge in the distance. He looked like he was shouting angrily over his shoulder, but there was no sound from the video. A person clad head to toe in a silver mesh suit rapidly approached him from behind. The scene felt bizarre and made Percy want to shout out, “Look out, Leo! You’re about to be attacked by the Tin Man!”

But the next part wasn’t funny. The silver figure wrapped an arm around Leo’s neck, picking him up in a chokehold. Although Percy wasn’t sure from the awkward angle, the figure seemed to break the hand Leo had on the sword.

The image went white as Leo erupted into flames. That part wasn’t the scary part. Leo had a tendency to explode into hot stuff. Really, Percy figured that would be the end of the video, with a *so long to that sucker* to the man in silver.

But as the flames died down, Leo wasn’t the one left standing.

The camera trembled and blurred. When it came back into focus, some other girl knelt beside Leo. The silvery figure appeared unmarred beside her and Leo. He’d taken off his jump suit, revealing the stoic face of Axel Pax.

Rage boiled inside Percy. He’d *trusted* that ex-Kronos jerk and his slimy little brother. He and
Annabeth had defended their right to Camp Half-Blood. Hades, he’d even told Connor to sneak in some proper Coca-Cola for them and you never scorned fresh, outside Coca-Cola.

By this point, Grover had nibbled off the bottom corner of his shirt.

Annabeth’s lips were pressed in a firm line as the image froze on the three.

Over his time as hero, Percy had heard some pretty creative cusswords from Coach Hedge, various gods, and unsettled guidance counselors. He was about to combine them all. “That—”

“There’s another one,” Annabeth cut him off. She flicked the image away to pull up another video.

Leo wasn’t in this one. Neither was Axel, or if he was, he was intermixed with a party of people. At first glance, Percy thought it was some kind of celebration at a banquet hall. When Percy noticed the particular bone throne, he realized this was security surveillance footage from the room they were standing in, pre-killer grove. The camera must have been somewhere above the bone throne.

In the video, there was a fire pit—where the fallen tree was now—roaring with turquoise flames. Since that was the only lighting and the angle was awkward, Percy couldn’t make out much more than the dim figures of party guests at the tables, where he, Annabeth, and Grover were standing now.

Facing away from the camera, there was a man in a suit standing by the fire pit, leaning heavily on a cane. Before him were three figures. Without any motion from Annabeth, the image zoomed. Despite the pixilation, Percy could make out the faces of three of their missing campers: Kalypso Cassand, daughter of Apollo, Euna Song, daughter of Demeter, and the slimy dirt bag, Ajax Pax, who had yet to be claimed.

They were all armed, looking ready to attack the seemingly feeble man; though, Percy had learned that seemingly feeble men could be shockingly spry. Then he noticed the weapon in the daughter of Demeter’s hands. One of Percy’s old scars burned.

“That’s Backbiter!” he cried.

“They must have tricked Leo into reforging it,” Annabeth said.

“Oh! I don’t like this,” Grover moaned, halfway through eating his shirt now.

The image zoomed back out. As it did, the daughter of Demeter raised Kronos’s scythe and the room devolved into chaos. Sound kicked in, startling all three of them.

Screams. They were quiet in the recording, but at least a dozen people wailed in agony. Percy felt his mouth drop as tree saplings burst through the guests’ chests, shoulders, and heads.

The man with the cane was the worst. The others were out of focus and darkened in the background. The man was closer, in fancy HD that Percy didn’t want, so he could see the man tear leaves from his face.

When Euna Song slammed the scythe into the ground, a walnut tree exploded into existence, growing out from inside him and literally tearing the man limb from limb.

Once done, the video stopped and the smartphone shut down.

Annabeth, Percy, and Grover stared at the blank screen.
Annabeth tried to restart the phone. “I’ve never seen a child of Demeter do something like that before,” she whispered. Her voice shook.

The smartphone wouldn’t turn back on. Percy had a feeling it never would. He hoped not. Regardless of why Annabeth would want to rewatch that, he never wanted to see that extended version of *Planet Earth* again.

“They—they can’t,” Grover stuttered. “That was some expert level nature magic. She *shouldn’t* have been able to do that.”

Percy had to admit, he’d seen Grover do some amazing things, but he’d never seen him grow so many trees at once, out of people no less.

“They tricked Leo into reforging Kronos’s scythe, and attacked him,” Annabeth muttered to herself. She tapped her finger against the Egyptian notebook, probably mad each tap didn’t give her another clue.

Percy stared at the trees. They were once people. Not monsters. Probably not even demigods. “And recycled a bunch of people into compost for trees,” he finished summarizing.

“But why?” Annabeth said. She stood up and shook her head. “This doesn’t add up.”

He, Grover, and Annabeth exchanged a glance. Percy gripped his fountain pen. “I don’t know what they’re up to,” he said. “But we need to find the new Seven and stop them before they hurt anyone else.”

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Thanks for reading the first chapter of *Attrition of Peace*, the third volume in the *Traitors of Olympus* series! For those of you who are new readers, welcome! To those of you that are my veterans and put up with all of my nonsense, welcome back! I hope you enjoyed this chapter and will continue the adventure with me, the Heroes of Olympus, and the "traitorous" seven!

I normally only update once a week but there's going to be a double release this weekend with Leo's Chapter: *Movie Night is On Me*, I hope you stay tuned!
Leo: Movie Night is on Me

When Leo realized he had no memories of the last month, he wasn’t surprised. As heroes go, losing a few months of memory seemed comparable to losing one pencil in a backpack. Judging off of when his friends, Jason and Percy, forgot their entire lives, Leo thought it might be more of a coming-of-age thing for heroes. Ah, you’ve turned 16? Better wipe away every awkward experience until this point so you’re completely unprepared to handle the future.

By the time Leo finished skimming through 72 hours of video surveillance, he felt like all his internal circuits were fried. He’d hunkered down in the Leo and Calypso Garage shack with chips and a packet of energy drinks, determined to figure out what had happened.

First, he and Calypso had to figure out how much time had lapsed. It had been happening to Leo more and more recently, though Calypso said that was because of the whole death and zombie experience and their recent detachment from society. This time though, Calypso also couldn’t remember what day it was, or why a group of rowdy centaurs and nature spirits graffitied Red Velvet Cheesecake and The Anti-Corruption Act all over their shed. Even when he couldn’t remember, Calypso’s memory was usually in mint condition.

After he and Calypso woke up to their little work camp looking like it had been invaded by Dionysus’s crazed fan club—and Leo knew exactly how they liked to party—Calypso realized someone had worked some magic on them. Leo was a little alarmed at how well she could identify forgetful magic, but he figured that was just a sorceress thing.

Leo fiddled with a few pieces of metal. He’d absently crafted three or four miniature Buford tables while wading through all the footage.

Nothing special. Some Cyclops raided their trash again. Leo really needed to Cyclops proof the trash with a tiny robot that said No, Bad Cyclopes, to guilt them into good behavior. A few rowdy centaurs stole one of their umbrellas and replaced it with the rotor blade and mast of a helicopter. That explained where that came from.

Leo’s ADHD drifted his attention away from the screen. He almost overlooked the guy in Calypso’s fireproof mesh suit trying to strangle him.

He sat up. “Hey Sunshine!” he called. “I found the Saturday morning cartoons!”

Calypso came into the tiny shack with a basket of fresh laundry. She sang softly and wore jeans and a T-shirt. Since they left the island, she’d permanently ditched the shiny goddess look, but Leo thought she’d never looked hotter in her work clothes. Her caramel hair was in a practical braid that made him crazy.

Leo reached to help her fold, but winced when she smacked his hand away. “Ow—Sunshine—you’ve got to stop punishing me for trying to help with house chores,” he complained and shook out his hand.

“You’re hands are greasy,” she said, her almond eyes narrowing at his fingers.

Leo hadn’t noticed how messy his fingers became while making the mini Bufords. He missed the full-size Buford.

Leo sighed and watched her fold. He suspected she enjoyed something about laundry, probably the therapeutic simplicity of it. This was one action that hadn’t changed since she left Ogygia, though
she must have fought with invisible servants to do the chore before. As much as he knew she was happy to be off the island, for every minute she took to enjoy her freedom, she seemed to need a minute in the garden or by the loom so she didn’t get overwhelmed.

He’d offered to build her a clothes dryer, or to have Festus start a fire-drying service, but that usually only earned him a scowl.

There was more to it this time though. Normally, she’d give him a playful flick or something.

Something about going through these videos had left her on edge.

He had a suspicion, but he wasn’t ready to admit it to himself, let alone to her.

Leo skipped backwards in the video. Although the surveillance camera in the front and back of the shack didn’t capture transition scenes, he could hear and see enough. This group of seven demigods bargained for Leo’s location with his father, Hephaestus. Once they found him, some tall, buff guy of mixed ethnicity named Axel traded Felix’s missing control board to have Leo rebuild a sword.

Felix—a smaller, silver version of Festus designed to find, protect, and reunite Calypso with him if they were ever parted. He was hoping that might alleviate some of her mild… separation anxiety. Leo vaguely remembered Felix disappearing one night. From the video, he gathered Felix went to find Calypso… just the wrong Calypso. Instead, it ended up outside Camp Half-Blood, after Kalypos, a daughter of Apollo that the dragon promptly tried to eat. Who would have thought destroy and protect would be so close when coding a mechanical dragon.

Although Leo felt pretty bad, once he found out everyone was okay, he was glad random strangers got to test out his new dragon, instead of almost having his girlfriend get charcoaled. Maybe he had a little more to learn before he could replicate Festus’s control disk.

When Leo pressed play, Calypso frowned at the screen. They were still at the part where the silver-suited guy strangled him. He could almost envision Percy shouting, “Look out, Leo! You’re about to be attacked by the Tin Man!”

“It’s okay,” Leo assured Calypso. “He didn’t strangle me too much.”

“It’s not that,” she said and waved his personal wellbeing away. “You recrafted Kronos’s blade.”

Leo glanced at her. No matter how long he was in the field of Greek mythology, he could never keep all the names straight. “That’s the dude from God of War right? Is he a big baddie?”

Calypso didn’t seem to hear him. Her frown deepened. “We need to find the people who have that sword.”

Leo tried not to gawk. That would mean hunting down other demigods. Calypso hadn’t been comfortable interacting with other demigods yet. He didn’t remember having a direct conversation with her about seeing his friends, but he had a distinct feeling that she hadn’t wanted to.

Having her say she wanted to talk to some demigods—even if it was a couple of jerks who crashed their shack—made him giddy. Maybe they could go to Camp Half-Blood next and get attacked by everyone for being M. I. A. for so long.

“Um—yea,” he said, half a moment too slow. Smooth, he thought. He probably should have cared more about this whole Kronos-sword thing, but he was mostly excited about the thought of seeing his friends. And beating up the guy who tried to choke him. That would be some nice stress relief.
He grinned, reaching for Felix’s silver control disk. It was on his desk, beside an empty packet of chips. While tracing his fingers along the metal, he said, “If that Kalypso girl is with them—what did they call her? Kally? If she’s with them, I think we’ll be able to find that group in no time. Just leave it to the Leoman.”

Calypso rolled her eyes. Then she glared. “Leo, The God of War is Ares, not Kronos.”

Leo laughed that it took her so long to catch the prior reference. “Sunshine, it’s the name of a game. We can play it sometime after we’re done catching the Tin Man Strangler.”[1]

With that, Leo snatched up some tools and went to find something that could fit Felix’s control disk. Although he couldn’t place why, he was sure finding this group of jerks would result in crossing paths with his friends from Camp Half-Blood and New Rome.

He just hoped this Kronos sword thing wasn’t that big a deal. He’d fought the Giants before. What could a group of demigods pull out that he hadn’t seen before?

[1] I know, the main character’s name is Kratos. I just can’t resist the look on Leo’s face when he remembers that is NOT a game you want to play with a jealous girlfriend around. Nor with someone who knows anything accurate about Greek mythology.

Thanks for reading the second chapter of AOP! I hope you enjoyed! :D Let me know if you're liking it so far in the comments! Watch out next weekend for Reyna's chapter: Who Ordered the Trojan Mario?
When Reyna first received the report, she thought it was a prank. Had it been from anyone other than Michael Kahale, she would have sent the messenger to help shovel their war elephant’s, Hannibal’s, pen or scribe for their local chatty harpy, Ella. She’d been told that was an unbearable task.

But as Reyna stood on the banks of the Little Tiber River, the military barracks at her back and Michael Kahale at her side, she could see he hadn’t been joking.

There was indeed a twenty foot tall, wooden statue of Nintendo’s Mario in their valley. He stood—one foot up for a jump—on the opposite bank of the Little Tiber. The statue was on wheels, ropes already bolted into Mario’s black shoe for dragging. The red and blue paint of his overalls and shirt gleamed brilliantly in the California sun, contrasting sharply with the green grass along the road to New Rome. The whole sight looked like it had been screenshot out of that game that Will made she and Nico play: Super Mario Sunshine.

This had Greek written all over it. Not literally since there was no writing on the plumber, but Reyna could imagine her Greek friends, Piper and Percy, thinking this was an ingenious idea and Annabeth sighing along.

Reyna wondered if it was in fact Annabeth’s idea, and if there were Greek troops inside to continue their little “rivalry.”

How many troops could you fit inside a wooden Mario? There was probably a ladder extending from Mario’s grounded foot to his torso, where you could fit the most soldiers. Depending on how close the campers would get to each other, she would guess at least a dozen.

“And it just appeared?” Reyna asked, gripping her pilum. There was a subtle, December breeze blowing through the valley, tussling her long black braid and purple cloak. Today was warm, even for California standards.

“Yes,” Michael said, clearing his throat. He wasn’t in his armor, but wore a work out tank top and athletic shorts. For being a son of Venus, he looked more prepared to beat someone to death than flirt with them.

“Nathan and Bobby were guarding the tunnel?” Reyna asked. She already knew the answer, but she wanted to make sure she had everything in as much detail as possible.

“Yes, they were found unconscious at the entrance, mumbling—mumbling about nightmares,” Michael added the last part hesitantly.

Reyna frowned. Lou Ellen and the other children of Hecate could easily use the Mist to mask their own approach towards the camp, but could they mask a twenty foot statue?

And one of the children of Hypno or even Nico might be able to put Nathan and Bobby to sleep. But she didn’t think Nico was back to full power. Although communication between the camps had been sparse recently, she’d heard the child of Hades was still struggling after that summer’s shadow traveling.

Something didn’t feel right here.
“Call over the First and Fifth Cohort and alert those on probation they need to haul in a large statue,” she said. “We’re going to give the Greeks a warm welcome.”

The First and Fifth Cohort were assembled and armed within ten minutes. Although there were some grumbles about this infringing on lunch time, most were too excited about the giant Mario statue and the prospect of getting another win for their Greco-Roman skirmishes. They were already talking about hauling the statue to Temple Hill as a sacrifice to the gods.

Frank was supposed to arrive any moment to discuss what to do. The lower ranks were lining up to grab the statue’s ropes and roll it across the Little Tiber. The First and Fifth Cohorts waited on the other side, ready to escort the statue further into camp and defend if the Greeks decided to strike.

The troop’s excitement was infectious until one member on probatio, Ellie Atmadja, found a note on the Mario statue. She raced it up to Reyna.

This recruit was fresh from Lupa. She was short, had a deep tan, and had the grace of Dakota after three pitchers of Kool-Aid. So very little.

Ellie almost fell over when she skidded to a stop in front of Reyna. She couldn’t seem to decide if she should bow or grovel. “Praetor—for you,” she finally said and shoved the note to Reyna.

“Thank you, Atmadja. You may return to the others,” Reyna said, hoping the girl wouldn’t have an aneurism from the conversation.

As Ellie fumbled over another bow and dashed back to help the others with the ropes, Reyna examined the paper. It was composed of four colorful pieces of construction paper, taped together. Her name was written in sloppy red cursive across the front. She flipped it open, wondering if Thalia was involved in this.

Dear Reyna Ramirez-Arelllllano,

I got you a present, something you know you desperately desire and don’t know that you already hate. Enjoy!

--From the Darkest

PS: I do not accept returns on damaged merchandise. Merchandise is likely damaged. Packaging is fragile and will shatter in the vengeful waters of the Bitty Tibbr. XO XO
That didn’t sound like something from anyone at Camp Half-Blood, although maybe from a Huntress.

_The Bitty Tibbr. The Little Tiber._

Reyna dropped the note, opening her mouth to shout at those on _probatio_ to stop pulling the Mario statue into the river. Before she could inhale, the water surged.

The ripple started forty feet upstream, but roared into an eight foot wave within seconds. Ellie and those on _propatio_ panicked, taking their last step towards the shore.

Although the wave was nothing compared to what Percy had conjured this past summer, it was large enough to smash the leg off of Mario. The blast knocked the lower ranking soldiers into the muck before splashing them back onto shore, unharmed.

The legless plumber crashed onto his side. The wooden frame cracked. She could barely hear a male with a British accent scream from inside, “We’re tied up—we can’t swim—”

Then the river whisked the wreckage into a raging swirl.

There were _people_ in those rapids.

Reyna had only ever seen the Little Tiber protect New Rome from monsters. These must have been enemies.

_But you won’t know why they’re here or who they are if you don’t interrogate them._

Reyna pointed to the Fifth Cohort, all of which were prepared with nets to catch some Greeks. “Fish them out!” she commanded.

There was a pause, then Dakota lead the Cohort towards the shore.

Before they could reach it, a thick vine snaked out of the water, digging into dry land. A moment later, two figures emerged. One, an Asian girl with shoulder length hair, gripped the vine as it snaked further inland. She must have been a daughter of Demeter. Her other hand was wrapped around the waist of an enormous boy.

Reyna immediately recognized him. That was Piper McLean’s favorite cousin, an Afro-Brit son of Eros named Calex Rupin McKenzie. That would make the girl either Euna or Joey Song. These were two of the new Seven that had arrived at Camp Half-Blood in early October. Reyna had run into them on a recon mission last month.

Once they were solidly on ground, the girl released the vine and went still. The boy struggled against some ropes around his arms.

That left five members still in the water.

The river smashed two more bodies onto shore. Dakota and the others helped to drag them out. One was a tall girl with honey colored skin wearing a burgundy parka that matched her hair. Dakota scrambled to help her up. If Reyna remembered properly, that was one of his half-sisters, Merry.

Near them, the other member coughed up some water. Although Reyna couldn’t remember the pale girl’s name, Reyna thought she was a child of Apollo. “Axel and Pax are still in the water!” the girl choked out, struggling to get out of her binding.
Reyna flinched.

Unlike the other four, the Little Tiber didn’t seem willing to release the Pax brothers. Through the vortex of water, Reyna thought she could see two figures struggling to break the surface. When the Fifth Cohort cast their nets to drag them ashore, the ropes snapped under the force of the current.

Reyna scrambled for a plan. She wished Percy was here. She could hear herself shouting for some chains—that they could harpoon the Pax brothers and drag them to shore with something less breakable.

They’d be injured, but they would be able to breathe, assuming she didn’t hit a lung.

At least the Little Tiber decided to drown them in a whirlpool right in front of camp, instead of dragging them downstream.

Someone shoved a javelin with an attached chain into her hand. Reyna dashed to the edge of the water, taking aim. She hoped she wouldn’t hit a vital organ.

Before she could throw, an eagle the size of a golf cart swooped over the water.

“Hold!” Reyna shouted at her troops.

The eagle snapped its claws into the water, snatching two people up.

As soon as they were out, the Little Tiber swirled back to its peaceful course. Like it hadn’t tried to kill two demigods. But that left Reyna wondering two questions: why had the Little Tiber so desperately tried to murder Axel and Pax? And where was the seventh member of their group?

When the eagle landed with the Pax brothers and morphed back into Frank, Reyna was surprised to find that she was shaking. She stepped towards the other praetor and the presumed Pax brothers.

The two figures had black canvas bags tied over their heads. Both wore dark dress shirts that the Little Tiber had nearly shredded. Their hands were bound behind their backs, proving they never had a chance to swim.

They choked, gagged, and coughed. The smaller of the two threw up some water.

Frank knelt down beside the smaller to untie the black canvas. “What happened?” he asked, his eyes wide as he helped hold up the tinier boy.

Reyna knelt beside Axel. Even with the bag over his head, she could easily recognize him by the scar on his hip. With the way the Little Tiber had destroyed his shirt, she could see it extend from below his pant-line halfway up his side.

Frank tugged off Pax’s black bag. The young Hispanic’s dark hair stuck out wildly. Pax’s yellow and black eyes darted about the soldiers and his gagging changed into a startled gasp. In Spanish, he babbled in a panic. “Holy Titans! New Rome?! She sent us to New Rome?!”
Reyna scowled at Pax, but decided it would be better to ask why New Rome made him so nervous in private. And why he saw it proper to call upon the Titans.

“I’m going to remove the bag over your head,” she informed Axel.

He muttered in a language she didn’t understand, likely Mayan from what he’d said about himself previously.

Reyna’s ears popped. For half a second, she felt like there was an air vacuum around Axel. _Magic_, she realized and tore the black bag away.

Reyna almost forgot about the magic when she saw the leather muzzle strapped around Axel’s jaw.

His dark eyes searched around in alarm. Once he saw Pax crawling closer to cower beside him and the Fifth Cohort helping the rest of his team over, he relaxed slightly. Despite his usual deep tan, he was sickly pale, making the systematic scars along his face more prominent. Judging from how scruffy his normally-neat goatee was, they must have been held captive for at least two weeks.

“Reyna,” he whispered, then clenched his jaw in what she readily recognized as humiliation.

Reyna unbuckled the muzzle from his face. Some of the skin on his cheeks had rubbed off with the straps. When she withdrew her knife and cut the binding around his arms, she could see some blood oozing from his chest. Nudging the scaps of material to the side revealed a puncture wound through his shoulder. Like someone had shot him and the river had reopened the wound.

Reyna wished her hands would stop shaking as she put away her knife. She didn’t register that Frank and some of the other soldiers had asked her a question. Or that Pax was whining to Axel in Spanish.

Axel tried to stand and wavered. Reyna caught his good shoulder, knowing someone like him would find it unforgivable to collapse in front of her, her troops, or his friends. Before she knew what she was doing, her tattoo burned and she could sense Axel’s panic, helplessness, and overwhelming guilt. The guilt of a leader who failed.

In that instant, Reyna knew the seventh member of their group was dead.

He frowned at the glowing symbol of Bellona on her forearm. Gently but firmly, he removed her hand. Reyna could feel some of her strength ebb into Axel, just enough to help him stand. Her symbol returned to a dull black.

“I think I’m going to owe you more than a cup of hot chocolate and a circus performance after this,” he said, his voice hoarse. By now, Pax had crawled over to hide behind Axel’s leg. Axel leaned carefully so he wouldn’t fall over as he ruffled his brother’s hair. Although she knew how twisted he felt inside, his dark gaze remained calm as he said, “Please help my troops.”

Reyna felt the gaze of the First and Fifth Cohort’s on her. Even Frank, still too self-conscious about his new role as praetor, was waiting for her verdict.

As far as the River Tiber was concerned, Axel and his friends were enemies of New Rome. She thought about what she’d discovered last time she met him—that he wasn’t a demigod. She considered the words on the note as well: *something you know you desperately desire and don’t know that you already hate.*
“Dakota, Michael, take a few guards and bring them inside,” she said, briskly turning towards her centurions. They snapped to attention. “Summon a healer while you take them in. Frank and I will question them to find out if we should help them or kill them.”

“We will?” Frank asked. He stood up from kneeling beside Pax. Upon seeing her glare, he also snapped to attention. “I mean, yes Reyna—er—of course we will.”

One day, Frank would remember they were the same rank when she gave an order.

As the legionnaires moved, Reyna withheld a frown. This was uncomfortably close to what happened with Percy last summer. And like last summer, she could tell the new arrivals were a bad omen.

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed! Our two teams finally cross, and I am *giddy* to see how you react to it!

And how are you liking *The Dark Prophecy* that just came out-I know I just started reading it :D

Now, assuming I'm not lazy and not distracted devouring that book (so... highly unlikely. I excel at the art of laziness) I'll get another double release with Reyna's *The Scent of a Liar* later this weekend!
Reyna: The Scent of a Liar

Last summer, when Reyna had escorted Percy Jackson to the principia, the Lares’ reaction had been unnerving. The household gods and ancestral ghosts of New Rome had slurried him as “Graecus” or Greek. They were still adjusting to the occasional presence of the Camp Half-Blood members, sometimes shouting more derogatory insults and threatening to empty their chamber pots on the visiting campers.

However, they’d never done this.

As Axel and his five walked towards the principia, the Lares were completely silent.

Similar to when Percy entered, the Lares would stop and stare. Some looked angry. Some looked scared. None threw an immediate insult. She only heard one speak. A young, purplish boy ghost whispered, “How did that monster get in?”

Their continued silence was unnerving and uncharacteristic.

Reyna was beginning to wonder if the information she got out of their interrogation would outweigh whatever threat these six could pose to New Rome. By the end of the conversation, she hoped to know if these six were stranded guests or if she should have let them drown in the Little Tiber.

Once Reyna sat in one of the two high-backed chairs in the principia and set her dagger on the table, she felt more at ease. Frank took a seat beside her, at rigid attention. They’d had several new recruits since he’d taken over the position as co-praetor and could comfortably run an interrogation on his own, but this was a little different than collecting stray Lupa pups.

Normally, new recruits would gawk at the polished marble floors, the velvet drapes cascading down from the mosaic of Romulus and Remus on the ceiling, and the enormous banners. She remembered how impressed she had been the first time she’d seen this room and later how she felt like the weight of New Rome had shifted onto her shoulders when she’d first sat as praetor.

Neither Axel nor Pax seemed surprised by the room as they entered. If anything, their glances were so direct, they appeared to have the layout memorized. As Axel stepped in, his head held high despite his prior humiliation and pain, his gaze darted to note the weapons in the room, the lack of guards, and—she was shocked he registered they weren’t statues—the metallic greyhounds at either side of her seat.

Pax still cowered behind his taller brother. Similarly, he seemed to know where everything was, but his panicked eyes were darting between all the exits.

Behind him, Piper’s cousin was having the reaction she was used to seeing. Calex’s wide grey eyes drifted around the room in awe. He and the tall Indian girl with a burgundy jacket were in
better spirits than the rest of the group. The girl teased him over his excitement.

Both quieted down when Calex turned to the last two members of their group and asked, “Where’s Joey?”

The Korean girl looked straight forward, like he hadn’t addressed her. She wore all black, maybe for a stealth operation, like Reyna had seen on her weeks ago. Something that looked a suspicious amount like a dinner napkin was tied around her neck in place of a bandana. Out of all of them, she was the only one armed. A xiphos sword hung at her side, one thumb pressed delicately on the top of the pommel, like she feared the sword might unsheathe itself of its own volition.

Reyna assumed some of the others had stealth blades on them elsewhere. Although torn up, she noticed the younger Pax brother had a utility belt with darts, vials, pouches, and some sort of brass knuckles.

The last member of the group, the daughter of Apollo with strawberry blond hair, pressed her lips together at Calex’s question. Her eyes teared up, and she shook her head.

Calex’s face fell.

Reyna frowned. She knew how hard it was to say that a friend had died.

Argentum and Aurum, the greyhounds at either side of her chair, perked up. Aurum, her gold dog, growled at the new comers. Argentum sniffed furiously in their direction, looking confused.

Reyna rubbed Aurum’s head to calm him down. “Thank you, Dakota, Michael,” she said and waved her hand in dismissal.

Dakota squeezed the shoulder of the Indian girl one last time and handed her his flask of Kool-Aid. Then he and Michael Kahale departed.

Reyna nodded at Frank to begin. He cleared his throat, adjusted his purple toga—something he still wasn’t used to wearing—and said, “What happened?”

They had instinctively formed a shoulder to shoulder line in front of her and Frank as they walked in. Except the smaller Pax boy. He still cowered behind his older brother.

Axel stepped forward and told their story, though he started somewhere she didn’t expect. He said that he and Pax were descended from Mayan Mopan Royalty on their father’s side. That their father, Santiago Pax, discovered the Greek gods were real, and thought he could become a god by a combination of eating a Greek goddess’s heart, and sacrificing thousands of lives to himself in a ritual. Axel and his little brother, Ajax Pax—or the one who went simply by Pax—were gathering weapons to stop their father and got sidetracked on some Greek missions along the way.

During this, Santiago captured their group of seven, and dragged them back to Santiago’s temple to use Pax’s blood for one of the ceremonies. Apparently, two of the Pax boy’s half siblings—an Egyptian magician named Lapis and a Japanese monk named Hiro—drugged Merry and Calex so they couldn’t use their demigod powers.

Calex and Merry’s eyes widened at the news. Merry looked a little sick.

Frank frowned and muttered, “Mayan royalty? Egyptian magicians…”
Reyna sympathized with his confusion. Before the Greeks, she thought the Romans were the only godly children out there. Now, the modern mythological world was starting to feel a lot more crowded and a lot more dangerous.

During the entire conversation, Aurum growled softly. He didn’t react when Reyna touched his head to soothe him.

“What made Pax’s blood so important to the ritual?” Frank finally asked.

Each time the word “ritual” was mentioned, Pax shrank more behind his brother.

Axel frowned. “His mother is a Greek goddess. Santiago thought his blood would be more powerful. He wanted Ajax and… and another demigod’s blood. He cut open Ajax’s tongue for blood and took the life of one of our friends, Joey Song.”

As Axel said it, his eyes unfocused. Reyna remembered the helplessness and guilt she’d sensed in him before and thought about the muzzle and bindings he’d worn when he arrived. He likely had sat there and watched, incapable of doing anything.

Euna, stared blankly at the back wall. She must have been in shock. From what Reyna was gathering, Joey Song was this girl’s little sister.

Merry hugged herself. Calex made a choking sound, his jaw dropping in disbelief.

“What?” He glanced over at Euna, who continued to ignore him.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Reyna said. She thought about the soldiers she couldn’t save during the Second Titan War and repressed a shudder. She still remembered the stories of the Triple A Chimera that would stalk into their camp at night, how people would mysteriously die in their sleep. She remembered her Cohort being torn to pieces when they were flanked by the children of Hecate, lead by a disgusting monster that combined skeletal features with a lion’s head —called the Leonis Caput by her troops, since they’d never seen it in their mythology before.

Although she knew they were grieving, Reyna needed to hear the rest of this story. She pushed away the memory of screams and forced herself not to touch the scar across her thigh, where the Leonis Caput had stabbed her.

She focused back on Axel and his little brother. “Your mother is a Greek goddess? Which one?”

Pax peeked over Axel’s good shoulder, his black and hazel eyes rimmed red from crying. “She never did that official glowy-claimy-thing,” he said, his voice much lighter than his demeanor. “But you know how it is with gods. One decade they’re having an affair with a crazed Mayan prince, the next they’re smiting a town because a cashier gave them Pepsi instead of Coke. I’m sure it’s on her to-do list.”

Plenty of demigods didn’t know their godly parent’s identity, but this situation felt different. “Your father never told you?” she asked.

Pax laughed nervously. “He is… he was a really busy guy too. Going to go out on a limb here, but he wasn’t much for laying around.” At the word “laying,” Pax released a hysterical giggle-sob.

Aurum growled again.

Pax ducked behind his brother’s back.
Reyna would need to question that further. She got the feeling it might be better to do one-on-one interviews with all of them after this. She picked her dagger off the table and twirled the tip on the edge of her armrest in thought. “I know this is hard, but we need to know what happened after.”

Axel glared at ground and swallowed. “I don’t remember.”

Kally, the small strawberry blonde, took a step forward. She trembled and choked on her words at first, looking nervous. After a moment, she collected herself and said, “Axel had been shot several hours prior to our fight with Santiago. He lost a lot of blood.”

Reyna understood the message: he’d passed out.

“That’s the second boss fight you’ve missed,” Pax whispered.

Axel sighed. “Shut up, Ajax.”

Kally started to lift a hand to her mouth, but stopped and slowly lowered it. She took a deep breath and managed to make eye contact with Reyna and Frank, though barely. “Afterwards, Euna fought Santiago Pax and—um—”

Kally’s green eyes had drifted to Axel, as though to look for affirmation about what she could or couldn’t say, only to remember Axel didn’t remember the event.

Pax almost fell reaching a hand out to her. “Wait! Kally, that sounds an awful lot like one of Mr. Pax’s secrets,” he babbled. The formal way he referred to his father felt uncomfortable. He gave an apologetic shrug to Reyna and Frank. “Mr. Pax tricked Kally into swearing on the River Styx to keep his secrets and I don’t really want her all cursed and bot fly-ridden.”

Kally stared at Pax like he’d smacked her.

Frank frowned. “We can’t expect you to curse yourself on an oath you swore to their dad. Does anyone else remember?”

Merry and Calex both looked stunned. They were still digesting the death of their party member. Euna kept her eyes on the back wall, thumb pressed firmly to the top of her sword. Reyna wondered how long it would be before she would speak.

Pax swallowed. “Euna…” Pax’s voice cracked. “Euna felled him with her blade, all vengeful hero-like. But it gets fuzzy after Phobetor—you know that fun God of Nightmares—showed up. There was a dramatic, evil monologue and then we woke with bags over our heads and our hands tied in some wooden box—”

“You were in a Trojan Mario,” Frank supplied.

Pax stopped sniffling for a moment. His eyes went wide. “A what?”

“Like the Nintendo character.”

For a split second, Pax’s face lit up. He glanced around the throne room, like he expected the giant wooden statue to be hidden in a corner. It reaffirmed Reyna’s original assessment of him: he was definitely an idiot.

Pax hung his head when he registered the Trojan Mario had sunk in the Little Tiber. “Oh poor Italian plumber…” he sighed to himself. “Designed by the Japanese, built by the Greeks, and
destroyed in New Rome… I feel your identity conflict.”

Kally looked ready to judo flip him into a wall. “Wait!” she cried, then blushed horribly. Again, her hand almost went to her lips. She hesitated, balled her fist, and continued, “We need to warn Chiron that Camp Half-Blood might be in danger. I think… I think Santiago was in league with several gods and they’re planning to attack Camp Half-Blood. We need to get back to camp as soon as we can.”

Frank glanced over to Reyna. During these interrogations, she’d learn that Frank tended to be too trusting, but, unlike previous times, he frowned at her in a *something doesn’t add up* way.

Reyna sighed and sheathed her knife. Someone was lying. If nothing else, Aurum hadn’t stopped growling since they’d come in. They couldn’t send them to Camp Half-Blood until they had a better idea of what was going on.

“You’re in no condition to travel,” Reyna said. They weren’t. Most of them looked like they were barely standing and the Little Tiber had banged them up pretty bad. “You’ll be detained here until you’ve had some food, rest, and been seen by a healer. We have phones and coins for Iris Messaging so you can get in immediate contact.”

“Reyna…” Frank muttered.

Reyna nodded. “We’ve been having trouble getting in contact with Camp Half-Blood, but we’ll get you in contact with them as soon as possible.”

“Food sounds good,” the Korean girl whispered. Euna slipped her thumb off her sword pommel and let it hang limply at her side. Her voice sounded hollow. Although not much, Reyna was happy she’d at least reacted to something.

Reyna and Frank dismissed them.

They started to shuffle out. Dakota and Michael were called to escort them. Merry looked completely shocked as she clutched Dakota’s Kool-Aid flask. Calex had a similar stunned expression, but he couldn’t stop staring at Euna. As they left, the child of Eros gently touched her arm.

Before Axel could leave, Reyna called, “Axel Pax.”

He paused. His little brother scampered to a halt beside him.

Reyna glanced over at Frank. He still looked troubled. Once she was done talking to Axel, she’d have to ask him his impression on this group. For now, she had a matter to settle.

“Frank, do you mind if I speak with Axel alone?”

Frank jumped a little. “Mm? Oh, yea. No problem Reyna. Um… be careful around him.” He lowered his voice. “He… smells weird.”

Although an unprecedented comment, she’d learned to trust Frank’s animal instincts… even if they were a little… strange.

As Frank went to leave, his purple toga sweeping about him and threatening to trip the giant, the younger Pax brother gave a call of distress. Pax grabbed his brother’s good shoulder and whined into it. In Spanish, Reyna could hear him blubber, “What if she kills you? I know you two are into some weird flirting but—”
Axel ruffled Pax’s hair and muttered back in a language she didn’t understand. Mayan if she had to guess.

“No, it’s not alright. You’re all I have left!”

Axel whispered something in that other language and pinched Pax’s ear.

Pax sniffled and bolted out of the room.

As soon as the door shut behind him, Axel sighed. For a moment, his shoulders sagged, then he straightened the posture of his good one. With a control that reminded her of Jason Grace, Axel raised his chin and turned towards her. “Yes, praetor?” he asked.

Reyna frowned. She remembered how much he smiled last time they met. Before her interest was a matter of personal curiosity, but now, his secrecy could pose a threat to New Rome. “I need you to lower your Mist Mask,” she said. “I believe you understand why.”

Axel’s eyes widened. In what she’d come to assume was a nervous tick, he puffed up his cheeks and popped them. He glanced down at his hands, then back to her. Although it had been years since Reyna learned sorcery from C. C.’s Spa, she could still sense the Mist magic coating his fingers, his face, and his legs. That must have been the spell he cast when she pulled the bag off his head at the river.

“I understand,” he said and hesitated. “Is there somewhere more… private we can do this?”

[1] Thank you for pointing that out Mel. For being a tank… he’s kinda failing XD

Sorry I’m running late guys! I hope you still enjoyed regardless! :D
Upon realizing they were at the praetor’s house, Axel did something Reyna didn’t expect: he blushed.

Reyna kept the décor in her house simple. She was rarely in it, so she didn’t feel the need for anything elaborate. Most of the decoration looked more like a barrack’s. Her favorite weapons covered one wall, a collection of blades from all over the world. There were rewards and homemade trophies scattered on mantels, ones that the Second Cohort had stubbornly shoved at her throughout her career.

A line of zombie bunny ninjas decorated her coffee table, just beyond the entrance. Piper had been sending her those over the last few months, saying they seemed right to liven Reyna’s room.

Above her cot’s mantel, on the far wall, was a flag. It depicted a skeleton with a spear in one hand and a glass in the other. The spear was about to pierce a heart floating up in the lower right corner of the flag.

“Blackbeard’s flag,” Axel whispered upon stepping inside. Though his voice was even, his normally tan cheeks had gone bright red. Like before, his eyes darted to account for all the weapons in the room and Reyna couldn’t shake the feeling he’d seen the praetor’s house before.

“You know your pirate flags,” Reyna said. Aurum and Argentum padded into her house. Within the comfort of their home, Argentum padded right up to Axel and started sniffing him. Aurum seemed as curious, but the golden greyhound kept further back.

Reyna was surprised; their suspicion of strangers usually overweighed any curiosity.

“I know this flag,” Axel said. He glanced down at Argentum and stooped to a crouch beside the dog.

“I wouldn’t—” she started.

Axel offered the dog one of his hands to sniff, staring directly into its ruby eyes. She’d seen recruits get mauled for less, but Argentum averted his gaze. Axel rubbed him behind the ears. “I used to wrestle with a jaguar named Juana,” Axel said, smiling sadly. “But I’ll bet you two could give me a run for my obsidian, couldn’t you?”

Aurum growled.

Axel looked up at her. Now that they were closer, she could make out the designs of his facial scars. They were impossible not to notice, systematically decorating his cheeks, temples, and jaw with asymmetrical swirls, dots, and lines. There were different from the haphazard battle scars scattered over his body, though most of those were visible due to the poor condition of his dress shirt.

When he’d knelt down, she could see the bumps of lash marks along his back. Before they left the principia, a healer had patched the bullet wound on his shoulder, though he’d rejected any unicorn draught to help the healing process.

His body markings were a story to themselves.
“This is as private as it is going to get,” she said stiffly. She stepped over to the couch and sat down, withdrawing her dagger to twirl the blade on her coffee table. She had to replace the table every six months when she was in here more often. “Why did your brother think I was going to kill you?” she asked.

Axel sighed and stood. He gestured to a seat across from her. “May I?”

Reyna was so used to her campers standing without question, she was mildly surprised, but Axel had always talked to her with the confidence of an equal and the respect of a warrior. She nodded.

Once he was seated, Axel frowned. “Ajax is… wary of something else happening to our family. From what was said and what I remember, I’m pretty sure Euna killed Santiago and Kouta, our biological father and eldest brother. Ajax had hope that they could change to be better people.

“And, when the gods sent us here, our… we—um…” He sighed again. “We live out of our van. We had a lot of memories tucked away in secret compartments, old weapons, pictures, circus costumes, Hunnie and Baller…”

Reyna raised an eyebrow.

Axel chuckled. “Ajax’s two pet weasels. They were gifts from Hecate. But… I don’t know where our van is, so that’s all lost too. Matthias—our mechanic—programmed it to go wherever we considered home in the event we got separated… but the Mayan temple wasn’t home.” Axel touched a section of the giant scar that stretched from his pant line up his torso. His eyes looked distant. “Our old camp was obliterated and I doubt the van will show up in Belize with Chich…” Ajax just doesn’t want to lose anything else.”

“I’m sorry about your brother and father,” Reyna said softly.

Axel’s feeling of helplessness and guilt fluttered back into Reyna’s senses. She wanted to tell him that he could talk to her about Joey, that she understood how it felt to carry the weight of dead soldiers. But, she had to remind herself that Axel was an enemy to New Rome until proven otherwise, and the Little Tiber definitely wasn’t on his side. “Why do you think the gods…” She noticed he used the plural whereas his little brother had only referred to Phobetor. “sent you to New Rome?”

Axel’s dark gaze sharpened. “I wanted to kill my father. I suspect these particular gods know that Rome isn’t friendly towards patricide.”

Reyna almost dropped her dagger. He said it so casually and candidly, she wanted to snarl at him to keep his voice down. She thought about the ghosts in San Juan and tried not to tremble.

“Unlike Rome,” Axel continued during her stunned silence. “I recognize that blood ties shouldn’t prohibit you from destroying something warped and horrible. If anything, those blood ties put the responsibility more solidly on the closest kin…” He clenched his jaw. “It shouldn’t have fallen to Euna and Joey…”

Reyna swallowed. She didn’t realize she’d embedded her dagger an inch into the wood. Alarm threatened to drown out all the questions she had for Axel. Memories of San Juan kept flickering in and out: the smell of the warm, ocean breeze, the taste of piragua, and the sound of Hylla’s shaking voice when her father lost his temper and came after them.

No one knew about that except Nico Di Angelo, Hylla, and Gleeson Hedge. Axel couldn’t.

Reyna suddenly wished that she’d kept Frank or someone nearby to continue this interrogation.
Forcing her voice not to tremble, she whispered, “That shouldn’t have been enough to make the Little Tiber try to kill you.”

Axel shifted his eyes back to hers. For a moment, she felt like he knew everything about her father. Instead, he lifted a hand up to brace against his chin. “You know exactly why the Little Tiber was trying to kill me,” he said.

Reyna had her suspicions. When she’d met him outside Camp Half-Blood, he’d said he was recruited into an army that wasn’t Camp Half-Blood or Camp Jupiter and ascended to a position of leadership, likely a low ranking Lieutenant or Captain. That army was obliterated about a year or two ago. He had Mist manipulation skills, akin to the children of Hecate. His little brother called upon the Titans for prayers and curses. He knew more about New Rome than he should.

Some part of her knew he was a soldier from Kronos’s army.

Neither of them wanted to put it to words, since she’d have to put him on trial. Though, both of them should already be put on trial for attempted and successful patricide.

“Take off your Mist mask,” she commanded.

Axel puffed up his cheeks and popped them. He opened his mouth, shut it, and ran the hand on his chin up his face and through his hair.

As his fingers brushed past his mouth, she could see white fangs, the length of her pinky. When his palm passed over his eyes, the Mist mask cracked. His eyes glistened a brilliant gold, the white disappearing to huge irises. His ears vanished, replaced by a layer of smooth, oddly patterned black hair.

Once his hand ran over the top of his head, a different set of ears appeared: triangular and fur-tufted. They remained flat back on his head when he dropped his hand. She recognized that expression from Aurum and Argentum: ashamed. Although Axel could masterfully control the slight frown on his lips, those ears gave away everything he was feeling.

His fingers now had short white claws. Obsidian blades were latched onto his forearms, previously hidden by the Mist. Upon further examination, she realized his calves had an animalistic arch.

He looked even more exhausted now, like dropping the magic mask was more difficult than keeping it up. She could tell he was waiting to see if she’d kick him out of her room or call animal control. This guy clearly hadn’t seen enough of Frank.

Reyna wasn’t sure what to say. This definitely wasn’t what she had expected. She was surprised to find, despite the animalistic features, he still looked ruggedly handsome. Just a little like something that belonged on a monster hunting show.

Axel released a shaky laugh. “Chiich said jaguar babies were a symbol of good luck. The village elders all thought it was a sign of favor from the old rain gods when Nilley gave birth to me. Jaguars are prevalent in Mesoamerican culture and…” He glanced at his hands. “I haven’t had anyone who can give me direct answers. Some of the elders said it was a gift from the Gods of the Underworld. Others thought it was a rebirth of Xbalanque.”

He shrugged. “You once asked me if I was a demigod or a legacy. I’m neither, but I never had answers and… after what Hecate did to me, I was even less sure. I am descendent from the Mopan line of kings, but none of my siblings are like me. Ajax is a Greek demigod. My little sister is an Egyptian magician, my little brother is a Japanese monk, and Kouta was a North American shifter.”
Reyna must have ripped her dagger out and set it down when he took off his mask. Her hand felt empty. Again, the fact that there were other mythological creatures running around didn’t bother her, but…

“How many people know about this?” she asked.

Axel shook his head. “Other than my family? I think it’s just Kally, a few of my old recruits that are still alive, and several gods. I’m not sure who else was conscious last time I lost control of my Mist.”

Reyna felt herself laugh. She didn’t intend to. All this time, she had suspected Axel might be a reincarnation of Luke, or a vengeful Krios, or Kronos. Not some Mesoamerican cat-guy.

“No wonder Frank said you smelled weird,” she said finally.

He cracked a smile through his fangs. “I get that a lot. I’ve been told I drive nature spirits crazy. I’m glad it didn’t startle you, though you don’t strike me as the type to startle easy.”

Reyna quieted her laughter to a serious tone. “You’re not scary,” she informed him.

“I would hope not, for a praetor of Rome. Else your troops would be in a bit of a bind when they confront real monsters,” he said. He relaxed noticeably. Slowly, his ears perked up.

Reyna wondered how afraid he’d been of showing her his real features. Although she’d been hoping that would answer a lot of her questions, it only clustered a set of others.

Axel leaned his chin on his hand again, examining her face. “You can touch my ears if you want.”

Reyna raised an eyebrow at him. “Excuse me?”

He shrugged. “You’re staring at them.”

She had been staring, but it was hard not to. She was used to the homeless fawns that wandered around Camp Jupiter and other hybrids. She wasn’t used to seeing someone she thought was human sprout animalistic features. Well—Frank didn’t count. He fully turned into the animals.

Axel stood up. Now that his Mist mask was gone, she could see that the curve to his legs made him several inches taller. He must have been well over six feet. Aurum and Argentum watched him carefully as he stepped around the coffee table to kneel beside her and expose his ears: an act of submission and something that left a warrior completely vulnerable.

This was not how Reyna had expected this interrogation to go. She thought about his attempted patricide, about his previous loyalty to Kronos, and the way the Little Tiber tried to drown him.

When Aphrodite’s words drifted through her memory, Reyna felt her chest get heavy. “No demigod will heal your heart.”

No. Someone from Kronos’s army wasn’t someone she should get close to. And the warning on that note, *something you know you desperately desire and don’t know that you already hate.* What could that mean? She’d handled Jason’s and Percy’s rejections. They’d never really shown an interest. But Axel… he wasn’t a praetor of Rome. He wouldn’t make a logical or useful ally. He was just someone who had made her laugh with a circus performance and had helped her beat up the Ares Cabin last time she went to Camp Half-Blood.

Despite her wariness and reservations, Reyna reached out. She needed to know. The thought of not
trying made her chest ache.

Axel’s ears twitched violently when her hand got near. He clenched his jaw. “That tickles,” he muttered as she felt the soft fur that intermixed with his coarse human hair. His ears stopped twitching when she settled her hand. Axel leaned into her touch.

“Do you have malicious intentions for New Rome?” she asked.

Axel shook his head under her hand. “No… not anymore. I just want Ajax and the others to be safe.”

_Not anymore…_

“If you pose any threat or slip up once, I’ll kill you,” she said.

Axel laughed softly. “I would expect no less. But you’d have to be able to kill me first.” He looked up at her. Although he still looked exhausted and sad, his eyes held the smallest gleam of playfulness. As he raised his chin, her hand fell from between his ears to touch the scars on his face.

_You’re a praetor of New Rome_, she reminded herself, and withdrew her hand.

Reyna stood and scowled at him.

“We have some of the best grief and PTSD counselors available here,” she said, making her voice as chilly as she could. “While we don’t normally serve those exterior to the legion, I can make an exception while you’re here, especially for Euna. We’ll make sure everyone is properly cared since you are guests, and we’ll get you on your way to Chiron as soon as possible. However—”

She lifted her dagger and slipped it into its sheath with a _snap_. “—you will be carefully watched, especially you and your brother. If you step out of line, the senate will try and punish you accordingly.”

Axel sighed and his ears drooped back against his hairline. She was annoyed how much the sight upset her. It was like when Aurum or Argentum thought they’d done something wrong when she accidentally bumped into them.

He stood up beside her, rising to his full height and pulling his shoulders back as best he could. He was well over six feet tall without the Mist making him look shorter. For a moment, she thought he might collapse, but he managed to maintain his balance. Once up, he muttered a few words in Mayan, rubbing his face.

With each motion, the fangs, gold eyes, claws, and ears disappeared, replaced by dark eyes, human ears and normal teeth. Now that she knew what he actually looked like, the Mist mask blurred between his actual features and the illusion.

Once done, he stood at attention. “Thank you, Praetor. I hope to one day be able to pay you back for your kindness.”

They paused for what would have been a respectful amount of time for two leaders to recognize one another. Then Axel puffed up his cheeks and popped them. “Last time we met, we made a wager for a rematch,” he said. “I know the conditions aren’t ideal, but do you want to find out which one of us owes the other hot chocolate?”

“Are you going to fight one handed?” she asked, examining his shoulder.
“If it comes to it.”

Reyna debated internally for a moment. “Very well,” she said. “I train with some of the more impressive soldiers at five in the morning tomorrow. I don’t think anyone would complain if there was some new meat.”

“I’ll do my best not to disappoint.” He smiled and, for a brief flicker of broken Mist, she could see his ears perk up.

Reyna was more exhausted than pleased about how giddy the movement made her. She didn’t want Axel to make her giddy. This Mayan had done nothing to earn her trust, or the trust of New Rome. Until she found out what was actually happening between him, Phobetor, these other gods, and his friends, she couldn’t let herself do this.

However, judging by how much more he opened up when they were alone, maybe a date over some hot chocolate would be the fastest way to more answers.

[1] Yucatec Mayan for Grandmother. I’m sorry guys. There are a lot of dialects of Mayan, and until I can get back to Belize, you’re going to get a nasty bastardization of all of them for the Pax brothers. I expect all you Mayan speakers out there to yell at me for this :P

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed :D I’m excited to get a little Axyna... Reyxel? Augh, does anyone have any ship names for them that don't sound like a pharmaceutical supplement? Oh well, weird to have romance in this book that isn't comical Pax-screwing-up-worthy... or is it? XD
Axel: Never Leave Merry and Pax Unattended

By the time Axel was escorted to his friends and little brother, his hands were shaking. Although he knew they would be empty, he tore through his pockets absently, thinking something had to be there.

All the eagles and wolves depicted on everything—Axel had to exhale away the memories and that wasn’t easy with the smell of metal, leather, and Reyna’s honey shampoo in his nostrils.

He was happy to hear the sound of Iris’s relaxed voice say, “I’m sorry, we cannot connect your call as dialed. Please hang up, try your call again, and try one of our delicious simulation cupcakes.”

One of the newer recruits—Erin if he remembered correctly from a prior run-in—was cheerfully leading him into a private room underneath the mess hall. As they passed a bustling kitchen full of noncombat Roman chefs shouting about garum, the smell of roasted fish made his stomach clench. He felt like he hadn’t eaten in weeks… though guessing from the dates on Reyna’s room calendar, he’d been in magical stasis and hadn’t eaten in weeks.

When Axel got into the room, he saw Pax and Merry making a small rainbow using a side sink and light prism. If nothing else, at least they were creative. Kally sat at a side table, with leftovers from last night’s cena.[1] Axel didn’t see Euna or Calex, but Erin assured him that they were still getting a medical look over.

“—enjoy another performance from you and your brother,” Erin was saying.

During their walk, Erin had gushed over the short acrobatics performance that Axel and Pax had given to thank the Romans for their help on a quest. While he appreciated her enthusiasm, he’d been contemplating the best way to tell this Roman that one of his friends had recently die, he’d spent three weeks in nightmare hell with an overtly persistent goddess, and he had just talked to his crush of three years without getting to take a shower or shave beforehand. In other words, he wanted to tell Erin to go punch a Gorgon in the face.

Fortunately, Erin stopped at the doorway, gave a brief, shy wave at Pax, and babbled, “I need to get back to my post.” Then she was gone.

Axel sighed and sank onto the bench beside Kally, grabbing some cold meat to nibble on.

She looked exhausted. Her long, reddish-blond hair was so knotted in its ponytail, he wondered if she’d have to cut some of it off to get her hair tie out. She gave Pax a half-hearted glare as Pax came to sit on her other side.

“Welp, no multicolored messages back to camp,” Pax said. He wore a T-shirt, likely a donation from Camp Jupiter’s souvenir shop. Originally, it probably said, I love Rome. But Pax had somehow acquired a marker to add a letter and doted the “m” so it looked like, I love BRonies. The water from the River Tiber had washed out whatever gel was left in Pax’s raven hair, so it was back to twisting wildly about his head. His fohawk, courtesy of the Stoll brothers during their last stay at camp, had almost completely grown out. He and Pax really needed haircuts.

“Who else wants to bet our lovely rainbow goddy is in the middle of a kitty fight with
another god?” Merry hummed. Her brown eyes were rimmed red from tears, like Pax’s and Kally’s. Axel was so used to Merry being relaxed and content, it felt wrong that she huddled into her parka so much. Something else that he should have been able to prevent.

After a quick shuffle in her pocket, smooth, sad jazz played from the magical music system in her jacket. She gave them an apologetic frown, but he knew she needed some music for comfort.

Kally stiffened and Axel realized the same thing she had: they hadn’t told Merry why all the gods were having petty arguments.

When Pax tried to put an arm around Kally’s shoulder, she shifted closer to Axel, then hesitated. Axel clenched his jaw when he heard the subtle whisper of the Leonis Caput in his head, _Trapped between the Snake and the Lion, wait until she meets the Cloven Witchboy._

*Shut up,* he internally hissed, wondering why the monster would even say that.

“You should have let me tell the praetors what happened,” Kally whispered to Pax.

Merry tilted her head, glancing from Kaly to Pax. She frowned. “Kally, exactly _how_ and _when_ did Mr. Pax get you to swear on the River Styx not to tell his secrets?” she asked. “You don’t usually like to talk to big, bad strangers.”

Kally glanced at Pax, then at the floor.

Pax coughed awkwardly. “Well, you see, Mr. Pax—”

“Say ‘Santiago Pax’ and then finish that sentence sweetie,” Merry said.

Axel wanted to groan. Just once, he wanted Merry’s intelligence to help him and Pax, not work against them.

Merry picked up a fork and aimed it at Axel’s brother. “Pax, _you_ are the one Kally swore to keep the secrets of, not your dad? That’s pretty foul, sweetie. And here I was, shipping you two.” She clucked her tongue in distaste.

“Hey.” Pax protested. “You keep the anchor raised on that ship,” he said before turning to Kally. “And I thought it might not be the best for Euna’s mental health if she was put on trial for slaughtering mortals.”

Axel flinched. “What?”

“Uh, Euna might have gone overboard on the whole _justified revenge_ thing,” Pax said.

He and Kally filled in Merry and Axel, telling them about how Euna used her temporary god powers to turn Santiago Pax and his henchmen into a tree park in the middle of one of California’s finest Mayan temples. Then, how Pax’s mother had shown up with her group of friends to kidnap all the Pax children.

Axel felt nauseous when Pax said that the goddess had picked Axel up by the back of his shirt and almost walked off with him. “Wait—did she take Hiro and Lapis?” he asked, realizing Pax had said _all_ of the living Pax children.

Judging from Pax’s soft whimper, he had to assume the answer was yes. Axel awkwardly reached his good arm around Kally to squeeze Pax’s shoulder. Axel _should_ have been awake to help them.
“So, Pax, who’s your loving momma?” Merry asked, poking around at the vegetables on her plate.

“Well—” Pax started with a light tone.

Kally elbowed him. “Actually tell her.”

He choked, glanced at her, and frowned. Pax puffed up his cheeks and popped them. “She’s Eris, the Goddess of Strife and Discord—strife like war and deciding which socks to wear in the morning. Or if you should wear socks at all.”

“Socks?” Merry asked.

“Don’t underestimate the small struggles of socks,” he said.

Axel wished he kept a recording device on him. That way, when Pax came crying to him about how Kally rejected him again, Axel could just playback things Pax had said in serious situations.

“Do you think they’re really going to attack Camp Half-Blood?” Kally asked, staring at her plate. She hadn’t touched her food.

“Who?” Pax asked, waving one hand. “A Goddess of Strife, a revenge-bent snake, and a God of Nightmares? No, I think they’re going to use the Golden Net for a picnic blanket.” Pax leaned into the table to see Axel. “How was romancing Reyna into letting us go? Romancy with a chance of stabbing?”

Axel sighed and hoped he was too tired for his face to go red. He wondered if it would be worth pinching Pax’s ear to shut him up. “She’s not going to let you and I go anytime soon. The others maybe. She can tell who we are. She’s not stupid.”

Though not exactly who. When he was in her room, Axel had tried not to glance at the nasty scar on Reyna’s thigh, where he’d stabbed her while leading an ambush against the legion during the Titan war.

“Did you tell her or is she not stupid?” Pax asked. “Because Pax boys have a nasty tendency of blabbering to the people they’re into.”

He must have winked at Kally because she scooted closer to Axel with a grumble.

“Kallydoll, why don’t you come over here, so these two can wrestle and bicker like real adults,” Merry hummed, patting the chair beside her.

Kally got up, quickly walked around the table and sat across from him, making Pax pout.

Axel hadn’t directly told Reyna about their identity, but the praetor must have had a pretty good idea. All the pieces were there for her. Plus, if Reyna did directly asked him about his involvement in the war with Kronos, his pride wouldn’t let him lie.

Pax puffed up his cheeks and popped them again, taking Axel’s silence as his response, one he must have found hopeless. He leaned back and stared off at the wall while saying, “I’ve always thought Rome would be a beautiful place to be executed.”

“They’re not going to execute you,” Kally said, reaching over for her plate. Uncomfortably, she added, “Will they?”
Pax gave her a skeptical glance. “Even their ghosts want to kick our asses. Kally, their river just tried to kill me.”

“That’s a pretty impressive feat, ticking off the landscape,” Merry said. “And why exactly was a body of water trying to murder you two? Were you that bad in ye old days?”

Axel frowned. Although Pax had told the others they were members of Kronos’s army, none of them knew what rank or what any of that meant. This definitely wasn’t the location to discuss it. Axel sat up. “Where’s the guard?” he asked.

There’s no way Reyna would leave them unattended.

Merry pointed behind the doorway. When Axel followed her finger, he saw Dakota in a crumbled heap on the floor. “Taking a nap,” she said cheerfully. “Pax darted him.”

Pax sighed dramatically. “Even though I’m running out of sleep serum.”

Kally gave Axel a serious glance. “This is why these two—” She pointed between Pax and Merry. “—aren’t allowed to hang out.”

Axel had to agree. He could see how Merry could be shortsighted on a matter like this, but Pax knew better. He sighed and rubbed his temple. “They’re going to find an unconscious centurion suspicious.”

Merry gave a sad smile. She rested an elbow on the table and her face on her hand. “Dakota? Nah. He gets so hyped up on sugar, he collapses all the time after a rush. If there’s one thing my lovely siblings are known for, it’s partying until we drop. Now, back to my question, Mr. Stoic and Evasive.”

As she said it, Calex stepped through the doorway. He frowned at Dakota, and turned to glare at Pax. Pax grinned and raised his hands in an innocent, open-palmed gesture.

“Dodgy prick,” Calex muttered.

“Where’s Euna?” Kally asked as he took a seat beside Merry.

Axel frowned at the thought of Euna by herself. The guilt clenched his stomach.

None of them should have ever been in Santiago’s temple. Axel should have known they were being followed. He should have been able to do more than sit there when Santiago pulled a string of thorns through Pax’s tongue and shoved Joey into the fire.

Axel slipped his hands into his pockets again, vainly hoping upon hope he’d find something to calm his nerves. Although he didn’t find a box of cigarettes, like he had hoped, he did find some chewing gum that hadn’t been there before.

He ruffled Pax’s hair in thanks. His pick-pocketing little brother gave him a small smile.

“She’s still being examined,” he said, “She hasn’t talked for a bit.”

Like everyone else, Calex’s grey eyes looked red-rimmed. His ebony skin contrasted harshly with the limestone walls. Although Axel had never seen Eros himself, he’d been told Eros’s face was hard to look at, because his beauty was so harsh. Axel wasn’t much for looking at men in that way, but he could see where girls and boys like his brother would have a difficult time looking at Calex for the same reason.
Calex put a hand on the doorframe, frowning distantly. “She looks like the teenagers that came into Mum’s clinic. One of me Mum’s mates is a Nigerian peacekeeper that she met during the First Civil War. He said you could tell which teenager had been recruited by LURD and Taylor as children soldiers by looking into their eyes…”[2] Calex shook his head and swallowed. “Euna’s still in shock.”

Axel knew Euna wasn’t the only one in shock. He wanted to tell Calex to sit down and eat something, but—after thinking about Euna—Axel didn’t have much of an appetite either. And he didn’t have any right to tell them what to do after failing them as a leader. And Roman garum, fermented fish guts, could make anyone lose their appetite.

Calex looked Axel directly in the eyes, something that made most people uncomfortable. The Mist could only alter so much about the feel of a predator.

“Is Joey gone for good? Has anyone come back from those turquoise flames?” he asked

Axel could feel Kally and Merry’s hopeful gaze on him. Pax whimpered and started to construct a building out of his rainbow colored carrots.

Axel clenched his jaw. “No. She’s gone. Her blood belongs to the deity she was sacrificed to, as a payment for giving her blood in the first place.” He wasn’t sure what that meant if Santiago sacrificed her to himself and he was now dead. Axel sacrificed blood to the original deities, like the ones that created modern humans, not madmen that wanted to become gods.

He was just happy they hadn’t seen Santiago rip Joey’s heart out or decapitate her, two rituals Axel and Pax were much more familiar with. None of the others had seen that type of violence. He knew Merry had physical altercations with her step-father, Kally’s Irish Catholic thug of a brother had tried to kill Pax—a laughable incident—and Calex had seen his mother and brother wither away to the Ebola Virus. Every type of violence came with its own nightmares and regrets, but this would have been new.

*All of it makes you feel helpless,* he thought, remembering the times he’d been too weak and pathetic to save those he loved from brutality.

For a moment, a jazz remix from Merry’s jacket sang the only distinguishable words out of the din of the mess hall:

*We’ll meet again.*

*Don’t know where.*

*Don’t know when.*

*But I know we’ll meet again.*

“There would have to be divine intervention to have saved her. And Greek gods aren’t known for saving their children,” Axel muttered. As soon as the words left his mouth, he wanted to bite them back. Calex’s father *had* intervened to save him from an eternal life of undeath with Thanatos.

For a morbid moment, Axel could envision Calex’s mother giving Eros and other Greek gods a quick session in parenting, labeled *How Not to Let your Child Die When You Can Totally Stop It.*

Calex closed his eyes and exhaled. When he opened them, he had a shaky smile. “How’d
it go with Reyna, mate?"

Somehow, Axel knew Calex’s question wasn’t about the political side of the conversation. Axel frowned and cleared his throat. “That doesn’t feel—”

He was going to say *appropriate*, but Merry nudged his foot under the table. “Give a dog a bone, hun,” she whispered.

He wanted to snarl at her, but one glance around the table and he understood what she meant. Kally had perked up and blushed a little, Calex’s smile became a bit more genuine, and Pax paused in building his carrot tower. Everyone wanted something else to talk about, so they could pretend nothing had happened.

“Um—we’re—” He thought about the feel of Reyna’s fingers when she stroked between his ears. The heat rose in his cheeks. “—I’m training with her tomorrow morning,” he blurted, “And some of her more skilled fighters.”

“And?” Pax teased.

Axel scowled at Pax. “And loser of the match owes the other hot chocolate.”

Calex and Merry made sounds of approval.

Kally tapped her lower lip nervously. “Can you fight like that?” she nodded at his shoulder.

Axel’s shoulder throbbed from his confrontation with the Little Tiber. The river hadn’t just wanted to drown him, but to cut him apart with each wave. As such, his body felt like he’d decided to have a water balloon fight with Percy Jackson.

He could fight, but he couldn’t win. He and Reyna were on par when he was in top condition and using magic, something that would immediately give away his identity.

Axel shrugged. “I just need to drop by the van to pick up—” He choked. All their money had been in the Paxmobile, which was gone.

Pax glanced innocently at the ceiling and slid his hand across the table to deposit a modest stack of denari in front of him. “I’ve heard hot chocolate and sweets are pretty expensive in New Rome.”

“When did you have the time to nick that?” Calex asked and glared at Pax.

Pax shrugged. “I’d rather look at it like a communal donation box to Reyna’s happiness that the Twelfth Legion would willingly contribute to.”

Axel wasn’t sure if he should tear Pax’s ear off for stealing from their captors or hug him for saving Axel an embarrassing “IOU” to Reyna. When he thought about Euna, he frowned. “I shouldn’t be doing this…” he muttered. He *should* have been looking for a way to help Euna, or to get them to Camp Half-Blood faster.

Pax sighed. “You haven’t stalked Reyna for three years to back out now.”

“I didn’t stalk her!” he snarled. Axel knew exactly what Pax was referring to, but that was an unfair, uncontextualized simplification of the situation.
“Riiiiight, you sent me to stalk her,” he said, waving the comment off.

“You were spying for military intel,” Axel hissed, thinking about smashing Pax’s face into his carrot tower.

“Knowing her favorite book sure was important for fighting the war,” Pax agreed. He cautiously removed one of the corner carrots, like he was playing Jenga, and stuck it in his mouth. “Did you tell her there’s a Labyrinth entrance in her room?”

Axel grabbed Pax’s ear and twisted hard, inciting Pax’s standard, “Aye! Aye! Aye! Don’t hurt me! I paid for your date!”

Pax knew Axel hated talking about that entrance. When he’d walked past the ajar door to Reyna’s bedroom that morning, he could see the mark of Daedalus on a wall inside. He remembered being on the other side of that wall years ago, the rest of the Triple A Chimera waiting for his cue behind him.

“What are you waiting for?” the Cloven Witchboy had hissed. He twirled a set of hexed marbles in his hands, ready to disarm and destroy the two automaton guard dogs deactivated in the corner. Although the labyrinth should have been black with shadow, the dark corridor gleamed with his armor’s green runes.

“While I’m the biggest fan of ruining plans, that little gift that I left for the guards outside might not keep them busy much longer,” the Silver Tongued Snake agreed. He tapped a sleep dart against his bronze breast plate, in case Reyna woke up. Whenever Pax wore Hecate’s helm, he sounded more like a snake, his voice taking on a raspy quality.

But Axel hadn’t been able to move. He saw that Reyna’s Queen Mattress was there for show—she slept in a cot, probably similar to what she slept in on Blackbeard’s ship. The cot had wrapped around her so much, he could barely make out her form, but he could smell her scent.

He’d already withdrawn his obsidian blades, the ones he always used for assassinating Roman Senators. It had taken them months to map the way to the praetor’s house, and weeks of planning. Now, he couldn’t signal for the attack.

Killing politicians in their sleep was one thing… but a warrior? Especially one he’d admired so much on the battlefield. He could kill her in combat, in a contest of skill with the sweat and intimacy of a fight, but not here, in the dark and outmatched with trickery. She deserved better than this, at least a warrior’s death.

Fool! The Leonis Caput snarled in his head, What are you doing?

For the first time in Axel’s career as the leader of Kronos’s Triple A Chimera, he shook his head. “Abort the mission.”

Axel often wondered if that would have changed the events of the Second Titan War. As his little brother struggled under his grip, Axel clenched his jaw.

“You can see Labyrinth entrances? So, you’ve got true sight. That’s what Pollux called Rachel’s gift of Mist-looking,” Merry said, raising an eyebrow at him. “That’s a fancy skill you conveniently never brought up before.”

That was how Axel had snuck Rachel Elizabeth Dare out of Camp Half-Blood, but he figured that explanation wouldn’t give him or Pax any shiny stickers towards looking like good
guys. Since all of his magic, exterior to true sight, required blood, and Pax’s required strife and pain, neither liked to go around espousing their might.

Footsteps sounded over the jazz music. Axel was hoping Pax had a backup explanation about why there was an unconscious child of Dionysus in the corner until Euna stepped in.

Her expression was hollow. Like the others, the Romans had given her dry clothing from the souvenir shop. Her long black hair lay in tangles around her shoulders. Axel frowned when he saw Kronos’s blade, Backbiter, still hung at her side. It was only a matter of time before someone recognized the two-toned metal. He needed to get it away from her.

An idea struck him, one that might help balance keeping Euna distracted and getting to know Reyna. “Hey Euna,” he greeted with a nod of the head. “We should train tomorrow morning at 5:00.”

Euna’s gaze slowly narrowed. “You want me to wake up at 5:00 in the morning?”

At least it was a response.

Last time Axel tried to wake up Euna for a quest, she’d punched him in the face. He figured mornings would, in fact, be the best time to train with Euna.

“Actually,” Pax said. “More like 4:30 in the morning, since he won’t want to be late for Reyna and the others, as he is a punctual jerk.”

Axel twisted Pax’s ear again. Pax whined and clawed at him.

Axel released him. Euna hadn’t said no. Maybe, after their training, he could get her to open up a bit and get Reyna to let them go back to Camp Half-Blood, hopefully before Reyna and the other Romans realized they should be putting Euna on trial for manslaughter and Pax and Axel on the execution block.

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[1] Dinner

[2] Calex’s mother, Tiwa, was a refugee from the First Liberian Civil War who fled to Britain. After the Second Civil War’s fighting calmed down, she returned over summers to run a clinic in her father’s hometown, Kakata, to provide reduced-cost medical care, sex education classes, and drug addiction treatment, especially for the child soldiers that were hooked on cocaine and khat. Eventually, her two sons (by Eros and Winston McKenzie) Calex and Tom, came with her.

Charles McArthur Ghankay Taylor had possession of the Liberian government when LURD (Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy) rose up to overthrow him. A lot of other countries got involved in the First and Second Liberian War, including Nigeria, Guinea, Sierra Leone, the United States, and the United Kingdom.

[3] Soundtrack time! Something I can Never Have by Nine Inch Nails. The lyrics are perfect for their relationship.

Thanks for reading guys! Sorry I’m running late-I just got back in the country and am a little sleep
deprived and behind on everything XD Regardless, I hope you enjoyed :D Poor Axel is so far out of his comfort range.
All Euna had wanted for the last day was silence.

And some of her father’s homemade kimbap. That sounded really good.

On autumn weekends when Joey didn’t have a dance recital and they didn’t have a tournament, she remembered racing Joey to the garden to pull carrots and pick apples while their father cut spinach from their indoor greenhouse. As they put on boots and jeans, he’d cook everything. He’d wrap the vegetables, eggs, and whatever other ingredients he wanted in rice and seaweed paper, then he’d shove his daughters out the door for an all day hiking trip.

When Euna was little, she remembered being excited to race Joey up and down the trails, inevitably getting yelled at by their father for being rude to other hikers. When she got older, she hated being dragged out of bed as early as 4:30 in the morning to stumble up a mountain.

Now, Euna sat on the porch of their barrack in New Rome, in the same comfortable silence and the same sky view as she would have had in her old home in Duluth, Georgia, or her new home in Alexandria, Virginia.

Everyone was worried about her. She knew it. She knew why Calex kept following her around, why Kally kept giving her worried looks, and why Merry kept touching Euna’s shoulder and humming, “How you doing hun?”

But, after fighting Santiago… after taking Hemera’s god-enhancing droplets and hearing all the plants scream out at once, the prayers of gardeners and farmers alike, the laughter from Santiago’s men, and trying to focus on her sister’s scream...

She liked this silence, even if it did come at the annoying price of a 4:30 AM wake up call.

Euna still had two drops from Hemera to temporarily put her in god mode again. She fingered the eyedropper in her pocket. With her other hand, she absently drew Backbiter. The two-toned blade gleamed fiercely in the moonlight.

“Are you still there?” she asked. Euna hadn’t heard the sword’s chilling voice since they entered New Rome. The Little Tiber had tried to rip it from her, but she knew she had to keep it. After all, Backbiter was part of her nightmare-prophecy.

“I don’t understand why you want me to have you instead of Eris,” Euna grumbled, flicking the blade’s pommel like she could wake it up.

The sword did the typical sword thing and didn’t respond.

“Huh, a sword. That’s a pretty atypical choice to open up to, but I’ll bet he gets your point,” a girl said behind Euna.

Euna whirled to face the intruder, taking a defensive position with Backbiter.

The girl didn’t flinch, despite being much shorter than Euna. She had shoulder length, curly hair and light eyes that contrasted nicely with her cocoa skin and locks. She wore an SPQR shirt and a cavalry sword hung at her side. She was beautiful in an energized, mystical way that made Euna feel like the girl could vanish at will. In one hand, she had a half-eaten, golden apple.
This girl looked like Hazel Levesque, the Centurion of the Fifth Cohort, but something felt off. They met Hazel after Reyna’s interrogation, when Hazel had kindly offered for their group to sleep in their barrack. She even escorted Euna, Kally, and Merry to the Roman bath house the night before, allowing Merry to ask all kinds of uncomfortable questions about the gossip in New Rome as a distraction. Euna wondered what they’d done with all of their original clothing with all the bloodstains before they gave them fresh clothing. Did the Romans do a massive well, that’s a bad memory clothing burning?

Euna lowered Backbiter and sat down on the barrack’s porch again. “You’re Pax,” she said, losing all interest.

The girl opened her mouth, like she was going to make an excuse, then shrugged and plopped down beside Euna. Her posture relaxed and she winked one golden eye at Euna. “Usually only Axel can figure me out that fast. What gave me away? My natural charm? Have you ever even seen me turn into someone else?”

“Calex and Kally told me you could,” she said. “I just knew it was you.”

“Can I offer you a kidney in exchange for not telling Axel?” Pax-Hazel asked. Hazel’s sweet voice sounded uncanny with those words.

Euna didn’t really see the point in telling Axel. “I don’t care,” she muttered. “Is Axel still getting ready?”

“Like a pretty princess,” Pax affirmed. “He likes to make sure he’s all neat and trim for Reyna, since he assumes the praetor likes the military-looking type. You know, short cropped hair, with just a hint of rebellion in the form of a goatee.”

Euna didn’t really hear him. She thought about how two of Santiago’s henchmen had restrained Pax so Santiago could bleed his son. “How’s your tongue?” she asked.

“Eh, it wasn’t the first time I’ve had a string of thorns put through my tongue,” Pax-Hazel tried to say lightly. He trembled. “But this time, Mom must have given me this cool tongue ring while we were sleeping—” Pax went to stick out his tongue, only to remember it looked like Hazel’s and not his own. “Ah, well, I’ll show you when I morph back. But it is awesome enough to befit a Pax boy.”

Euna examined the girl’s face, how Pax puffed up and popped her cheeks. Normally, Pax looked like a younger version of his father. Whenever Pax shoved his hair back, Euna had to restrain a wave of rage at seeing that face. “Do you ever hate yourself for being part of your family?” Euna asked.

Pax ceased all his fidgeting and looked at Euna. For a moment, all of Pax’s playfulness left Hazel’s golden eyes. “Yea… I do. It’s one of the reasons I like turning into other people.” He held up the remains of the apple core. From what the others said, they were gifts from Eris that let Pax turn into whomever he wanted for an unpredictable amount of time.

Pax continued, Hazel’s mouth creasing into a frown. “And why I liked Camp Othrys so much. No one cared who my parents were. I could just be a kid and have fun. Though my Uncle Frasco was a cool part of the family, before Santiago beat him to death… I miss Joey already. She brought a lot of spirit—ha ha—to the group.”

The laugh was half-hearted.
Euna stared off at the rest of Rome’s encampment. There were a few sparse guards posted out in the distance, but no one close enough to hear them. “I’m so used to telling Joey to shut up, waiting for her to act disrespectful to the wrong person, throw a temper tantrum, or tell me I’m being a lazy waste. Now it’s just quiet. I think… I think Hemera’s god droplets messed with my head.”

She touched her temple. “I get it now. It’s hard for gods to care about us, because we’re just one thing screaming out of their whole domain. How can you decide which scream to listen to when there are so many? When they blur into one thing? I never thought I was important. But I thought Joey would be.” Euna’s voice cracked.

Joey had been ambitious. No matter how many times Joey snapped that Euna was the better fighter or better at controlling plants, Euna knew Joey would surpass her because Joey cared. And then her hubris got her killed.

Euna hadn’t cried, but she didn’t think she needed to. Persephone had warned her years ago that she wouldn’t be able to save their sister, that it wouldn’t be Euna’s fault. What had Persephone meant when she said she’d help Joey when the time came? Had Persephone just forgotten?

The emotions she was feeling were annoying and exhausting.

“Joey had a crush on you,” Euna said absently.

Pax balked. “Why would you tell me that? And why would she get a crush on me? I’m sorta-kinda Kally’s not-boyfriend. And I’m definitely a cowardly jerk.”

Euna shrugged. “I don’t know. Calex told me.” Joey used to tease Euna for complete obliviousness about relationships, but she could sorta see it with Pax. Pax had never been afraid to tease Joey, made Joey struggle hard not to laugh at his lame jokes, and had never backed out of a fight in front of them.

Pax-Hazel cleared his throat. The small girl pulled her legs against herself. “There was a girl… named Flynn that I promised someone I would take care of before the Slaughter of Mount Othrys. Jason Grace blasted a pillar beside Flynn and she was crushed in the rubble. He didn’t even know he killed her. He was aiming to crush Krios…” Pax puffed up and popped Hazel’s cheeks again. “Fate works in stupid, random ways, doesn’t it?”

Euna thought about the prophecy that the Oracle of the Dead spoke through Rachel Elizabeth Dare and the last two lines that hadn’t been fulfilled yet:

“Orpheus’ head, won by heart’s loss.

Darkness’ end: peace or chaos.”

She thought about all their nightmare-prophecies from Phobetor. Hers and Merry’s hadn’t come to pass. And they didn’t even know what Axel or Pax saw at night, but—from what she heard from Pax—it was enough to make Axel scream awake. A pity since everyone deserved a good night’s sleep.

Was Fate stupid or random when there were prophecies like that? Well, yea, stupid. But random?

“Are you going to join the Huntresses of Artemis?” Pax asked suddenly.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“You seemed to get along really well with Thalia.”
“She was cute,” Euna admitted.

“Talk to her,” Pax said and flipped Euna a denarius. “Even if it isn’t about all of this, talk to her.” Pax-Hazel stood up and stretched. “Welp! This conversation got uncomfortably emotional for both of us, and I still need to steal something from Frank Zhang while I look like his girlfriend so I have a bargaining tool for a date with a goddess. Have fun third-wheeling on Axel’s date with Reyna. I will see you later after I’m done wreaking some havoc and stealing candy.”

Pax went to take a step down the porch. As he moved, he adjusted his posture to a scarily perfect replica of Hazel’s.

Euna tilted her head to one side. “Hey Pax… why do you think your mom is still giving you those golden apples if you’re fighting against her? I feel like that would put her at a disadvantage or something.”

Pax-Hazel’s eyes widened. He slowly glanced down at the apple.

“Hazel!”

They both jumped to hear someone else in the darkness. A huge figure, with a hastily wrapped toga, came towards their barracks.

“Hey Frank!” Pax-Hazel gave Frank a friendly wave and a shy smile. “I was just chatting with Euna. Where’s Reyna?”

Frank gave her a confused blink. “She went ahead to the training field. Why? Was she supposed to be somewhere else?” He looked like he was scared he’d missed a memo.

“I didn’t think so. That Pax boy was asking about her and I just wanted to make sure,” Pax-Hazel said.

Frank noticed Euna and gave her a brief head nod. “Oh—good morning. Euna, right? I heard you’re training with us this morning. I—um…”

Euna nodded back, not really in the mood to say a morning could be good. As if that could ever be the case when she wasn’t sleeping in. And she didn’t need any more awkward sympathy from strangers.

“Thank you for talking with me, Euna,” Pax-Hazel said. He/she took a step closer to Frank, to put a hand on his arm. “Do you mind if I steal Frank for a minute to talk alone? We’ll catch up with you and Axel at the training field.”

Frank frowned. “Hazel, are you sure that’s a good idea?”

Euna knew the Romans didn’t like them unattended. Especially after finding out Dakota had apparently slept on the job the other day.

Pax-Hazel gave Frank’s arm a comforting squeeze. “Don’t worry, I already set it up for them to be escorted. Now, I really wanted to talk to you…”

Pax-Hazel began to tug the praetor away, into the darkness. Euna hadn’t been paying enough attention to the camp’s layout to know exactly where they were going. She just nodded again when Frank shouted over his shoulder, “Uh—see you at the training fields!”

Euna was about to settle back into enjoying the silence when footsteps sounded behind her. She
glanced back to see a freshly trimmed Axel and a Hazel Levesque. Euna was about to ask Pax why he’d doubled back again, before realizing that was likely the real Hazel.

“Morning Euna,” Hazel greeted, tossing Euna a normal looking apple for breakfast. “Has Frank come by yet?”

Euna caught the apple and glanced off in the distance, thinking that Frank was probably a little too oblivious and innocent for whatever Pax had concocted. What had he said about a goddess? It didn’t matter. They were already long gone. “He said he would see us at the training fields,” Euna muttered and bit into the apple, wondering what Pax had planned.

Sorry I’m running late guys! Being out of the country really messed up my schedule. Pax is finally up to some shenanigans. You didn’t think he could sit quietly in Rome, did you? XD I hope you enjoyed :D
Ajax: Do Not Leave your Firewood Unattended. All Unattended Firewood Will be Stolen.

Eight: Ajax

Do Not Leave your Firewood Unattended. All Unattended Firewood Will be Stolen.

Pax really needed to stop morphing into likeable people. Sure, he was used to the strict scheduling in New Rome. When he was the Spy Master for Camp Othrys, he’d spied in the Camp Jupiter enough to know their routine, and enough to know that everyone would ask him why he wasn’t at the optional morning training with Reyna and Frank.

But why did Hazel have a herd of fauns stalking her? You’d think she carried a shepherd staff and could yodel. Pax didn’t know if goatherders did yodel, but he felt like there should be a standardized test to check their goatherder yodeling skills and good practice in “Just Telling Fauns No.”

After Pax gave some faun named Don a denarius, Hazel’s faun fan club dispersed so he could walk down the Via Praetoria without a homeless entourage, past bakers’ shops scenting the street with their morning goods. If these bakeries were currently supplying the legion with breakfast, the military tribune would be walking around soon to check that the food was up to adequate standard, and assure people like Pax hadn’t poisoned it. At a camp like this, it was more a formality, but Alabaster had given Pax a boring lecture on the history of it once.

On an impulse, Pax bought three muffins with some money he was… redistributing from the Fifth Cohort. He figured he could give the spare two munchies to Axel and Kally afterwards.

Once Pax made it to the principia, he found two sleepy sentries outside the doors. One was short, tan, and did a little jump when she saw Hazel-Pax approach. This girl was maybe twelve, just a Lupa pup. The other was also short, but far bulkier, and looked utterly relieved to talk to someone other than the younger soldier. He must have been training her on sentry duty.

Pax fought the urge to tell them that Jupiter had come to camp to announce his new marriage to a flower pot. His self-restraint barely won out against the prank.

“Hey Hazel,” the bulky boy said, “Are you supposed to be—”

“On a quick assignment since Reyna and Frank are too busy to be in here. I need to pull out some paperwork from the archives before morning muster.” Pax smiled and gave them a shrug like, you know how it is. Hazel’s shoulders were so much more delicate than his, the motion felt uncomfortably light. He handed them the two extra muffins. Maybe he could steal some money from the treasury and buy more for Axel and Kally on the way back. “How’s the morning shift going? See any ghosts?” he teased.

From what he had gathered from Hazel’s personality, she was friendly and fairly warm, though he didn’t have enough interaction with her the other day to feel full confidence in the act. He’d barely managed to replicate her posture before she left with the girls to the bathhouse.

But he needed someone that was close to Frank, important enough to go where they wanted, but not important enough to be noted, like Reyna. Plus, it would be creepy if Pax ran into Axel as
Reyna. Normally, Axel could immediately tell when Pax had morphed into someone, but imagine if that was the one time he couldn’t? Pax had seen some pretty horrifying stuff, but that would probably actually send him to therapy.

The boy groaned and bit into a muffin. “Don’t say that. You know the Lares like to prank us on this shift.”

The younger girl’s eyes widened, mouth half-open with crumbs. “Do you, uh, want any help in there?” She sounded desperate after the ghost comment.

Pax giggled and covered his mouth. The motion was weird and he wondered why Kally always covered her mouth too. None of the guys he pretended to be covered their mouths when they laughed. Then again, he most often morphed into Jason Grace and Nico Di Angelo. Good luck making Sexy-Goth-Prince Di Angelo laugh at something other than dancing corpses in top hats.

“They won’t actually hurt you,” he assured, like he had any idea if the Lares would hurt Roman soldiers. “Besides, it wouldn’t look good if someone saw only one guard outside the principia. I don’t want Reyna or Frank to think you’re not following orders.”

The boy pressed his lips together. Pax was hoping he’d take that bait. They weren’t really supposed to let anyone inside unescorted except the praetors, but Pax had morphed into someone who happened to be a centurion and the praetor’s girlfriend for this reason exactly. They should let Hazel in, or else the corruption in the system had failed Pax.

“I’m supposed to be training you anyway,” the boy muttered at the girl. The fact that he could have gotten rid of his trainee and didn’t seemed to rip up his tiny, Roman heart.

“See you two at morning muster,” Pax cheered. When Pax bid them a good morning, and walked under the giant purple banner inside, neither guard tried to stop him. He had New Rome’s head quarters to himself.

The day before, when Pax and the others were dragged soaking wet into the praetor house, it was a pleasant surprise to find out they weren’t going to kill him. Very gracious. As such, he chose not to put tacks on Reyna and Frank’s seats or to draw bunnies on all of their paperwork.

Fortunately, the two greyhounds were also missing.

When Pax used to spy in New Rome, they always thwarted him from entering the principia. Apparently automatons didn’t take decoy steaks the way cartoon dogs did. But Pax guessed Reyna was keeping her dogs close each time she saw Axel.

Pax assumed it was because Reyna didn’t trust Axel in the I can tell you’re a former enemy, but you’re hot, so who cares kinda way. Pax didn’t blame her. His brother was awesome and the previous heartthrob of Camp Othrys, unbeknownst to the oblivious Axel himself. Monsters and demigods alike fell for his stoic and tantalizing disinterest.

That was the only reason Pax supported this little romance with Reyna. There was no way his brother would pass on the awesome genes with his current track record.
Pax walked past the table full of important stuff, to the gated stairwell in the back corner. As Pax got closer, the world seemed to get shorter, and he could see Hazel’s curly, brown hair shorten and darken into his bangs. The scimitar at his side morphed back into his utility belt and his shirt went from an *SPQR* shirt to an *I love New Bronies* shirt.

Perfectly timed for him not to be murdered by sentries. And he still had half an apple for the trip back. Score.

Pax withdrew the small lock picking packet from his utility belt, still shocked it had survived his little splash in the Little Tiber.

There were iron bars with a padlock across the stairwell entrance. Pax wished Luke, Mercedes, or Chris were here. Children of Hermes made lock picking look as easy as Orpheus did music. He’d learned from the best though. Plus, Alabaster had enchanted a few of his picks to dissolve magical barriers so—

Someone giggled behind him.

Hands slipped along the side of his neck—

—he tilted his chin down, so they couldn’t do a proper chokehold and scrambled to grab a weapon—

—and the girl wrapped him in a hug from behind.

“Hi there Ajax,” she giggled. “What kind of unrest are we causing today?”

Pax relaxed the hand around his dagger hilt. Then he almost fell backwards when she lifted her feet off the ground and put all her weight on his shoulders. Pax scrambled to keep his balance and to grab her arms so she didn’t *actually* choke him.

Once done, he puffed out his cheeks and popped them. “Atê,” he greeted his half-sister, also known as the Goddess of Mischief and Ruin. Now that he wasn’t panicking over dying, the reek of iron became overwhelming. He remembered the blood that crusted her black *I Solemnly Swear I am Up to No Good* shirt.

“You know, I passed a drycleaner this morning with the motto of *one denarius and no fuss*. With the treasure down here, I’m sure we could clean *all* of your shirts. Or burn them. Whichever would be better for the environment,” he said, focusing back on the padlock.

Pax withdrew his tension wrench and pick and began to fiddle. Within a few seconds, the lock clicked. The magical pick shattered; there must have been an enchantment on this gate.

Pax took off the padlock and carefully swung the door open. When he took a step forward, Atê let her feet drag behind them. “Ajax,” she whined, “I want a piggyback ride.”

“I think it would be much more time efficient to throw you down the stairs,” he argued. Though he really shouldn’t. She’d probably set off some sensors or traps if he did that. He gritted his teeth. “And don’t call me Ajax, only my lovers, close friends, and family—oh.”

She *was* family.

“Well, touché,” he muttered and picked her legs up for a piggyback ride. As they descended, Pax skirted around unusual spots on the floor and stepped over areas where a knot stuck out of the wall. He didn’t know how high tech this Roman basement would be, but he really
didn’t want to set any sensors off when he was carrying a Goddess of Ruin.

“You look like you had some fun with Frank,” she teased.

Pax smirked. He always had to have some fun when he was on a job, or else what was the point? Getting work done? Bah! Besides, he had to get Frank flustered enough that Frank would be too embarrassed to talk to the real Hazel about what happened and not notice that Pax had stolen from him. AND Pax had to make sure the real Hazel was too distracted worrying over Frank to look into any report of her coming to the principia.

Instead of summarizing all of that, Pax said, “Eh, I like ‘em lanky and nerdy. And a little less Roman.”

“Lanky and nerdy…” Atë huffed some air against his ear. “Maybe you could get him to turn into a giraffe with hipster glasses.”

Pax laughed. They’d reached the bottom of the stairs without setting off any alarms. This basement would make Long John Silver sob with joy and possibly poke his own eye out while trying to clean up his snot. Assuming Long John Silver was one of the pirates with a hook hand.[1]

There was treasure everywhere, and not necessarily conventional treasure. There were vaults in the walls and traditional piratey chests that made Pax want to give Connor and Travis Stoll a map to this place, just to say, “told you so!” Pax walked past it all towards a couple of old school filing cabinets in the corner.

He chuckled. “We could get him like, ten clashing plaid scarves. He’d be the coolest of giraffes—wait—no, this is wrong,” he said and promptly dumped Atë onto a table covered in first edition Nintendo releases.

“That Frank would make a wonderful scarfed giraffe? I mean, I guess buying all those scarves might be a pain in the neck,” she said.

Pax started to laugh again. “Neck. I see what you did there—wait—wait no!” He pointed an accusatory finger at her. “You’re a bad guy. Stop being cool. We’re here on serious business and only because you can help us out.”

Now that he had whirled to face her, Pax could see Atë kick her feet under the table. She leaned back, shoving a few games off the tabletop so she could brace her hands. In the far distance, Pax could practically hear his friend, Mattias from the Hephastus cabin, crying out at the carelessness with those games.

Atë must have changed her hair since he last saw her. Now, those jagged black locks were streaked with blue, green, and white, instead of purple and red. Her eyes matched her lips, a dark crimson that Pax found uncomfortably distracting, kinda like she’d gutted something cute and innocent to get that color effect, maybe a baby Frank.

There was dirt smudged all over her skin and clothes, making it impossible to tell her natural skin tone. Instead of her I Solemnly Swear I am Up to No Good shirt, this black shirt read Reality is an illusion; the universe is a hologram; buy gold. That and her black boots contrasted harshly with the white jean shorts, covered in colorful band logos.

Pax couldn’t decide if he was pleased or irritated to find the name Orpheus Metal amongst those bands. Pleasantly irritated? Or irritably pleased? Plirritated? He’d save that in his mental wordbank beside hangry and scaroused.[2]
“We should steal everything in here and redistribute the wealth to the bakers and have a cornmuffunist revolution. It’ll be hilarious,” she said with a giggle.

Pax had never considered the infinite prank possibilities with the powers of a goddess on his side. He tried furiously not to dance at the idea. This girl was the Murphy’s Law of ADHD tricksters trying to focus.

Like she’d read his mind, she frowned at him. “I thought we were on a play date. Your siblings are no fun as playmates. They’re too methodical. I like you though. You’re reckless, clumsy, and prone to screwing up… like me.”

Pax almost didn’t catch her last two words, or the way she glanced off to the side. When he did catch them, he almost missed the insult.

“I’d rather look at it as improvising than screwing up. Now, about your incompetent playmates, Lapis and Hiro,” Pax said and puffed up his chest. “I want to hear what they’re up to and how they’re doing. Other than being incompetent.”

Last night, Pax couldn’t stop thinking about his little half-brother Hiro, or his older half-sister Lapis. They left willingly as Eris’s henchmen, but he would still rather wish sunshine and daisies on them instead of pain and fanged rabbits.

Lapis’s words kept replaying like the worst pop song on the radio: “You and Axel left us with Dad twice, Ajaxapax. What do you think it’s been like with you and Axel gone?”

If Pax had to guess: bad. Dad had probably let all of his anger, his beatings, his wrath, and his hair gel out on them after Axel and he ran away.

In addition to the overbearing guilt, checking on his siblings would satisfy his spymaster tendencies to check on the enemy. That’s how Atē had tempted him, giving him an unbeatable offer through one of his dreams. Props to her for being a decent villain.

Atē tilted her head and stopped kicking her feet. “So a dream-vision of Hiro and Lapis at some vaguely inconvenient time, preferably to give away some of Mom’s secrets.” She shrugged. “You said you wanted two things.”

Pax puffed up his cheeks and popped them. Slowly, a half smile slid onto his face. “I need you to find and read me a story. If my previous creeping is correct, it will be in one of those filing cabinets, under the summer of 2009, in a list of seemingly benign task orders given to a seemingly low soldier.”[3]

Atē’s red eyes widened with excitement. She became unnervingly still. “You’re looking for the Roman spy that infiltrated Mount Othrys,” she said.

That person probably was the one who alerted the Romans to Mount Othrys’s weak defenses.

Against Axel’s, Jack’s, and Krios’s wishes, Kronos had left with nearly the entire demigod army to attack Manhattan, leaving his seat of power with a handful of real troops, and an army of lizard ladies, which they all knew were the pawns of the mythological world. So, kinda like leaving a candy shop unlocked and unattended around a seven-year-old with a compulsive eating disorder and politely saying, “Now don’t eat that, Jimmy,” as you walk away.

Pax remembered how he dug at the rubble covering Flynn’s crushed body. Apparently, he’d scraped all the skin off his fingers, leaving them bloody and raw. He screamed until his voice
was hoarse. He remembered how the Roman automatons had chopped and crushed Jack’s body to a chunky pile of Play-Doh, like some cannibal giant had half-chewed a person before deciding, *Augh, Children of Apollo are NOT good for my figure,* and spat him out.

He remembered watching in horror as the Roman War Machine crawled up Mount Othrys and how that horror turned to fury at realizing one of their friends had betrayed them.

Pax shrugged nonchalantly. “Yea, I kinda wanna know who that is. I mean, how does that old saying go..? Snitches get stitches? Or do they get full body casts, with goats trained to lick their feet to the point of insanity. I can’t remember, but it’s something like that.”

Because of Pax’s Mayan and Greek blood, his dyslexia was so bad that he was almost illiterate. But Axel would never have agreed to help him read these documents, not when the Romans were already so suspicious of them. And he couldn’t put Kally in any more danger. So, that left him with a less favorable choice.

“Oh! That sounds like fun!” Atë said hastily. “I’ll do that for free.”

Pax tapped a finger to his lips thoughtfully. “Oh? But you said the item I stole was worth *two* favors. If that one is free… what if I want a pony too?”

“Dead or alive?”

For a moment, Pax had forgotten he was talking to Atë, someone who constantly had bloodstains on her clothing.

“I’ll be gracious and forgo the pony this time,” he decided.

“But… you do have *it* in exchange for the sibling dream, right?” she asked, still uncomfortably still. Pax found himself wondering if gods had to breathe, and—if they didn’t—how often she pretended to be a zombied-corpse at morgues to freak people out. That’s what he would do with full god powers.

“On that…” Pax said and withdrew a small cloth bag. He pulled a burnt piece of wood from the cloth. “What *is* this?!”

“It’s a stick,” Atë said helpfully.

He’d figured that out, but he didn’t understand why Frank was carrying it on him or why Atë wanted it.

“What’s so important about—Oh my Titan! Is Frank a wizard?! Is this his wand? Is that why he can turn into animals?!” Pax asked, realizing he may have overlooked something *awesome* about the praetor.

Instead of giving him a real answer, Atë gave him an unblinking smile.

Pax sighed dramatically and waved the burnt piece of kindling around. “Okay, okay, mystery, suspense, and all that nonsense. Before I give you this stick, you need to swear you’ll give me that dream-vision of my siblings, and swear—in the manner we discussed—that you won’t mislead me with the information in this room.”

Atë put a hand over her heart and closed her eyes. “I solemnly swear on the River Styx that I will not mislead you, lie to you, or be dishonest in any way that would explicitly or implicitly deceive you with the information I will read to you in this room AND I will give you a dream-
vision of your boring siblings doing something that will hint at Mom’s plans.” She cracked one eye open to look at him. “Deal?”

Pax glanced down at the blackened piece of wood. This must have been way more important than a pyromaniac’s starter tool. He couldn’t ask Frank about it when he was Hazel—it would have brought too much attention towards an object he wanted to steal. Pax wished he’d had more time to investigate Frank, but…

He held the kindling out. “Deal. Here’s your stick,” he said.

Atē vanished in a puff of smoke from the table. When she reappeared, she stood within inches of his face, grinning. She enlaced the fingers he had on Frank’s stick, in a sort of handshake. She kissed his cheek and whispered, “You’re the kind of champion that Mom and I deserve.”

Pax felt queasy. “Hey, I’m not you’re champion. That would make me a bad guy and I’m just an anti-hero.”

“You’re right. You’re not a bad guy. You’re just… reckless.”

_Reckless, clumsy, and prone to screwing up._

Pax’s mind reeled. He had just watched his father and eldest brother die—of course he wanted to make sure his siblings were okay. And he needed a way to spy on Eris, else she’d do whatever her nefarious villain plan was to attack Camp Half-Blood. And he couldn’t have asked Axel or Kally, right?

But, as Atē slipped Frank’s piece of kindling from his fingers, Pax couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d done exactly what the Goddess of Mischief and Ruin predicted he’d do: he’d screwed up. Like Gaea-sized screwed up.

Pax tried to take a step away from Atē, and backed right into the filing cabinets. For a split second, an image of Flynn’s scarred face flashed through his head and he felt like he’d eaten some cyanide-flavored ice cream: sick, shaking, and wishing he had a Child of Apollo on hand. He babbled, “So, about these Roman task orders, exciting reading, am I right? I heard the movie adaptation got a 10/10 on both Rotten Tomatoes and Megacritic.”[4]

Atē did her poof thing again, allowing Pax to exhale in relief. She appeared behind him, opening a filing cabinet. “Oh, I’m sure. Let’s find out who betrayed you and got all your friends killed!” she cheered, pocketing the ever-mysterious stick.

Thanks for reading guys! :D Gotta love Pax being... reckless, right? XD

[1] If anyone is wondering, no. No he Unfortunately isn’t.
[2] “Fry Am the Eggman” Futurama. Also, Pax was the drummer from Kronos’s propaganda band Orpheus Metal.

[3] People have theorized that original canon places the end of the PJO series in 2009. Which places this stuff (and Magnus Chase and Trials of Apollo), theoretically in 2011… and Riordan’s and my characters make pop culture references to way later than they should. So either there’s a time paradox, a lot of fourth wall breaking, or some lazy authors. Your choice!

[4] False. The movie adaptation of “that fight” got a generous 5.1/10 on Rotten Tomatoes and a 39/100 from Megacritic. *sighs* As Disney says goodbye to a franchise that could have been as big as Harry Potter.
Rexel: We’re Only Sworn Enemies. What’s the Worst that Could Happen?

Nine: Axel

We’re Only Sworn Enemies. What’s the Worst that Could Happen?

The worst thing that could happen during Axel and Reyna’s date happened: they had a great time.

There was some part of Axel that wanted to sabotage everything, so neither he nor Reyna needed to worry about the other as anything more than a comrade in arms. But everything fit together like setting a sword in a custom showcase, like fate decided today was a romantic subplot day.[1]

She destroyed him in their morning fight, much to the delight of her soldiers and much to Axel’s expectation in his exhausted state. Everyone was baffled when each weapon he touched broke within a few swings. He’d managed to skirt around questions about that curse.

Euna fell into the weird, focused calm she got when she fought—the distraction he was hoping she’d get. The only oddity was Frank. According to Reyna’s criticism, he was a flustered mess during their training, and freaked out even more when he saw Hazel.

But Axel couldn’t care about that. Not when he and Reyna went for hot chocolate after morning muster. She gave him a tour of New Rome, with all its shops and its university—all colorful and chaotic in contrast to Camp Jupiter.

As they walked, Axel teased and tested her, asking what her soldiers would do if they were attacked from various weak spots around the camp, like from the air or underground or within, strategies he’d come up with years ago but Kronos and Krios had shot down.

He didn’t know many girls that would enjoy that kind of verbal strategy game, but Reyna parceled through each challenge tactfully and posed harsh rebuttals to explore the logistics of his attacks. “How many soldiers do you think you could get in? How are they armed? Do they have the blessing of any god?” He could see the mental checklist forming in her head of adjustments she might need to make to their defenses.

When they left the training fields that morning, she’d been tense and distant. Especially after they overheard Calex and a centurion chatting on the sidelines. Apparently he, Merry, and Kally had come to watch.

“They both wish there was,” Calex snorted.

“Ha! How would you know that about Reyna? She’s as cold as ice.”

“I’m a son of Eros, mate. That’s kinda my territory.”

But, after leaving Camp Jupiter, changing into street clothes, dropping off Argentum and Aurum, and walking amongst the Roman retirees and their families, she began to relax. After hot chocolate, came lunch.
As they’d passed a traditional Roman restaurant, the owner—who apparently was a recently retired soldier—whispered to one of his workers, “Is that the praetor on a date?! She took a day off?! Holy Venus! Get them inside for a free meal!” They hadn’t planned for it, but… well, it was the same treatment they’d been getting all morning from the locals.

“That’s unnecessary Adams,” Reyna told the giddy owner, a man only five or so years older than Axel.

The man laughed and waved his hand. “It’s completely necessary. But if you won’t have that, at least you’re in time for our Menday’s surprise discount. Half off for lunch!”

Axel was 90% sure that was a letter away from mendax or a liar’s surprise, but he decided his Latin was weak enough to accept a discounted meal. Especially when the owner shoved them into a semi-private triclinium, with long couches for them to lounge on instead of chairs.

“Your old troops really love you,” he said after the owner left.

From how irritated Reyna looked, she wasn’t used to this kind of treatment, and he guessed that she wouldn’t normally let it happen. “It’s not appropriate for a praetor to take advantage of her position,” she said

“You do a lot for New Rome. Maybe New Rome just wants to acknowledge it and show its appreciation,” he said. Axel wasn’t sure how close he should get to her when they went to the couch. As traditional Roman meals were supposed to go, they lay down on their stomachs and propped up on their elbows.

Axel felt childish; he couldn’t believe he felt nervous being by her on a couch.

He allowed a solid half-foot between them and tried not to make a sound when she adjusted to be closer.

“Would you let your troops?” she asked.

“No,” he admitted, then puffed up his cheeks and popped them. He fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette, only to remember he didn’t have any here. There was a box in his pocket though, presumably bubble gum from Pax. Ever since Pax found out that Axel wanted to quit smoking, he’d steal Axel’s cigarettes and replace them with gum. Axel wondered what kind of messages would be on this weirdly shaped packet.

Axel figured he’d leave the gum until after lunch. “We had this kid at camp named Charlie... Whenever people wanted to force gifts on me, they’d give them to her to give to me, since they knew I hated being mean to her. Jack—”

Axel froze. Reyna would recognize that name, Jak-Jak the Plague Bringer: Scourge of New Rome. He’d interrogated, tortured, and killed enough Romans to make it as one of their legendary villains.

Jack also happened to take Axel and Pax under his wing when they first joined Kronos’ army. He could remember Jack’s infectious, happy laugh as he wiped the blood off Axel’s face with the ends of his shirt, like a father would dab stray pudding for a child. That lanky, redhead maniac had cheered, “Kid, I’m going to make you into a star!”

Axel was relieved when Reyna didn’t ask him what he was going to say. He took a handful of grapes off the table and popped one into his mouth. The couch cushion was comfortable. He’d have to come back here when he had enough money to properly tip the owner.
Reyna swirled a water glass in her hand—an impressive feat to look so graceful when she was braced on her elbows—and examined him. The way he stumbled over Jack’s name hadn’t gone unnoticed.

Time to change the subject to something he should have brought up at the beginning.

“The Iris Messaging isn’t working and Merry said Annabeth isn’t answering her cell phone,” Axel said slowly. He frowned. This wasn’t something he wanted to bring up, but he knew he had to. “We need to get back to Camp Half-Blood. Not that they need any more ambiguous warnings about some vague threat, but…”

Pax said Kally would tell Chiron everything if they didn’t. And that meant she’d be cursed by the River Styx forever. He didn’t want to tell Chiron everything, but he’d rather that then have a friend punished for doing what she thought was the right thing.

Besides, knowing Chiron’s track record, the centaur would just tell them not to tell anyone and leave it mysterious for the campers. Since that’s how you save lives. Axel refrained from rolling his eyes.

Reyna set her glass down. Her hand fluttered to where her dagger was normally sheathed, until she remembered there was a no weapons policy in New Rome. Instead, she reached for a butter knife on the table and twirled that between her fingers.

Axel had a hard time not staring. He’d never really seen her out of her armor before this date. She wore a black workout tank top and jeans. The absurdity of the butter knife made him grin.

“The healers will probably say you’re safe to travel tomorrow. Because we delayed you and the circumstances involved a quest, New Rome can supply the funds for airplane tickets home... But, you understand why I’m uncomfortable sending you and your brother to our allies?” Her dark eyes narrowed.

Axel knew how suspicious they looked and, honestly, were. “You could keep me as a hostage,” he joked. “Ajax won’t do anything if he’s scared I’m on the line. Then you can let me go when Merry calls you and lets you talk to Chiron. And if this is how you treat prisoners, I think I could suffer it for another day.”

Reyna cracked a smile. Before she could respond, a messenger poked their head into the room. “Praetor Reyna?”

Reyna sat up. She glanced at the clock in the corner of the room. Axel assumed she’d have to leave for afternoon drills and training, but he thought that didn’t start for another hour.

Axel shot up beside her, realizing something horrifying that could easily be connected to this messenger: he hadn’t seen Pax since they first woke up that morning.

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Nine ½: Reyna
Reyna became more concerned when the messenger reported that Hazel and Frank wanted her to take the full day off. Though, her reaction proved their point: she needed a full day off. This was a prime time to find out if Frank could run the camp on his own, since she needed to know if he could run the camp if something happened to her. So she sent the messenger back with careful instructs for Hazel to keep an eye on Frank, especially considering how oddly he’d been acting that morning.

She wasn’t displeased spending more time with Axel, but not in the city. Reyna thought she spent leisure time here, but the way everyone reacted made her wonder when was the last time she’d took a break to visit the shops and restaurants. As soon as any of her former legionnaires saw her in street clothes with a guy, they treated her like a celebrity, Keeping New Rome safe was her duty. Such untethered gratitude felt uncomfortable when something should have been expected, not rewarded.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?” Axel asked again.

They’d left the city, walking along the aqueducts into the fields that led to Berkeley Hills. This way, she was out of the city, far enough from camp that no one could accuse her of overshadowing Frank, but close enough to help if anything went wrong. Plus, the view was beautiful. Despite it being December, the unusually warm weather combined with consistent rain had left the fields looking lush.

“Frank should be okay,” she said, more to herself than in answer. “I just wish I knew what agitated him this morning.” She’d never seen him so flustered.

Reyna heard a pop. She glanced over and found Axel half-way through deflating his cheeks, what she’d come to realize was his nervous tick. He had his hands in his jean pockets as they walked. Someone from the Fifth Cohort had loaned him a purple SPQR shirt. When Reyna squinted at it, she could see someone had taken permanent marker to write out Super Porcupine Quintessential Recon horizontally down each letter. She doubted Axel was the writer, though she remembered him having similar shirts in previous interactions.

“Any ideas on what might make Frank so uncomfortable?” she asked.

“Nope,” Axel said with a shrug. “I can’t imagine having the six of us there making a difference. He seemed like he’d normally be a confident fighter.”

Something told her that he did have an idea. She’d been leading their little hike through the field, but slowed her pace to even with his. He had an obvious tell she could use against him. After a moment of hesitation, Reyna gave Axel a crooked smile and reached up to run a hand through his hair, to see what his ears were doing.

He startled, stopped, and stared at her. Then, slowly he leaned into her touch. As she’d expected, the Mist wavered and she could see his ears were down. He did have a suspicion about Frank.

“We’re alone. Drop your Mist mask,” she said, more a command than she’d intended. He’d been struggling with it all morning. Because she knew how he really looked, she’d occasionally see his eyes glisten gold or his nails expand into claws.

Without the mask, she figured his ears would act as a natural tell when he lied.
But, there were lots of reasons why his ears could be down. He might be worried about the others. “Are you okay with us being out here?” she turned the question on him. Having lunch together hadn’t taken him from his friends for too long, but, with their walk, it was late afternoon by now.

As she removed her hand, the illusion shattered and she could see his tufted ears, golden eyes, and fangs. Axel glanced off to the side and frowned. “I’m fine. I just know how anxious I was when someone else had command of my soldiers. I thought you might be feeling something similar.”

Reyna wondered who managed to wrestle Axel’s troops away from him in the past. From his commentary and strategizing, she was starting to realize he wasn’t as low ranking as she had originally thought. Had there been a major power struggle in Saturn’s army?

Axel’s gaze drifted from the fields, up to the aqueducts above them. His ears rose along with his eyebrows. He walked up to touch the stone base of the aqueducts. “I’ll bet you have a phenomenal view up there,” he said.

“I can’t believe you have four bars on your tattoo, and you haven’t climbed up here once,” Axel teased.

She had to convince him to use the maintenance ladders instead of climbing the exterior of the aqueducts, like he wanted. He sat on the edge of the stone channel covering, a flat slab that covered the water passageway under them, and stared at rooftops of New Rome.

Before they’d climbed up, she might have thought it a waste of time. But, now they had a highly accurate map for their strategizing banter about invading and defending New Rome and Camp Jupiter.

The view was phenomenal. Sunlight glinted off the shimmering marble of Temple Hill, making the buildings look appropriately godly. Camp Jupiter bustled with activity, as the Cohorts set up for campus, or marching practice. From the looks of it, Frank hadn’t blown up the camp yet and—if he did—she’d have optimum seating for the show.

Axel sat beside her, legs dangling over the edge, like they weren’t at a falling height that would make them splat on impact. With the soft smile on his face and the way his ears perked up with curiosity, he looked closer to her age.

For an uncomfortable moment, Reyna wondered if Axel was the kind of boy she might have dated in Puerto Rico, if her mother hadn’t been Bellona and her father hadn’t lost his mind. He had the deep tan of a Native and was just old enough that Hylla would have scrutinized him mercilessly. The jaguar features might have hinted that there was more to the world than her local parish described and his scarification might have marked him as bad news.

Reyna wished she had a knife, so she could twirl it. She felt naked without her praetorian armor. Just because she wasn’t wearing it didn’t mean she could ignore her duties.

“Axel,” she said. “When you were talking about, the gods that sent you here, why did you refer to
multiple gods when your brother only said Phobetor?”

Axel sighed, like he knew their little moment up here couldn’t last. “I wasn’t sure at first…” he admitted. “I believe Phobetor is working with Eris—or Discordia—and some other minor gods. I think he’s been giving us nightmare prophecies every night to disrupt any dream prophecies or communication that we could receive, and I think Eris has been causing minor bickers amongst the gods and cabins to keep everyone distracted from… something.”

He shrugged, glanced down at their hands, then back up to New Rome. She was well aware he’d edged his fingers along the rocks so his were beside hers.

From Reyna’s time at Camp Jupiter and from what she’d heard of other campers, Discordia didn’t come up in mythology often, but when she did, it was never good. Normally, she associated with major wars and disagreements, often mixed up with Reyna’s own mother, Bellona, in her relationship with Mars. Phobetor almost never came up, except when discussing his father, Hypnos.

“You think they’re going to do more than attack Camp Half-Blood?” she asked.

“I’m not sure even they know what they’re doing. I know Eris kidnapped Hemera, the primordial Goddess of Day… I think…” He cracked a humorless smile. “I think she’s just bored. Two major wars ended, and she missed out on another civil war between Camp Half-Blood and Camp Jupiter. If she’s anything like my little brother, she’s dying to stir something up. I wouldn’t even be surprised if something petty happened and she’s proving a point.”

“Like your little brother would,” she repeated. Now that she thought about it, she hadn’t seen Axel’s little brother during their training that morning. A petty child of Discordia with a grudge against Camp Jupiter? “He sounds exactly like someone I’d want wandering free in my camp,” she sighed.

Axel went silent and frowned. She could tell he didn’t want her knowing about Pax’s heritage. “Are you done with my interrogation for today?” he asked.

“Three more questions,” she said, counting them out carefully. From the way his posture went rigid, she needed to come back to Discordia later, when he was less guarded. Besides, she’d been hammering him with questions, every time they weren’t discussing how to invade New Rome. “Then we can switch the interrogation, and completely reverse the roles, as if I showed up at your camp in a Trojan Mario, looking suspicious.”

Axel relaxed again. He slid his pinky on top of hers. Reyna felt like someone injected her with a shot of adrenaline and was furious that she felt so giddy.

When she didn’t withdraw her hand, Axel half-smiled. “I’m a scary interrogator,” he warned her. Reyna snorted. “Now… assuming you didn’t just give me all of your battle strategies to test out which gambit would be the best for an some invading force, and assuming the end of your quest ends up being unrealistically easy… what are you and your brother doing after you’re done warning Camp Half-Blood? For the long term.”

Axel paused in surprise. She’d been asking him so many specific questions about his intentions and history, this might take more thought.

“I want Ajax to stay in Camp Half-Blood,” he said and stopped kicking his legs. “He loves it there and has a lot of new and old friends. He’ll slowly drive Chiron insane and keep that old horse from
hiding things he shouldn’t hide from the campers…”

Axel sighed. “Honestly, I just want him to have a healthy, stable, safe environment to finish growing up and forget all the horrible stuff that’s happened to us.”

“Safe?” Reyna scoffed. “You know how many times Camp Half-Blood has almost been destroyed in the last few years, right?”

“Is that one of my three questions?” he asked, eyes darting to her playfully.

“Only in the sarcastic way.” She shook her head. Hylla had always been so independent. When they had parted ways at The Queen Anne’s Revenge, neither had looked back. She couldn’t imagine feeling as responsible for a sibling as Axel did. His little brother couldn’t be that helpless.[2]

“You didn’t finish answering,” she said.

He puffed up his cheeks and popped them. “I’m not sure. I never really thought past getting rid of Santiago… I’m not…” He struggled with words for a moment. “Meant for Camp Half-Blood. It’s too chaotic and aimless. And I’m a little old for summer camp.”

His brow furrowed and his golden gaze looked lost on the horizon.

Reyna took a deep breath. She took her pinky from Axel, so she could clasp his whole hand. His knuckles were calloused, like hers. “Second question: have you thought about joining Camp Jupiter?”

Axel’s eyes went wide. He tensed, and she knew he couldn’t tell if she was joking. “Reyna…” he said her name warily. Slowly, he enlaced their fingers.

She kept her voice as businesslike as possible. She kept picturing how happy Jason looked with Piper and Percy’s discomfort when he told Reyna he had a girlfriend. “Next time Nico comes through, I’ll ask why the Lares are so unnerved by you, since they won’t talk to us. And I’ll have to ask Percy if the Little Tiber will try to kill you every time you step near it and see if Rachel can do a fill-in augury reading for you but…”

There was no reason for her to feel so anxious inviting someone into the legion, but she was inviting him to more than that. They both knew it. She thought she knew his intentions, but, once, she thought she knew Jason’s too.

She took a shaky breath. The thoughts about Jason and Percy stopped when Axel leaned closer to her. Up close, she could see the intricacies of the swirling scars along his cheeks and temple. The scent of hot chocolate flushed Reyna’s senses and she had to wonder how Axel could possibly still smell like that.

“We might have an opening for an acrobatics instructor that dabbles in strategizing. The legionnaires who saw your act expressed interest in its battle application after seeing you and your brother perform. And you’ve demonstrated how well you know the camp and its weaknesses…”

His forehead tilted against hers. The warmth felt wonderful with the chill of the setting sun. “You’re dangerous outside of Rome if you decide to turn on us. You know… keep your friends close…”

Reyna stopped talking. Axel had reached his empty hand across them. He stroked a finger along her jaw line. Her heartbeat thundereous louder than the water in the aqueduct under them.
“Keep your enemies closer?” he whispered, his mouth brushing her ear. “How close do you want me?”


She pressed her lips against his.

Axel mumbled softly. His fingers on her chin slipped, delicately dancing along her neck, past her shoulder, until they rested on the small of her back. Reyna pulled him closer by his collar, twisting her torso to press against his.

For that instant, she didn’t care that he was a former enemy of Rome or that she hadn’t known him that long. She was beginning to think they knew each other better than she had previously realized. The logistics of getting him into camp faded to nonissues.

When they withdrew for air, they were both trembling.

This was fragile. And she had the distinct feeling neither of them were good at handling fragile things.

Axel had the dumbest, happiest grin on his face.

They both laughed.

He raised their enlaced hands up to his mouth, so he could kiss her knuckles. “I assume I’d have to start at the bottom of the ranks and move up? Do all the menial tasks of a new recruit?”

“The worst ones,” she agreed. “I’d have to be particularly harsh on you, so no one thinks there’s any favoritism. I’ll block as many promotions as I can and make sure you get disproportionate punishments. You’ll have to scrub the Via Praetoria with a toothbrush and polish everyone’s armor, including Hannibal’s.”

“Oh, I’ll make your armor and roads shine brighter than Apollo’s chariot,” he assured, pausing his kisses at her wrist. He set their hands back down, so he could keep his eyes level with hers. “One condition: would I keep getting private tours from the praetor?”

“Only if you keep impressing me,” she said. With Axel’s personality and skill, she could see him become a centurion within a year or two. Logistics and luck were against him though. No one would trust him after his entrance, and the Senate would attribute any of his success to Reyna if they had a public relationship.

Thought seemed to cloud Axel’s smile. “I want to be here with you,” he said, the humor in his voice gone.

For a moment, neither spoke. Axel rolled his thumb over the top of her hand. “What was your third question?” he asked.

“I was going to ask if you had any gum on you, but—now that we’ve already kissed—I might ask if you have a tail to match those ears,” she said with a wry grin. “I’m surprised you remembered the other question.”

“I’m never going to forget when you have something to say,” he said, his own smile going crooked. “But you might need to find out about the tail in more creative means. I should have some gum on me. Ajax is a sneak-thief and reverse-pickpockets the weirdest flavors. Let’s see what
today—”

He let go of her waist to pull something from his pocket and put it in her hand.

Then Axel choked and seized up beside her, like he’d withdrawn a snake.

When she registered what he’d handed to her, she understood why. There was a small purple box, with cartoon logo of a man wearing a Roman style helmet. Beside it was text that read TROJAN: her pleasure. Sensations.

A sticky note was stuck on the box that read, Be safe, bro ;)

Axel’s jaw dropped in shock, slammed shut in mortification, then he stammered, “I didn’t—th—that’s not—” His ears dropped flat with his head, and his face went bright red.

Axel looked positively horrified and she couldn’t handle it. Reyna burst into laughter.

“Holy Epimetheus[3]—I—I’m so sorry—look, I’ll climb down this aqueduct—or jump off it—and you never need to see me again—”

Reyna hugged herself—she was laughing so hard. Tears threatened her eyes and her stomach started to hurt.

A hardened warrior and that scared him. Maybe she hadn’t spent that much time with him, but she didn’t think she’d ever see Axel that terrified, especially after the confidence he’d shown a few moments before.

Through her laughter, she almost didn’t hear Axel stammer something else about leaving. He moved to stand up.

Reyna grabbed his knee to keep him seated. She wiped the tears from her cheeks and tried to gain her composure. With the straightest face she could manage, Reyna said, “What was it you said to me when we talked at your van? ‘For a good strategist, preparedness is wisdom—’”

“I’m going to leave so I can kill my little brother,” he said. He moved to get up again, but Reyna tightened her grip.

“I can pretend to be angry if that would make you feel better,” she offered. “I was with pirates for a long time. They were way more forward than that.”

“That doesn’t make it better!” Axel cried. “They shouldn’t have—I—I swear I didn’t mean—or expect—”

Reyna leaned across him to put the purple box back into his pocket. Axel silenced and looked away. She was thankful for it. Now that he was calming down, she could feel the temperature in her cheeks flare like the snap of an onagers; she fully registered what she was putting back into his pocket.

“If you’re going to be one of my legionnaires, I need to know you can follow orders and problem solve under stressful situations,” she said, forcing her voice to sound more like a praetor’s should.

“I can,” he choked out.

“Good. Ignore what just happened. What are you going to do next?” she asked.

Axel puffed up his cheeks, popped them. He shook his head and closed his eyes. “I’m going to
remind you that it’s my turn to be an interrogator.” He opened his eyes and shakily placed his hand back over hers. Reyna almost laughed again when she felt how much she’d just made him sweat. “And I’m going to ask you if you’ve ever curled up with someone to watch the sunset.”

Welp! Welcome to my first attempt at a full fluff chapter. Let me know if you enjoyed it, and—as always—thanks for reading! :D

Also, I am so sorry guys! I definitely skipped uploading this chapter last week. It was sitting as a draft..... not being uploaded because I'm oblivious >>” Thank you for letting me know Ma_Philosophie!

Footnotes:

[1] Yea, Mel said she liked this fourth wall breaking, despite it being a placeholder…. Soooo, it’s here for good now XD

[2] Pax would like to dispel this slander in saying that he is entirely that helpless and is mortally offended and hurt that someone would imply otherwise.

From what Joey had seen so far, the Underworld sucked. She didn’t care how much “bandwidth” Mr. Charon said their lines could hold, or the sign that read how many people had died that minute—147—or that day—151,600—a number that threatened to make her feel really small. She’d spent too long waiting in that elevator to wait in another stupid line. She was wholly unimpressed and expected more from Hades.

When she’d first found herself in the lobby for the elevator, Joey didn’t remember how she got there. One moment, she’d been screaming in pain, her skin encompassed in a searing heat, like each particle was being ripped out with a pair of tweezers. Then she was there, in a lobby with a lot of other spirits… waiting.

If anyone asked her, and someone had better ask eventually, she handled it all with finesse. She would scoff and say, “It’s just death. Augh, you make it sound like such a big deal.”

She would neglect to mention how she’d curled into a ball and sobbed for her sister and father for the first half hour. Because dying—at least her dying—hurt. She would be lucky if there was anything left of her body after it was pushed into that raging fire. She’d hiccupped in her sobs. Was a pretty corpse too much for a girl to ask? They’d need something for the viewing, so Pax could make some ill-timed joke about her death.

Joey guessed her friends were all still alive, since she didn’t see any of them in the lobby. She just hoped Euna wasn’t doing anything stupid without her around and that Pax had managed to man-up and kill his father.

Would that mean his father would be down here somewhere? She didn’t know. There was no welcome pamphlet on death or how it worked. There was nothing to give her direction and nothing to strive towards.

Joey had watched the sign on the wall that read *Number of Deaths Today* slowly roll to 151,601. Something felt hollow inside her.

Until Joey’s fingers touched the rosewood box in her pocket: Hera’s quest item.

Then Joey remembered that she still had a purpose. She still had to get Hera’s quest box to Persephone, to finish the Trials of Psyche, as predicted in The Traitor’s Prophecy. Which would make her a full quest above Miranda Gardiner, so she could usurp Miranda’s position as head counselor. She could prove to Euna—once and for all—that she was better than her older sister, that not even death could keep her down. And she could really impress Apollo and leave Pax speechless—a new goal in her life. Er, in her death.[1]

Joey didn’t know the details of how that would all work, but she didn’t care when she walked up to the lobby security guard. He wore a white Italian suit that matched his military-cut hair. His skin was chocolate colored and he was tall. Joey might have thought he was hot, if something hadn’t
given her the creeps about him.

She walked up to his security guard podium and leaned against it. Her arm—which she just noticed was transparent—went right through, almost making her scream.

“Hi, you must be in charge here,” she said, trying to keep her voice light. She’d learned that faking confidence was half the trick to confidence and people respected it. “I would like to get to the Underworld please.”

“I would like to get to the Underworld please, Sir,” he corrected. “Your honesty and straightforwardness are refreshing, young miss. No screaming. No—wait. You are actually dead, right?” He leaned forward to inspect her through a pair of shades, like lots of living people came up to him for a tour.

“Duh,” she said.

A lot of other people probably were confused or in denial of their death. “No, I can’t be dead. I was only grazed by that 18wheeler. I’ll walk it off.”

Maybe having nightmare prophecies about her fiery death for the last two months did it, but she wasn’t surprised at all. Unsettled and feeling a creeping sense of being lost, but not surprised.

The security guard didn’t seem to like her response, but what did he expect when he was in a room full of dead people? “Duh, Mr. Charon,” he corrected with an irritated frown. “And how did you die?”

She tried not to frown or cry. For some reason, talking about her death choked her up. Instead, she raised her nose. “Sacrificed in a ceremonial fire,” she said.

Mr. Charon paused. He went to pick up a pen, but set it back down. “In a ceremonial fire? We don’t get many of those anymore. What kind of ceremonial fire?”

Joey knew she’d start to sob again if they kept talking about this, and her makeup was already smudged enough. “I don’t know—Mesoamerican? It could have been a barbeque for all I care—I’m dead.” She huffed and tried to regain her composure. At least it was a cooler death than anyone in her dojo or dance class would get.

“I see. And were those who sacrificed you kind enough to give you funds to cross the River Styx?”

Funds? Joey didn’t have funds. She was lucky if her Dad gave her money for clothes. He always gave all their money to Euna, and she either forgot about it or spent it on food. Was there anyone she could access as a ghost to ask—

“I’m Apollo’s girlfriend,” she said, about to continue.

“And Barack Obama is a my homey,” Mr. Charon responded dryly. He sighed, his expression becoming more sympathetic. “I’m sorry, my sweet girl. I forgot how young you were, and didn’t realize you were a demigod.”

He shook his head.

“Those gods don’t care about you once you pass on. Apollo only wants living toys to play with. I’m afraid only one god cares about you here.”

Joey’s eyes widened. “Jesus?”
Mr. Charon coughed back a laugh. “Now, that is far too politically and socially sensitive for me to respond to in full. But I was referring to Hades.”

Joey forced herself not to think about dancing with Apollo, the warmth of his smile, and the tenderness of his hands. She withdrew her rosewood box and set it in front of Charon. “I’m on a quest for Hera. It would be really unfortunate if word got out that you prevented a demigod from doing the Queen of the Gods’ quest, especially when it involves visiting my poor sister when she’s loneliest in the Underworld.”

Charon recoiled. “You’re one of Persephone’s sisters?” he asked and stood a little straighter. Apparently that meant something more to him than mention of Hera. “That should be payment enough.”

“Yes,” Joey agreed, having no real idea if it was.

He frowned at the box on his podium. “Child, good things do not come of that box,” he warned.

Joey snatched the box back up and put it in her pocket, wondering how it didn’t fall right out when she couldn’t seem to touch anything else. That box was her reason for living—er—trying right now. Besides, the story of Psyche ended well, right?

“That’s not true,” she said. “A mortal became immortal with it. Maybe I can do something like that.”

Mr. Charon shook his head. “I will take you on the next ferry ride, but the fate that awaits you might be worse if you pursue this quest, instead of accepting your current death.”

Joey didn’t know how it could be worse. She wanted to politely knock on Charon’s bleached hair and say, “Hellooo! I’m dead, remember?” Besides, she hadn’t completed enough heroics yet to just be dead. And now she needed to add punching Apollo in the face onto her list.

Her friends and sister needed to finish that prophecy. They were counting on her.

“I’ll take your next ferry ride,” she said, trying to think of something cool to say. “The Underworld needs its next popstar.”

[1] So, I have to do a call out here. Frost has some major foresight and close reading skills. She immediately noted that I’d given the person who needed to go to the Underworld an express pass down there. Awesome predicting skills dude!

Thanks for reading! We’re just about to get into some of the juicy stuff ^^ Plussss, Joey’s back! Er, well, sort of >>’ ‘ Hope you enjoyed!
Normally, when Pax found himself covered in blood, he’d have to take the opportunity to mess with someone. Maybe dramatically lie in a place where his brother would find him, or run into a room shouting, “Zombies! They’re everywhere!” and pretend to zombify… though this might not be the most ideal location to be a zombie. Too many trigger-happy kids with access to Roman weapons and chainsaws.

Right now though, he was too tired. He just wanted to slink back into the Fifth Cohort’s barracks unnoticed, and either curl up in Kally’s or his brother’s lap. Hades, he’d even go for Calex’s lap, under the condition that he’d make Calex feel absurdly uncomfortable before Calex would punch him in the back of the head.

When he saw some legionnaires playing poker on the Fifth Cohort’s porch, Pax couldn’t remember any of their names. He was too deliriously exhausted. If they talked to him, he decided he’d just give them a thumbs up and moonwalk into the barracks.

When they stood up, looking alarmed at his approach, he realized that moonwalking might break whatever character he was playing. Had he morphed into someone else? That would mean he wasn’t covered in blood. But his hair, height, and skinny jeans all felt like him.

“Oh—uh—Hazel’s not in yet. She’s still out with Frank,” one of them said.

“We can tell her to meet you by the temple if you want. That’ll give us more time to prepare for evening inspection,” the other said.

“Augh, evening barracks inspection,” the first groaned.

Pax jammed his hands into his pockets and shrugged, breezing right past them. “I’ll wait for her in here,” he grumbled.

Neither tried to stop him. They seemed too scared.

Pax stumbled into the barracks. As Pax had hoped, most of the Romans weren’t inside. They were likely out at the bathhouses during their tiny bit of free time after dinner.

Each little chamber had three sets of bunk beds and a section for their armor. When he finally found the empty room that his friends were assigned, he almost collapsed into Kally lap.

She sat on the floor beside the door, her knees pulled up so she could lean a notebook against them. Her honey hair was damp from a recent bath. The ends hanged against her sweatpants; Hazel probably loaned them to her.

Merry paced back and forth across the room, humming softly and tapping a cell phone in the crook of her shoulder and ear.

Euna was curled up in one of the barrack beds, Backbiter resting beside her pillow, like a
replacement, homicidal teddy bear.

Axel and Calex were missing, likely at the Roman bathes, discussing Axel’s hopeful successes and that little surprise gift Pax had left in Axel’s pocket.

The thought of curling up in Kally’s lap was too much, like chowing down on a stack of Reese’s Sticks. Pax sank to the ground and rested his face against her leg.

Kally almost screamed, making Merry tap a finger to her lips to call for silence.

“Nico!” she yelped. “What are you—Pax?!!?”

At her outburst, Merry shook her head to an unheard beat and stepped out of the room.

Nico? Pax glanced down at his hand to see a silver skull ring. That made enough sense. The Sexy Goth Prince could go anywhere he wanted in Camp Jupiter and New Rome without question. From what Pax had gathered, despite Nico being a hero and a close friend of Reyna’s, people still found the I play with dead things creepy.

“You’re wising up, Cyclops,” he murmured into her leg, not even caring how she’d identified him.

Her voice started angry, but he couldn’t blame her. Last time he’d turned into her half-brother’s boyfriend, he’d accidentally kissed her and less accidentally tricked her into swearing on the River Styx. And that was why Pax owed Kally cookies and cuddles for the rest of forever. That and because she was really hot and really cool—an impressive contradiction in the Book of Pax.

Her tone quickly softened and she could feel her hand slip against his face. “What happened?”

Pax could tell her what happened. That his little reunion with the traitor to Camp Othrys hadn’t gone as planned.[1] Though Pax hadn’t really planned it. He was more a “jump and check the bungee cord afterwards” kind of guy.

Instead of giving that riveting exposition, Pax winked his yellow eye at her—or what would have been his yellow eye if he looked like himself and not like a Halloween decoration. “Did you know I can morph into four or six different people a day with the same apple?”

She didn’t find this nearly as impressive as he did. “They sent people looking for you.” Her green eyes flicked past the entrance, like she was nervous about the Romans seeing them. To be fair, it might be kinda weird to have the Ambassador for Pluto napping in the middle of the barracks on a daughter of Apollo.

“You were worried about me,” he cheered, wishing he had enough energy to give that the smile it deserved. He also wished he had a full mariachi band on call for times like this.

“I got lost in New Rome,” he said. This was true. He had gotten lost in New Rome, which sounded like a bad reality TV show: Lost in New Rome: A Centurion’s Heartache.

After he and Atë parted, he was stuck looking for the jerk-traitor in an area he’d rarely had to spy in when he was the spymaster of Camp Othrys. A shame, since the University was so pretty and had more Greek elements than they were willing to admit.

When Kally continued to stare at him, he sighed. He’d have to tell her some of what happened.

“And I released all of the weasels from their weasel enclosure. Did you know Romans stuff weasels into bags with disobedient legionaries and toss them into the River? And they call us
She relaxed. “I thought…” Kally raised her hand, like she wanted to touch her lips, but stopped herself halfway up. She smiled. “You and Axel... I’m surprised he hasn’t brought up faun rights since we got here.”

“Oh, I’m sure he slipped it in with some sexy banter to Reyna.” Pax rolled onto his back and reached a hand up to touch her chin, mimicking the way he assumed Axel would romance women. “Your eyes remind me of the green of jungle ferns, sparkling with mist just after a soft rain. Also, you should make a career center to decrease faun unemployment.”

Kally tried to scowl through her blush. “I’m pretty sure Reyna doesn’t have green eyes.”

“She doesn’t. I’m asking you, Kally, what you think you can do for faun rights.”

She shoved his hand away from her chin. That was that look she got when she remembered that she’d told Pax they couldn’t date because she couldn’t trust him. A very specific facial expression.

And, here he was, misdirecting the conversation, like someone she couldn’t trust... But, it was for the good of the team, right? What’s a couple of deals with the enemy for the good of the team? And he couldn’t tell her what happened with the traitor… that could implicate her, and she did not need to get in trouble for assuring weasel justice, among other things…

“Don’t talk to me like that when you look like Nico,” she snapped. “It’s weird.”

Normally, Pax might have reminded her that he couldn’t control how long he looked like a person. But Atë told him to try.

He remembered his half-sister lounging on a stack of gold in the corner after they’d found the pseudonym of the traitor to Mount Othrys. He’d wanted to ask her one last question before he tracked down the jerk: why Eris kept giving him the apples, despite the fact that he was working against her.

“Maybe you’re more god than human. Maybe you don’t need the apples. But what do I know? I’m just the Goddess of Mischief and Ruin. Remember not to trust anyone, Ajax!” She’d twiddled her fingers at him and poofed.

To turn into someone, he usually thought of their features and what they were like while biting one of his golden apples. What was the essence of Ajax Pax? He thought about cute and helpless things—like baby seals—and about Reese’s Sticks and weasels—

“I miss Hunnie and Baller,” Pax whined. He hadn’t been away from them for this long since… since Alabaster and Hecate gifted them to Axel and Pax.

“Pax!” Kally cried loud enough to make Euna roll in her bunk. “Your hands!”

There was the blood. The crusty, dried glittery-red was all over his hands, his forearms, and in smear marks across his jeans, where he’d tried to rub it off. But none on his T-shirt. The University of New Rome shirt was freshly… borrowed and clean.

“Would you look at that,” he said, wishing he wasn’t laying in her lap anymore.

“What did you do?! Where’d all that blood come from?!” she asked. “Ajax, you can’t just pretend this is nothing.”
“But you’re always willing to pretend this is nothing,” he whined. It was true. She’d always been willing to overlook things before. “Can’t you grow a backbone tomorrow or something?”

Before he could see Kally’s reaction, a pillow nailed him hard enough to knock the creepiness out of Zeus.

“You’re loud,” Euna stated in the same scary way a coroner might state, “Humans die of hypovolemic shock after losing 40% of their circulating blood.”

“Euna, you should become a baseball pitcher. Or throw grenades for the army. Either way, you’d be fulfilling someone’s dream,” Pax said, shoving the pillow away and sitting up.

Kally caught his hand, singing softly over the wounds. He hadn’t even realized there were still cuts all over them. With his accelerated healing, he assumed they’d be closed. With each of Kally’s notes about sunshine, a cooling sensation tingled his fingertips. And he started to realize how much they hurt.

“Ayyyye!” he whined.

“Pax has been someone else all day,” Euna grumbled. She’d sat up in her bunk, rubbing the sleepiness out of her eyes. “He left with Frank as Hazel this morning.”

Kally’s eyes widened. Her lips parted in shock and she dropped his hands. “As Hazel… You are what made Frank so flustered this morning?” Her eyes darted to the ground.

A horrific pang of regret sank Pax’s stomach, a fairly new emotion for him, but Kally was really good at inspiring it. Nothing could beat a consciousness into a person like disappointment.

His normal instinct for redirecting and evading crumbled at the look on her face. At least she wasn’t asking about the blood anymore. “Wait—I was—I had to steal a stick—a mysteriously important stick—from—”[2]

Merry waltzed back into the room, humming and nodding her head. “Paxy, I know you’re not saying or doing anything suspicious when we’re a day from getting home. And I know you’re not breaking Kally-Dear’s heart.”

The dangerous glint in Merry’s brown eyes reminded Pax that her father was the God of Madness. And parties. But he was pretty sure Merry wanted him to remember the madness part at that moment.

“Home?” he echoed and perked up. “We’re good to go back and terrorize Chiron?”

Merry nodded, hoping onto the bed beside Euna. Euna gave Merry a lazy glare.

“Rey-Rey gave us some money for airplane tickets,” Merry said. “I got us five to New York for tomorrow morning. Just in time to help my mom consult a lawyer. Though we’ll have to get a cab to camp from the airport. I can’t get a hold of Chiron or Dad to arrange a proper, fancy chauffeur.”

“Six tickets,” Kally said. She glanced up at Merry, rubbing the back of her hand across her eyes. With how pale she was, she couldn’t hide how blotchy her skin got when jerks made her tear up. Pax wished he could sic a weasel on himself. He’d never been held accountable for what he did on spy missions but… he guessed making out and fondling another guy might upset the average not-girlfriend.

“No, five. Reyna is holding Axel as a zesty hostage until they get word we made it back to Camp
Half-Blood without any tricks or sneaks. Then he’ll be packaged up and shipped out after.”

Pax’s panic over Kally came to a seizing halt. “Wait—we’re leaving my brother? Without getting a dowry? I did not agree to that! What if they kill him!? And communications have been down with Camp Half-Blood!”

Axel was way too awesome to be held hostage. Especially not by people who had more reasons to kill him than politicians had secret agendas. Especially not when he was prone to blurring stupid things around girls he liked, like, “I used to kill your friends,” and “I sing cheesy love ballads when I shower.”

Merry gave Pax a half-grin. “On the long list of things Reyna wants to do to Mr. Stoic and Mysterious, I think killing him is low in priority.”

“He’ll be fine,” Euna agreed, “We should be focused on how we’re going to stop and punish Eris, Phobetor, and the others.”

Kally, Pax, and Merry exchanged a quick, confused glance. Yea, Pax had pulled pranks on gods and titans, Kronos in particular, but punishing?

“Punishing gods is kind of a godly thing,” Merry explained. “Like when Zeus stripped Apollo and Poseidon of their godly powers and hotness. Or when he hung Hera over the nothingness of Khaos, so she could dance to the music of evisceration. Not really stuff us demigods can do.”

Euna’s gaze narrowed. Her fingertips danced across Backbiter’s hilt. Pax was glad the blade didn’t start laughing maniacally or attempt a soliloquy about homicidal sword thoughts.

“Khaos can eviscerate a god?” she asked.

Merry shrugged. “The gods seem to think so. But Khaos is under Tartarus. Which is under Hades. It’s a lighthearted road trip with lots of musical numbers. Most gods won’t willingly do a ride along there.”

“Could we bring part of Khaos to them?” Euna asked. “I bet they wouldn’t mess with the camp if we had it.”

Merry frowned. “Euna…” Her tone was abnormally worried compared to Merry’s normal buoyant voice. “Unless you had Pandora’s Box or something that can capture the ess—”

Pax raised his hand. “Can we stop theorizing about how to kill my mom? I know she’s negligent and kinda evil, and occasionally kills my friends as collateral damage, but don’t all parents do that?”

That definitely fit his Dad’s profile. And when Jack decided to play the part of Axel and his surrogate father, and Flynn as their surrogate mother, they were fairly similar. Just with more fun trips to the circus and genuine hugs. So really, Eris could have been worse in the parenting department… right?

One day, Pax would have a brood of mini Paxes that he would take to the circus, give genuine hugs, not neglect, and not kill their friends on accident. Those might have been high expectations for a Pax, but he at least needed to set the bar.

At the thought, he glanced back over at Kally. Her eyes were still red-rimmed, but she made eye contact. Normally, he’d love that look of pity. He would have curled into her lap, reminded her they would have beautiful children with his tan complexion and her green eyes, and told her he
wouldn’t fondle any more guys without her permission, even if it compromised a mission.

But right now, he wanted to puff up his chest, look strong like Axel,[3] and laugh like, “I’m fine! What’s a dead brother and a dead father when you can cause chaos in New Rome?”

“This is all suspiciously easy,” he said to change the subject to something lighter.

“Easy?” Euna asked. He hadn’t noticed, but her knuckles were white around Backbiter’s hilt and Merry’s hand was delicately placed over hers. For a sickening moment, he could envision a counter in Euna’s head: Two Paxes down! Four to go!

He really hoped she didn’t have a vendetta against his family. She’d have to get on a wait list.

“Not like, the last month,” he quickly said. “Just… Mom and the others put us in a Trojan Mario and dropped us off by the Little Tiber with a bunch of gods and people that hate Axel and me. She said she wanted us out of the way right now, so she could do obligatory evil things to Hemera and obligatory evil things with Camp Half-Blood. Yea, we lost a few weeks of time and yea, we were stalled a bit by Reyna and Axel wanting in each other’s military skirts but…”

It hurt him to admit this, but Pax inhaled deeply. “If I were an evil villain, that wouldn’t be enough chaos for me. And Mom and I… may have some similar personality traits.”

An uncomfortable moment passed where Pax almost hoped someone would say, “Na Pax. You’re cool.”

No one did. They all looked worried and he got the feeling he was right.

One thing was for sure: there was no way he could leave Axel alone in New Rome. Something else bad was going to happen, and he wasn’t willing to lose his brother as more collateral damage. What Atë said floated through his mind. “Remember not to trust anyone.” He wasn’t planning on it. Especially not the Romans. Especially not after he’d hunted down their spy.

[1] So, there is actually a chapter missing from this book that should go RIGHT before this chapter. Later, I’m going to make it a chapter-gone-short story, but I can’t put it in now, because it’ll give away the identity of the traitor in Tales from Mount Othrys, book 5. So I didn’t forget that Pax has to have his… confrontation with this person. But you won’t get who this person is until the end of the series. And there is a reason why the Romans aren’t freaking out about a body or an assault. You’ll get all of that in the short story. Assuming I don’t get hit by a bus before then. We’ll see.

[2] I’m 90% sure this is how all my excuses and explanations sound to friends and family -.-


Ah! Sorry guys, I thought the next chapter was Frank’s chapter, so we had a little more build up
during this one. But don’t worry! The book is going to earn its title in the next two chapters XD

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed!
Frank was determined to act like everything was normal today. He wanted to pretend he hadn’t spent the first half of yesterday avoiding his girlfriend and the latter half of the day chasing down weasels. No matter what animal he had turned into, he’d discovered weasels were difficult to catch.

Normally, he found his praetor house unbearably lonely. Jason had helped him take all of Jason’s stuff out, and put Frank’s stuff in. Members of the Fifth Cohort had snuck in for sleepovers a few times, but it was huge compared to the barracks. It made him think of his family’s burned mansion in North Vancouver.

At least he hadn’t blown up Camp Jupiter and Reyna could go on her date in peace. Despite all his heroics the past summer, he was still scared of disappointing her.

And he was scared of telling anyone that his stick was missing.

He must have misplaced it. That’s what he kept telling himself, but he kept imagining someone thinking it was a piece of kindling and throwing it in the fire. He’d furtively had the members of the Fifth Cohort go through their guests clothing when they went to the baths last night—just in case. He had known they were going to leave to catch a flight this morning, one earlier than morning inspection, and he didn’t want his stick to do some cross country traveling without him.

But nothing. He’d retraced all of his steps as a bloodhound to see if he could pick up the smell. The scent dead-ended at the Principia, intermixed with the various scents of their new guests. It was like someone had poofed with it. He didn’t know how it could disappear without him knowing. Normally, that thing weighed on him heavier than Sisyphus’s boulder.

This alone time at the praetor house gave him the quiet he needed to panic as he shaved his patchy chin growth and prepared to suit up for the day.

Then a shimmery image of Annabeth appeared in his mirror. Well, not in his mirror. Where the sunlight caught the steam in front of his mirror.

Frank yelped, stumbled backwards, and almost tripped over the toilet.

“Oh gods, it actually got through!” Annabeth cheered. “Frank!”

“Hey Annabeth,” he said, trying to pull his shirt and pants on as quickly and casually as he could. Knowing Annabeth, she wouldn’t even notice, but he could still feel his cheeks burn with embarrassment. “I thought Iris Messaging hasn’t been working.”

“It hasn’t!” Percy’s voice came from somewhere behind her. “And Iris hasn’t been giving me any drachma refunds!”

“Percy!” he cried. Just hearing their voices was calming. Maybe they’d have some ideas on how to find his kindling. “It’s good to hear from you two.”
“Unfortunately, we don’t have time to digress,” Annabeth said. She turned her face towards Percy and Frank could imagine the chastising look she was giving Percy. She looked back towards Frank, having given him—possibly strategically—time to change. “We’re looking for some demigods. They’re lead by a guy called Axel Pax—”

“He’s here. Why?” Frank said. He felt something squishy on his shirt. He reached down and found shaving cream smeared all over his clothing. He sighed, realizing he’d have to get changed again.

Percy snorted, “Because one of the girls with him went a little Poison Ivy and killed a bunch of mortals.”

“Percy! We’re not sure exactly what happened yet!”

Frank stared at Annabeth’s image. “What?”

Her expression was grim. “It’s not pretty. She’s carrying Backbiter, Kronos’s old scythe, though it could be in xiphos form. We don’t know what’s going on, but they have definitely proven to be dangerous.”

Frank was starting to feel nauseous, like he’d eaten some ice cream. “We just sent them your way on an airplane. Well, most of them. One of them is here, Axel Pax. Their escorts reported that one of them went missing on the way to the airport, maybe thirty minutes ago. A kid named Pax.” Reyna was supposed to be interrogating Axel about his brother’s disappearance right now.

“Be careful of that kid,” Percy warned. “The Stolls said there are rumors he can change into other people.”

Frank’s nausea solidified into a knot in his stomach. He thought about how Hazel hadn’t quite acted like herself when he saw her yesterday morning on their walk to the battlegrounds and on their… detour. And how Hazel left to grab something, only to show up moments later from a slightly different direction. She’d made him so flustered, he hadn’t thought twice about it.

And he hadn’t noticed his kindling was gone during the rest of practice because he was so focused on what to say to Hazel, and so upset she was acting like nothing had happened.

Frank balled his fists. His face felt like it was on fire and he couldn’t decide if it was from embarrassment or rage. “He has my stick. He stole it from me,” Frank realized.

“What?!” Annabeth asked, her face going pale.

“How?!” Percy asked. “You watch that thing like it’s your… well, your life force.”

“It went missing yesterday morning,” Frank growled. He was going to find that Pax kid, turn into a grizzly bear, and smack him around until Pax gave him his stick back and an apology. How dare he impersonate Hazel like… like that.

“Oh gods,” Annabeth said. “Frank, we’ll find them and your stick. When do the others land in New York?”

Frank shook his head. With trying to round up the weasels, run the camp, avoid Hazel, and look for his stick, he hadn’t paid as much attention to their guests’ itinerary. “I’m not sure, but I can find out from Reyna—but I’m not sure how to get in contact with you after. Iris Messaging hasn’t been working and every time we’ve tried to call you—”

Annabeth frowned. “My cell phone malfunctioned after I took some pictures of an Egyptian journal
that we’re pretty sure was cursed.”

Frank probably should have asked, but his anger was too distracting.

“We’re pretty sure they used to be part of Kronos’ army, so the Pax brothers will be trained and—”

“You knew they were part of Kronos’ army and you let them into your camp?” Frank demanded.

Annabeth sighed, like she’d had this conversation before. “That’s not important right now. Just know that they could be very dangerous—”

“—same with that Ana girl—”

“—Euna,” Annabeth corrected. “And, Frank…” Annabeth’s expression changed. “Leo is—”

The image shuddered. Annabeth’s image disappeared as something moved in front of his window, blocking the sunlight’s path to the steam.

Frank almost hoped it was Pax, so he could throttle the kid. But he would have way rather heard the end of that sentence. *Leo is… what?*

“Those punks *are* dangerous,” the person said behind him. “But nothing you can’t handle.”

Frank was pretty sure he recognized that voice, though it sounded much smugger than usual. Frank turned, wishing people would stop crashing his bathroom.

He just wanted to finish shaving.

The man behind him wore a pair of dark cargo pants, a dark camo shirt, and a bulletproof vest lined with grenades. His combat boots were caked with mud, adding some unneeded decorations on Frank’s white floor. He wore red-tinted night vision goggles and a black bandana with a skull symbol. He was huge, and shouldered an enormous assault rifle, like a HKG36 on steroids. He stared past Frank, at the mirror. With his other hand, he shaved some scruff off his neck with a hunting knife.

Frank decided he *didn’t* want to use his dinky razor while this guy was shaving with a hunting knife. Frank could go get a knife from his room to try the same, but—with his luck—that would end this conversation faster than getting Hannibal the elephant to storm the praetor house.

“Mars?” Frank asked. Normally, his father looked like an honorable soldier. This guy looked more like an eager mercenary.

The guy must have been satisfied with his shave job, stowing away his hunting knife. “Eh, close enough kid. Ares. I don’t usually come *here* like this, especially with all you Romans expecting my other side, but this is *personal.* To both me and my stiffer side, I guess. And to Rome. But Roman aspect won’t handle this as tactfully as I will.”

Ares set his assault rifle down so he could crack his knuckles.

Frank didn’t understand why he was getting so mad at Ares for tracking dirt into his bathroom. He guessed it was Ares’ aggressive atmosphere, but he still felt like going for a loving father-son smack down. Were the Greek aspects of gods more… influential than the Roman?

“Is this about my stick?” Frank asked. He was mad at himself for asking. He didn’t want to talk about it, but the words just slipped out.
Ares bellowed out a laugh. “Oh no. That’s your problem. This is about those two punks, though mostly about the one that can turn part monster. I gotta hand it to him. If I didn’t hate him, I’d say he has a lot of spunk. Waltzing around Camp Jupiter—like he hadn’t killed two praetors.”

Frank dropped his razor. It clattered on the ground. “He what?!”

Ares shrugged, like this shouldn’t have been shocking. “The legion had to lose two praetors for Reyna and Jason to come to office. I’m not sure how he took out the first one, the one that Reyna replaced, but that monster killed the second in an ambush during the Second Titan War. He wore their medals on his military cloak as battle trophies.”

Wooziness hit Frank. Yesterday, he’d practiced fighting with Axel. He could envision the seemingly genuine glee Axel exuded when battling Reyna. Frank remembered feeling stupidly excited when Axel patted him on the back, complimenting one of his strikes. Axel gave off the confident cool of a leader, one that needed impressing.

But he had smelled weird. Frank couldn’t describe it, other than not-human.

“He killed two praetors. And you’re saying he can turn into a monster?” Frank asked.

“Something like that. I don’t really get it. The Leonis Caput is one of Hecate’s weird magic-science experiments. I’m not sure how much of it comes from being a savage freak, but he has a helmet that can turn him part monster now. But he doesn’t have it on him, so you should be able to take him pretty easily. I kinda wish he did, it would be a better fight.” Ares seemed disappointed.

“Gee, sorry,” Frank muttered.

The Leonis Caput. Frank had heard older legionnaires talk about that creature, one of Krios’s lieutenants.

“It’s a shame. Now, if I remember properly, you Romans are all about quests, right?” Ares scratched under his chin. “You got a pen on you?”

“Uh, no.”

“Augh, why do I feel like Romans never have pens?”

Frank scowled. “We’re in my bathroom.”

“Whatever,” Ares growled. He withdrew a grenade that morphed into a pen and went to scribble on Frank’s wall. Frank wanted to yell at him to stop. He’d have to clean that and the dirt on his floor. He wasn’t sure what the regulations were on yelling at your godly parent, but he assumed it would result in more than being grounded.

“So, you’re supposed to be a good tactician and whatever. If you were this guy, what do you think you’d be up to?”

Frank’s mind whirled. His jaw dropped. The Pax brothers had his stick. And Axel was currently with—

“Reyna,” Frank gasped. “Do you think he’s trying to collect more praetor medals?”

“I don’t know. I just hate the guy. It’s why I cursed him,” Ares said and stepped back from the wall.
“Why do you—”

Ares vanished, leaving Frank with a quest scribbled on his bathroom wall:

*Bring the Leonis Caput before the council of the gods for divine judgment. Or at least kick his ass. Have fun kid.*

Frank stared at the message for a second, deciding something for sure: the Greek version of his dad was a jerk.

Then he realized he was staring when he should have been scrambling for his armor and weapons. Reyna should be strong enough to hold off the Leonis Caput, right? Especially if he didn’t have his helm?

[1] CinemaSins Counter: 1

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Good ol’ Ares…. such a great dad!

Sorry I’m running late on updates! It’s been a crazy week. Regardless, I hope you enjoy! I’m super excited for next week’s chapter: Axel’s *Handicap of Emotional Heartache*. Ready for this book to earn its title! XD
Axel wished he could assure Reyna, “No, my brother is not collecting grasshoppers to make a plague in your temples, or filling every doors’ keyholes with superglue, or drawing vulgar pictures with weed killer on your lawns, or ziptying all of your scissors shut,” because those were all things he’d seen Pax do to his friends. There was no telling what he would do to people he didn’t like.[1] He just hoped Pax didn’t have access to hardware or craft stores. Or an exotic animal shop. That had been a terrible prank.

Reyna had kept up the façade of a proper interrogation for the first fifteen minutes of breakfast. She’d even sent Argentum and Aurum to watch the principia, since there might have been a break in. She didn’t give up until he swore on the River Styx that he didn’t know where Pax was. That was when her shoulders slumped.

They were sitting on the couch in her praetor house, an empty bag from Pandora’s Bakery: Exciting Surprises with Every Bite on the coffee table. Axel knew they didn’t have a lot of time left. She wouldn’t forgo her praetorian duties two days in a row for him. Plus, his friends should be landing in New York in the afternoon, Cali time, so he’d be escorted to the airport as soon as they got word from Chiron that Euna, Merry, Calex, and Kally hadn’t made a break for it.

“I’m worried about Pax. He doesn’t… think much before he acts,” Axel said. He leaned forward to pick up the fiercest looking ninja-zombie bunny that lined her coffee table. “How about Cuauhtemoc? He looks like he took his last stand against the Spanish.”

This rabbit was painted blue and black, and had a half-eaten heart hanging out of his mouth.

Reyna shook her head gravely. “I don’t want to think of what kind of nicknames the others would give him.”

Axel set him down and picked up another. This one was red, with its paws outstretched to perform a vicious roar. He leaned back into the couch, feeling a cushion catch him. As casually as he could—which wasn’t very casual considering how nervous she made him—Axel lowered one arm onto the cushion behind her back.

Her hair smelled wonderful. Once they came back to the praetor house, she’d let it down. Axel didn’t know why she did, but he loved to watch those dark waves undulate along her shoulders and arm muscles.

“You don’t think Pax thinks before he acts…” she said and leaned back into his arm. Axel felt his heart skip about six beats, do a back flip, and standby for more excitement. “Between releasing the weasels and what he snuck into your pocket yesterday, I’d think he’s more of an idiotic mastermind.”

Axel felt his cheeks heat up with the threat of a blush. He coughed. “I’m pretty sure his subconscious is always plotting connivingly, but the thoughts in the foreground are just versions of the Harlem Shake.” He lowered his arm around her shoulder, leaning in to show her the zombie-ninja rabbit he was holding. “You could call this one Agis III.”

She raised a skeptical eyebrow. “The Greek that fought against Rome?”

“You want diverse representation among your rabbit army,” he said. “And you already have two Romans there, Marcus Cassius Scaeva and Flamma the Gladiator.”
“Flamma was Syrian,” she chastised.

“But he fought for the Romans.” Axel had just lost this word battle, but some stubbornness might lead to a fun mockfight. He couldn’t maintain the conversation though—not when Reyna turned more into him.

He cleared his throat. “When I’m done with my mission, you’re still okay with me coming back here? To clean your armor and show up all your best fighters and help you finish naming your zombie rabbits…”

“I don’t make suggestions about joining the legion lightly,” she said in answer. Although her voice was firm, Reyna rested her head into the crook of his neck.

Axel thought about kissing her again. He hadn’t stopped thinking about kissing her since yesterday. But he was enjoying the moment too much: the sweetness of anticipation, wondering if she was thinking about pressing her lips to his. From the quick flutter of her breath against his neck, and the rapid heartbeat that he could feel along his arm, she was. Or she was preparing to attack him. Axel was comfortable with either.

“How much time do you have before you have to go be a praetor again?” he asked. He set Agis III the Zombie Rabbit to the side and enlaced their fingers.

“I’ll give you two more minutes.”

He wished he could be at her side all day, working together to keep Camp Jupiter functioning as a machine. He passively wondered if he’d have to kill Frank Zhang to become praetor, or if there was some other way to replace him. Probably not. He liked the tall, friendly Canadian too much to kill him. And Frank made a better praetor than Axel would.

Axel’s ears twitched.

Footsteps shuffled softly outside of the praetor house, at least half a dozen people. From the clink of metal, they wore armor. For an instance, he thought it might be a change of sentry—but that was too many soldiers. Everyone should have been doing their daily duties and they wouldn’t need Reyna until fatigues or camp maintenance…

Which meant something was wrong.

He put up his Mist mask.

Ajax, Axel briefly cursed, until he heard two hushed voices that made him sweat.

“Why’d you come back? Wait—we’re doing this quietly. We need to get Reyna out of there before you—”

“What’s the fun in doing anything quietly?”

Axel knew that gruff voice. He still remembered it cursing him, the day every weapon he touched started to break within a few strikes.

Axel and Reyna sat up.

The door kicked open.

For a split second, Axel could see the thug-like features of Ares. The War God gave him a brief
nod, and a sinister smile.

Then he disappeared and Frank Zhang led five armed legionnaires into the praetor house. Axel immediately recognized a few of them: Michael Kahale and Leila of the Fourth Cohort, and Dakota of the Fifth and Jacob of… some Cohort. They’d practiced fighting with him the morning before.

Time felt like it was slowing down as they created a semicircle around him and Reyna. Their golden and leather armor shuffled softly, their spears glinted in the morning sunlight from the windows.

Axel tried to keep his breath even. He knew what this was about. He’d been stupid, so stupid to think the God of War—one of the most powerful gods in Rome—wouldn’t notice him here. At Camp Half-Blood, he’d stayed out of their borders as much as he could, but here…

One of the legionnaires, Nathan?, stumbled a little while coming inside. For a split second, Axel realized that the soldier didn’t know how to function with the rest of the team. It was a sixteen year old, bulky around the shoulders, with the symbol of Minerva on his arm. The legionnaire caught Axel’s gaze and winked. Axel couldn’t tell if the motion made his stomach seize up more or relax.

He and Reyna stood. Reyna tried to hide her fear with outrage. “Zhang, what’s going on?” she demanded.

“Reyna, step away from him,” the praetor said. Frank frowned furiously, like this was the last thing he wanted to be doing. None of them wanted to be doing it. The older members looked enraged. The younger members looked scared.

Frank stepped forward, keeping his eyes locked on Axel. Unfortunately, the direction Frank stepped also put him between Axel and the only real exit Axel had: the labyrinth entrance in Reyna’s bedroom.

“Axel Pax, also known by the alias Leonis Caput, you’re under arrest for the disappearance of Praetor Megara Laskaris, the death of Praetor Julian Obademi, and countless others, for being an enemy of the legion, and for the suspicion of aiding Euna Song in the murder of several mortals. You’re to be put into custody until your trial date.”

Reyna froze.

Axel felt his heart sink. His hopes crumbled and, like a phoenix of carnage, the voice of the Leonis Caput rose in their place, Another praetorian medal to our mantel. We’ll go down in the blood of our enemies as your ancestors did before you.

“Under whose accusations?” Reyna asked, voice trembling.

Axel already knew, but hearing the god’s name made him clench his jaw.

“Ares, the Greek aspect of Mars Ulta,” Frank said.

“Why the Greek aspect?” Dakota asked, like he hadn’t noticed the oddity before.

Frank sighed. “I don’t know.”

What kind of trial would that be? Axel could envision it now, Well, our patron deity says this guy is the beast we’ve wanted to kill for years…. So uh, who wants to pretend to be his defendant? If he was captured, he’d be dead within the week.
As Axel glanced at Reyna out of the corner of his eye, he could see her put the pieces together. She already knew he was an excellent fighter and a former strategist, part of Kronos’s elite. Her lower lip quivered, though he hoped it was anger instead of…

He didn’t want to think he’d hurt her, but that was as stupid as thinking he could have lived here.

She slowly slid her hand to her knife, tensing.

Although the words felt dumb, Axel had to whisper, “I’m sorry, Reyna.”

He glanced back at the legionnaire who had winked at him. The legionnaire nodded back, eyes flicking to the general direction of the labyrinth entrance, beyond Frank. That was Axel’s brother, but one of them would need to cause a distraction for the other to act.

“You’re disgusting!” the legionnaire cried, in one of Pax’s best ‘I’m-upset-but-not-really’ voices. He threw something at Axel’s head that Axel barely caught.

A lighter.

Chaos broke out.

The legionnaire let go of his spear to throw something into Jacob’s neck.

Jacob collapsed.

Pax morphed back. With a crazed laugh, he dropped a smoke bomb onto the ground and flicked his other hand up to dart Dakota in the neck. Dakota stumbled over, almost taking Michael Kahale with him.

Kahale growled in confusion, unable to fully see Pax around Dakota. “Nathan, what the—”

Axel kicked the coffee table at Frank Zhang, hoping he didn’t murder any zombie-ninja bunnies on the way.

He snapped out the obsidian blades from his forearms. He used one hand to strike the lighter and the other to slice open his tongue. As the blood dribbled from his mouth, he growled out the incantation, “Xma’su’tal Xib, Liik’il Xtaabay!”[3]

Although Axel couldn’t do the full transformation without the helmet, he felt the Mist swirl like a maelstrom around them, making the room flicker from the praetor’s house to a surreal ethereal plane of Pax’s green smoke. The barometric pressure dropped, and his ears popped. The sunlight shrank back as the fire from the lighter blazed a deep turquoise on contact with his blood. He tossed it onto the couch, so the material would burst into bluish flames.

Hecate taught them how to make the world into a nightmare for Romans, and that was exactly what he was going to do. He just needed to scare Rome’s best and most courageous warriors out of his way.

From what he could see through the curling mist, Pax managed to dart Leila as Michael Kahale crashed into him.

Axel could feel a Mist tail morph out of his body and his jaguar features enhance. This made him vulnerable to their weapons, but there’s no way he could escape without some extra speed. To maintain this form though, he would need to make someone else bleed.
Yes, lieutenant, we will.

“We’ve brought Tartarus to you, Romans,” Axel roared, enlacing as much fear magic as he could with each howl. “Leave this house, or I’ll eat your hearts and souls like the comrades I’ve eaten before you.”

To an extent, it worked. Michael Kahale and Frank both flinched.

Reyna punched him in his bad shoulder.

Axel hissed out in pain, stumbling backwards. He snatched a sword off Reyna’s wall, but felt the blade shudder and torque, like it was fighting his control. Like it wanted to listen—instead—to the Daughter of Bellona’s will.

As Axel crouched low to the ground, Reyna almost kicked him in the head. He barely dodged.

“ROMANS!” she screamed, the rage and hurt in her voice making Axel tremble. “WE DO NOT FEAR MONSTERS OR DEATH!” Her tattoo gleamed in the murky lighting and smoke.

With those simple words, Axel could feel his fear magic shatter. Her powers completely negated it. That shout was loud enough that back up would be coming soon.

Frank broke out of his paralysis with Reyna’s courage. He side stepped, so he could flank Axel, and jammed his spear forward.

Axel twisted to avoid the strike, grabbed the pilum’s shaft and snapped it in half. Just as Reyna threw her knife at Axel’s chest.

Axel whipped the broken shaft in front of him, smacking it into the projectile. The blade still grazed his ribs before clattering onto the floor.

Reyna grabbed another blade off her wall.

He couldn’t take on both praetors. Not at the same time. But he didn’t need to. He just had to get past them.

Axel retreated further into the room, keeping low in the dissipating green smoke and Mist shadows. If Axel backed up far enough, and Reyna and Frank advanced on him, it would leave a gap of space between them, Reyan’s bedroom, and Pax. They would think he’d run for the exit, not for her bedroom. Maybe he could dash past them, on the other side of the flaming couch, grab Pax- 

Frank’s skin rippled and a jaguar snarled where Frank had been standing. The jaguar leapt over the flames of the couch, landing comfortably on the other side, so he could flank Axel again. A good strategy—now, they could back him into the corner of the room.

Axel couldn’t help but smile. He’d been wrestling jaguars since he was a kid. This shouldn’t be a problem.

Before Reyna could charge, Axel lunged at Frank. He threw the broken pilum forward for a diversion, and followed through with the sword. As he suspected, the sword bent before it even got near the son of Mars. Axel cursed, discarding it to tackle into the jaguar instead.

Frank the Jaguar rose onto his hind legs to bat the pilum piece. He wasn’t ready when Axel slammed into him. Axel latched his claws into Frank’s forearms, so he couldn’t prepare another
swing. They skid backwards, past the flaming couch, and closer to Reyna’s bedroom.

Axel sank his fangs into the fur behind Frank’s ear and twisted. He didn’t want to tear Frank’s skin off, but he did want to direct Frank’s jaws away from him. As typical jaguar battles go, Axel had already won, having Frank pinned and his teeth ready for a killing blow—though he didn’t want to kill Frank, just disable him.

But most jaguars didn’t shift into something much bigger.

Axel felt the fur under his teeth thicken. Before he could disengage, a paw the size of his chest slammed into him. Gravity stopped working. Axel found himself airborne before smashing into—

Everything fuzzed.

When he could orient himself, he was winded and felt like he’d been hit with a chariot. He was on the floor. The world sounded hollow: his brother’s shouting, the roar of… of…

Axel blearily raised his head to find a bear the size of a car stalking towards him. There was a huge hump on the bear’s back—a grizzly—and blood spilled down one side of the bear’s head.

Axel coughed again, spitting out a half-morphed jaguar-grizzly ear that flopped back into a human one upon contact with the ground. “Ew,” he breathed. That was something he hadn’t meant to do.

Get up, the Leonis Caput snarled.

Trying, he wanted to growl back. But his body wasn’t responding. Kinda dazed from being backhanded by 600 pounds of pure Canadian mascot.

Then a foot caught him in the stomach and smashed him back against the wall. For a split second, he could imagine meeting Jack in the Fields of Punishment and the pleasant chats they’d have between eternal punishments.

“Oh, how did you go?”

“Beaten to death and mauled in my recently-ex-girlfriend’s house.”

“Ah, charming. Such a fitting spectacle.”

Reyna stood over him, scowling down. A pain, sharper than anything he’d be dealt in this room, pierced him when he saw the red rims around her eyes.

Let me fight her, the Leonis Caput growled. I was made to embrace her in battle.

No, Axel snapped. But he could already feel himself losing his awareness. His Mist tail went to wind around her ankle without his permission. The Leonis Caput was about to rip control from him.

“Why?” Reyna whispered.

Frank shouted in alarm.

Before she could kick him again or he could trip her, Axel was alarmed to see the Pandora’s Bakery: Exciting Surprises with Every Bite bag shoved over Reyna’s head. Pax grabbed the ends of her hair and pulled her backwards, shouting, “Eat bread, witch!”

Later, Axel would have to give Pax a lecture on things Pax wasn’t allowed to do to his girlfriend,
even if she is trying to kill him.

Pax dashed past Reyna to grab Axel’s arm. Axel hadn’t realized—when Frank threw him—he’d crashed into the wall closer to the labyrinth exit. Pax dragged Axel towards the wall, shouting a, “So long suckers!” before smacking into solid rock.

“Aye!” Pax whined, grabbing his shoulder, where he’d made contact.

Axel coughed again and punched the glowing symbol of Daedalus on the rocks beside where Pax tried to exit. It was hidden under a map of old Rome. “To your left,” Axel gasped.

“Oh,” Pax grumbled.

Reyna caught her balance and ripped the bag off her head. Human Frank… was still whining and pawing at his face from whatever Pax had done.

But, of course, Pax still took the time to shift Axel to the left and shouted, “So long suckers!” again before running them through the labyrinth entrance.

The world plunged into darkness. After about ten feet of Pax dragging him, his little brother took a sharp turn to the left. Pax must have been tracing his other hand along the walls. Another few feet in, so they’d be outside of any flashlight range, Pax dropped him and plopped onto the ground.

From what Axel could feel, this was still smooth stone, likely a part of the labyrinth modeled off of ancient Rome’s limestone rooms. Everything smelled damp, and had the dankness of monsters.

Distantly, he could hear Reyna and Frank arguing over getting back up to try following them, though Frank sounded like he was in a lot of pain.

Once all his sense of sight was deprived, Frank could feel how hard Frank the Grizzly Bear had thrown him and how hard Reyna had hit him in the shoulder. He’d be lucky if he were just bruised tomorrow. Although his mouth was coated with Frank’s blood, Axel thought he could smell someone else’s.

“Are you badly injured?” he gasped. Breathing hurt.

Pax patted around, accidentally pinched Axel’s ear, then patted him on the head. “I’m probably feeling better than you. At least you got to date Reyna for a day without anything going wrong. I mean, that’s pretty good for us, right?”

When Axel thought about it, he stopped trying to stand up. He collapsed on the labyrinth floor. Normally, he was always about struggling forward, because, normally, he had a purpose. But they’d killed his father already. Camp Othrys was gone. The girl he loved rightfully hated him.

He still had Pax though, and the other five.

He just had to digest that the best future ever—building up retirement as an acrobatics instructor that got to beat up Romans every day and got to go on dates with the most beautiful, intelligent, and the bravest warrior ever—was gone.

“Just… give me a minute,” he said.

Then he punched the floor and pain shot through his arm. He was halfway through every curse he knew in Spanish when he realized he had been hissing them in Mayan, Kriol, and English too.
“More like a few years,” Pax snorted.

“Shut up.” Axel exhaled. He dragged himself to sit up beside Pax, or, where he assumed was beside Pax. “We need to beat them to New York. You heard what Frank said, ‘suspicion of aiding Euna Song in the murder of several mortals.’ We should keep moving.” The labyrinth was different now. From what Axel understood, the structure had collapsed and rebuilt itself. This wasn’t a place one would want to stay for long.

He closed his eyes, exhaled, and rubbed them. When he opened them again, he could see a faint, glowing trail along the floor. “That way,” he pointed before realizing how dumb that was.

“Let me just put on my night vision goggles to see your hand—"

“Shut up. Just grab my arm and follow me.”

Is this the end of Rexel?!?! Eh, probably not, but it'll take a Hades of a demigod therapy couples session (also known as a gladiator arena in New Rome) to get through some of this. Regardless, I hope you enjoyed! Were you expecting things to start to fall apart in this way? I hope the ear was at least a surprise. Let me know what you think in the comments! :D

[1] So, I just disposed a dangerous power on many of you. As my pranking days are over (or are they?) you must go forth and do my bidding. But wisely. And tactfully.

[2] I’m debating on rewriting Thus Stalks the Lion of the Labyrinth, so bear with me on names here.

[3] “Abandon the man, ascend the demon.”

[4] Yea, everyone knows how typical jaguar battles go, right? >>’’

[5] Their symbol is actually a maple leaf and their animals are a North American Beaver and a Canadian horse…. But a beaver didn’t seem like quite a fair fight, so I took liberties with this Belizean’s knowledge of national symbols.
Their plane ride back to New York was both wonderful and like being trapped in an elevator with a bunch of cats high on catnip. Everyone was tense and jittery. Despite all of her attempts at jokes and laughter, Merry seemed one monster sighting away from having a breakdown. When Kally had put her thumb out to her, leveled horizontally with the ground, like a Roman emperor about to decide a gladiator’s fate, Merry had mimicked the motion of neutral. But her hand shook. She wasn’t neutral. She wasn’t okay.

Kally couldn’t blame her. They’d had a solid five hours and twenty minutes to think about how they didn’t have a plan, how their main strategist was back in New Rome, how Pax had snuck off, how Eris had kidnapped Hemera and had the Golden Net, and about how they’d never hear Joey Song laugh or see her scowl again.

Calex kept checking the touchscreen flight map on the headrest in front of him. Kally couldn’t tell if it was in a vain attempt to make time move faster, or to make sure they stayed on course and didn’t stray off towards Kakata or St. Albans.

Euna didn’t say a word. She elected the window seat—which no one argued about—and stared out at the clouds.

Kally knew they needed a plan, about as much as any Greek demigod needed an assistant to keep their ADHD from making them wander off from a quest. After they landed in the terrifyingly large terminal, she decided that she’d direct them towards the nearest taxi and get them back to Camp Half-Blood at all costs.

If Pax thought his disappearance would prevent her from telling Chiron what was going on, he was dead wrong, River Styx curse or not… though hopefully not actually dead wrong. She hadn’t wanted to leave once he went missing. But, what Merry and Calex said to calm her was true: Pax wouldn’t leave without Axel, was probably fine and hiding out with a colony of escaped weasels, and they needed to get back to warn camp.

Eris had a three weeks head start on them. She was mad at Pax for disappearing without word, especially since he could tell her anything, but she couldn’t let her frustration, worry, and whatever other emotions she felt for that idiot give Eris more time.

Though her determination changed when they got into the terminal.

The airport was all white, with large, netted windows, a sweeping doomed ceiling, and steel modern art sculptures that reminded her of a mix between the Udvar-Hazy Museum and an exclusive intergalactic prison. She could see the sun setting through the windows and felt surreal thinking about the time zone difference.

There were too many people walking by with set conviction. A few others seemed as confused and lost as she was, but most had the irritated ease of regular travelers. Kally would have frozen up, remembering exactly how much she hated their first trip to New York City, had Merry and Calex not corralled she and Euna through the crowds of people to collect their one checked bag containing Euna’s sword.

As they reached the terminal exit, relief made her tear up. Iris Messaging or some communication
must have been back online, because there were two familiar faces waiting for them in arrivals.

Amidst the other taxi cab drivers and chauffeurs with signs, these two stood out like a pair of Cyclopes. One stood far taller than the other, with blond, short hair and a Camp Half-Blood sweatshirt that couldn’t hide the fact that this teen had enough muscles to supply four different bodies if he died an organ donor. She remembered hearing the nymphs at Camp Half-Blood plot to get Jason and Axel to work out together, and she could understand their sentiment.

Beside him was someone that made Kally giddy. This boy was shorter, with dark hair, an aviator jacket, an oddly colorful Hawaiian shirt, and a pair of skinny jeans. In one hand, he had what looked like a box of unfortunately fake flowers. He held up a sign in the other that read, in Ancient Greek:

IF YOU CAN READ THIS, WE’RE (PROBABLY) HERE FOR YOU!

The “probably” was written in smaller print above the main text, with an arrow pointing down. Kally wondered how many professors of Ancient History had wandered over to ask the son of Hades and the son of Jupiter for a ride.

Kally inhaled to shout out to Nico. Out of all the people at camp, he’d become her favorite, other than Merry of course. He’d been teaching her to play Mythomagic, she’d been trying to get him involved in Dungeons & Drakons, and he—like she—hated human interaction but felt obligated to fulfill it.

Before she could shout, or before Nico or Jason caught sight of their group, someone wrapped a hand over Kally’s mouth.

She almost screamed. Instead, she slammed her elbow backwards.

“Aye!” someone whined, grunted, then said, “Cyclops, you could pop airships with your elbows and maybe even a sumo wrestler.”

Kally expected to turn and see the Pax brothers, though they shouldn’t have been—not unless they snuck onto the plane.

Instead, she turned to see two young and respectable looking South Asian businessmen in suits. She almost apologized for hitting the guy who grabbed her, but realized that would be stupid. He had grabbed her.

Calex and Merry went to reflexively take a step between her and the two men. Kally felt ridiculous having Merry, a pacifist, go to defend her.

The taller businessman shook his head. Mist fluttered off to reveal Axel’s deep tan and asymmetrical facial scars. As it peeled off his clothing, Calex gasped audibly.

“Oh my gods, mate, what happened to you? And—what the hell are you doing here? How did you get here?”

Dried blood was smeared all over his mouth and soaked into the remains of his shirt. The once purple material across his chest had been shredded, like he’d tried to pet a shark at the zoo and fell into the aquarium.

His expression was the worst. Axel’s gaze looked hollow and dazed. He could have said he’d spent four year in Tartarus, doing synchronized swimming in the River Acheron, and she’d have believed him.
But his voice was as commanding as ever. “We need to get Euna out of here.”

Merry crossed her arms. “Axel, Pax, I can tell you two hubbies had a rough morning, but those are our friends. I don’t want to hear otherwise.” Her lip trembled.

“They’re actually here to arrest Euna for murder, growing trees in a no-tree-growing zone, and for having a cooler weapon than Jason Grace,” the shorter businessman said.

They stared at him.

The guy put a hand to his head. “What? Does this guy’s hair look stupid? We need to move now!”

He grabbed Kally’s wrist and Merry’s and tugged them off to the side. Merry begrudgingly stumbled along. Axel grabbed Calex’s arm and Euna’s. They staggered back into the terminal, bewildered. Kally didn’t quite understand. This all sounded so stupid.

“There used to be ten terminals instead of six. One of the old ones is now a labyrinth entrance underneath the airport, but I don’t think I can sneak all of us to it. Piper is wandering around the terminal, asking people if they’ve seen you, and Will is at one of the other exits. We were able to swipe some noise canceling headphones, but they’re not going to work nearly as well as the ones in the van if we have to fight her. And we don’t have enough for everyone,” Axel said, as though he wasn’t speaking like someone Dionysus had inflicted with madness.

“Wait—wait—no!” Kally said and tried to pull back from Pax. “We should just go talk to them. I’m sure this thing has happened before—”

Axel let go of Euna to grab Kally’s arm. He leaned down to look her in the eyes, and—for a second—they flickered gold. The motion didn’t frighten her, probably because Axel looked so sad.

“Kally, I’m not sure how much everyone else is implicated in what happened to Santiago’s men, or how much they think… they think you’re affiliated with us.”

Kally thought she knew what that meant, at least sort of. From the way he said it, she wasn’t sure anymore.

“And I do want us to talk to them.” His eyes glanced from hers to Merry’s brown and Calex’s grey. “They still need to hear about Eris’s plans. But first, Pax and I need to tell you everything so you can relay the message in full. We can’t be there, and I want Merry and Calex to tell them—not you Kally. I don’t want you to accidentally get cursed by saying the wrong thing.”

“And uh—we’re like 95% sure my mom set all of us up to look reaaaaally bad,” Pax said. “So, maybe the six of us can have this conversation somewhere else, like in a fugitives’ bar? Away from 50 cent Captain America and Mr. Goth Pants and Pretty Shirt.”

As he said it, Kally heard something that made her tremble.

“That’s them!” Jason’s voice carried down the hallway.

When she glanced over, she saw Jason and Nico carefully walking up the hallway towards them. Nico’s hand slipped inside the box of flowers, and she could have sworn she saw the hilt of his sword.

Euna frowned. She slid the xiphos out of their carry-on. Kally had to wonder what airport security saw, considering no one even paused while walking past them. Maybe they thought everyone was just holding the world’s longest maracas.
“Woooow!” Merry held up her hands in a cease fire gesture.

“Do I need to fight them?” Euna asked calmly, something that made Kally’s skin crawl.

Axel examined the approaching figures, calculating. “That’s… cute that you think you can take Jason Grace.”

Euna withdrew her god droplet vial. “I can.”

The shorter business man shoved the vial back into her pocket. “Bad Euna! As much as I would love to see that, the last thing we need now is you turning their mascot boy into a table.”

Jason lifted a walky-talky to his mouth, muttering something into it. Nico cracked a soft smile, waving casually at them. They paused, and Kally got the sense they were waiting for back up.

They needed to make a decision.

Merry fluttered her hand back and forth, as though to say this was nothing. Although she was acting nonchalant, Kally could see her trembling. “Normally, I’m with Pax in loving dramatics and ridiculousness, but, I can—”

Calex took hold of Merry’s hand. He glanced nervously at Euna, then back to Merry. “Ey. It’s all gone mad, but we’ll sort this out. If we do as Axel says, we’ll chat with them later after getting Euna cleared. If they catch us, we’ll say this nutter threatened us into running.” He pointed at the short business man.

Pax shrugged. “I don’t threaten, I merely predict probably outcomes.”

Merry stared at Calex for a moment. Kally took her other hand, remembering Merry’s nightmare prophecy: My friends fight the Heroes of Olympus. My powers are too weak to stop everyone from trying to kill each other.

Kally couldn’t imagine anyone from Camp Half-Blood hurting any of them. She didn’t want to fight these guys, and she had a feeling Euna, Axel, and Pax weren’t going to go with them without some struggling.

Merry huffed. “Alright, but running isn’t really my thing. When I start to fall behind, one of you big musclies has to carry me.”

Kally still didn’t like this, but Calex had a great point about pinning their escape on the Pax brothers, since it was true.

This time, when Pax tugged at her, she stepped into a sprint.

“Sorry blokes! This is all just a misunderstanding! I promise we’ll come back and explain! Cheers!” Calex shouted over his shoulder as they ran.

When Jason and Nico dashed after them at full speed, Kally had the squeamish feeling they made the right decision.

“Wait!” Jason called.

Within a few feet, Kally could feel Merry tugging on her hand to slow down. Calex whisked Merry up. Kally could guess it was much to Merry’s delight. People parted rapidly in front of them, especially when Calex shouted about being late for a flight. A security guard yelled at them to
slow down. She was scared someone might call more security, or think there was a bomb threat.

Like he wanted to invoke just that fear, Axel said, “Ajax, drop a smoke bomb. Do you think you
can dart Grace if—”

“I’m out of smoke bombs!” Pax morphed out of the business man into himself. “And sleep serum.
I’ve got pepper spray and an ear.”

“You took Frank’s ear?!” Axel growled.

Calex asked the more important question. “You cut off Frank’s ear?!”

Kally felt sick and seriously considered stopping and waiting to get tackled by Jason Grace.

“Ajax! They could have reattached that!” Axel scolded, like Calex hadn’t spoken.

“Oh…” Pax frowned. “Do you think I should give it back—”

“No! It’s too late for that now!”

They sprinted out the doors of another terminal. Kally suddenly felt the need to thank both her
soccer coach for forcing her through suicide sprints, and Mr. Paine for doing the same during her
demigod training.

Jason Grace wasn’t far behind. In one glance back, she saw he and Nico racing around a corner.
She wondered why Jason hadn’t taken to the air yet, or why Nico hadn’t raised any dead. But Nico
probably still couldn’t use his powers without going all shadowy and it might be a bit weird for the
Mist to cover up a flying guy. Would the Mist put him on a segway or a hoverboard?

Once they got outside, Pax ran up to the first taxi-bus in the front of the line. “Everyone in!” he
said, shoving a credit card and a wad of cash at the driver. Kally frowned, not having the time to
ask Pax where he got that from.

The driver was young, maybe in his twenties, with deep chestnut skin, and excited, dark eyes.
There was a sticker on his headrest that said Hello, My name is Sanjay (Sam) Datta. I’ll be your
driver today! When Kally hopped into the middle seat with Calex and Merry, she found
biostatistics textbooks all over the dashboard. Biostats: a worse fate than Tartarus. Euna and Axel
climbed into the back.

“That guy just found out I convinced his girlfriend to leave an abusive relationship with him for
me,” Pax said, gesturing to where Jason had exited the terminal. “I’ll pay quadruple your amount if
you can get us out of here before he reaches this—”

“Done!”

Before she’d finished buckling up, the taxi-van took a wild swerve into the line of cars exiting the
terminal, leaving Jason Grace and Nico Di Angelo in the dust.

“Where are you kids going? You’re the adult supervisor right?” the driver glanced back at Axel, in
the back seat.

“Yes…” Axel said slowly. “For a school field trip. Just take Van Wyck Expressway and get off
towards south Brooklyn. I’ll give you directions as we go. That guy’s been uh... giving our troop
trouble this whole time.”
“That’s away from camp, Mr. Stoic,” Merry said. “Where are we going?”

“What Pax said—a fugitive’s bar of sorts. I have connections that might be able to hide us until we figure this out or at least create a diversion,” Axel said.

Merry gave the curious driver a warm smile in the rearview mirror. “We’re a performing arts school and have been practicing improv, so don’t mind our silly selves. Oh—Sarawati!” She nodded at a small icongraph on his dash, sliding around beside the textbooks as he merged onto the expressway. There was a woman in the picture, with four arms playing an instrument. She looked similar to the icons Kally had seen on shrines at Mrs. Blythe’s house. “You studying for finals?”

“Yea, nonstop, and I’ve been bored out of my mind because of it,” the driver said. “You guys are probably the most interesting thing I’ve encountered all day and the nicest present to private school debt.” He gave a lighthearted laugh and tapped “Pax’s” credit card against the wheel. “So, improv away. Gotta ask first, what did that blond guy actually do?” He glanced at Pax in the passenger seat. “Sorry dude, but there’s no way you convinced a girl to leave him for you.”

If Pax could bristle, he would have. “Hey! I’m cuter than a duckling! And I’m also the one paying you!”

“Sure you are, Mr. Thong… Thaeng Chaiprasit,” the driver stumbled through pronouncing the name on the credit card. He had to swerve a little to avoid a car merging towards him.

Calex sighed. “Pax, you’re a plague upon society.”

“Mr. Chaiprasit is our director,” Merry said, picking up the pieces. Kally always had to admire her quick thinking in crisis situations. “You know how artsy people are. He’s so scatterbrained and bad at budgeting, he gave Mr. Stoic, here, a card and the pin so we could withdraw cash when we needed it.”

“Is your name actually, Mr. Stoic?” the driver asked.

“Yes,” Axel said without blinking. “Both on stage and off.”

Despite everything, Kally had to cover her mouth so she didn’t burst out laughing at the seriousness of Axel’s expression.

She stopped laughing when Merry put an arm around her shoulder. “And that blond guy started stalking our poor Kallygirl here, all due to some really nasty miscommunication.”

Pax huffed.

“Cool. I’ll still anticipate being contacted by Visa for a fraudulent credit card transaction, but, you’ve got enough cash here to afford a drive to the opposite side of Manhattan,” the driver said and shrugged. “Okay, now improv on.”

They glanced at each other. Maybe Kally hadn’t taken many cabs, but this guy seemed like the weirdest cab driver ever.

After a beat of silence, Axel dove into explaining. Actually explaining. Part of Kally felt indignant at how easy they got the information. Before Pax would tell her any of this information, she’d had to swear on the River Styx. The other part of Kally realized that was stupid: she needed the others to know everything so they could tell Chiron, instead of having her break her River Styx Oath. It already felt dumb enough having an oath to a river; she didn’t need to be cursed by it too.
Everyone already knew that the Pax boys had been part of Kronos’s army, but none of the others knew how much Eris had directed the Pax boys’ movements—that she’d sent them to save Kally, to get to Camp Half-Blood, to get the Golden Net and reforge Kronos’s scythe to use against their father. If Kally were angrier, she’d tell Axel he’d been played, but the broken look on his face said he already knew that.

He did skim over the part where Axel attacked Leo Valdez and wiped his memory. Pax gave her a sheepish grin as they hurried through that section.

They’d come off the expressway and Axel directed the driver down some side streets. The sky had darkened enough for street lamps to flicker on. All the shops had metal gates peeled up, like teeth ready to chomp down. Any parking lot or yard had fences ringed with barbed wire. The buildings were old, and weatherworn. Some had paper and duct tape covering failed business ventures, while others had beautiful, classy arches over the windows to give the street some character. The contrast of decaying versus new made Kally anxious. This place felt like its own morphing monster.

The sidewalks were bustling with weekend excitement.

Axel was just getting to the tiny detail that Ares wanted the Roman senate to execute him as an enemy to the state when Euna pointed outside.

“A horse is keeping pace with us,” she said.

Kally glanced over at her window. On the sidewalk, sure enough, there was a brown stallion clopping along and dodging pedestrians. The stallion was beautiful and enormous, with chocolate eyes and black hair. On top of it, was a rider with frizzy cinnamon hair, golden eyes, and an SPQR shirt: Hazel Levesque. There was a very angry looking lemur curled around her shoulder, with gauze covering one ear.

Pax and Axel both popped their cheeks.

“Do you ever wonder why Frank doesn’t just show up naked after he transforms?” Pax asked. “I mean, think of how many boxers he’s probably ripped turning into—”

“Ajax,” Axel growled.

“Sorry. Is this a good time for me to give him back his ear?”

“No.”

Although their cab couldn’t have been going over thirty miles per hour, that horse didn’t even look like it was trotting.

They were approaching a stop light and Kally’s stomach dropped. Ares wants the Romans to execute me, Axel had said. They want to arrest Euna.

“We’re only two streets away from the spot,” Axel said. He leaned forward to check the nametag on the headrest. “Sam, is there any way we can lose that horse and—”

The driver stopped at the crosswalk for the red light. He glanced at the blinking counter for the pedestrians. “In 45 seconds or so. Does that blond stalker of yours have cavalry reserves? That’s a pretty dedicated stalker.”

Kally didn’t really know what to say. Yea, you should check out his friend’s ballista.
Horns blared beside them as Hazel and Frank’s horse made its way through a lane of traffic towards their taxi. The horse paused for a moment to nip at one of the honking cars, in a motion Kally could only interpret as flicking someone off: equestrian style.

That horse’s pause might have saved them.

The light was about to change when the stallion stepped alongside Pax’s window. Pax sheepishly waved back when Hazel motioned for him to roll his window down. She tapped her drawn cavalry sword against the glass.

Sam revved his engine and was about to shoot forward when another black stallion dropped from the sky into the crosswalk.

*Ah New York,* Kally thought, *Known for the pigeon and pegasus problem.*

This one also had two riders: a teenage boy with dark hair and a curly haired blonde girl.

“*Pisaasu!***” the driver swore. “Is that a flying horse?!”

Kally didn’t have the heart to tell him “yes—this is normal—Greek mythology is real—you should be as confused about your gods as I am.”

“I guess that’s it then,” Calex said. He swallowed.

Kally wondered what they *did* do with bad demigods. Hazel had mentioned some pretty nasty things back in Camp Jupiter. A tight knot formed in Kally’s stomach, telling her to get out of the car and see how long she could outrun a horse and pegasus for. Because, if they just sat here, they were trapped.

“Hey!” Percy shouted. “We just want to—”

Before he could finish his sentence, a red and black blur slammed into the black pegasus, knocking it out of their way and into oncoming traffic. Rainbow sparks exploded everywhere.

Kally gawked.

Approaching traffic came to a halt as Percy’s pegasus tried to stumble to its hooves. Percy and Annabeth were thrown clean off the pegasus, onto the pavement.

Another horse, with an ebony main and crimson fur, trotted backwards from the collision, shaking its head. There was a half-broken spiral of gold and silver on top of its head, spitting rainbow glitter everywhere.

“Vinyl!” Calex shouted in joy at seeing the unicorn. Then winced at seeing what damage it had done. Fortunately, Percy and Annabeth were slowly getting up.

Something small skittered out of Vinyl’s mane and dove towards Hazel’s horse. The horse seemed unimpressed until the small creature grew into a California Long-Tailed weasel the length of a van. A distinct patch of spotted, blond hair was on its back and a tinier weasel rode on its head. The monster lunged at Hazel’s stallion.

“Hunahpu! Xbalanque!” Pax cheered and sniffled back tears. “She’s—she’s okay! S-someone f-fixed her! Dude! Calex! We have animal reinforcements!”

Pax turned in his seat to high-five Calex, who obliged. Afterwards, he and Calex made faces, and
quickly rubbed their hands off like they’d slapped an infected worm.

“Go!” Axel shouted at Sam.

Something slammed into the taxi-van, rocking the whole vehicle. Sam smashed the accelerator. They shot forward, as fast as the van’s engine could take them.

“Wow! Was that a unicorn? And a giant ferret?! Man, this is way better than studying for a final!” the driver cheered.

Kally was glad that was his reaction, as opposed to the sane reaction of, “WHAT WAS THAT?!” She twisted to look out the window, hoping everyone was okay. Horns blared from confused drivers. From what she could see, a black and red blur disappeared down one of the roads, colliding occasionally with a brown one. Hunnie was nowhere to be seen. Percy, Annabeth, Frank, and Hazel were now on foot, though the black pegasus was still nearby.

An SUV paused to pick them up. It didn’t look like the Roman SUVs she’d seen before. This one had bones rimming the front windshield.

“Pull over here!” Axel shouted.

The driver swerved into a metered parking spot that had just opened. He exhaled. “Wow! That was cool—here—” He fumbled in his pocket to withdraw a business card. “If you need any other rides—”

“Thanks! We’ll promise to almost get you killed again,” Pax said, snagging the card.

“Good luck with your stalker!” Sam shouted.

“Good luck with your exam!” Merry shouted back.

They scrambled out of the van. As soon as his feet touched the sidewalk, Axel spurred them forward. “Move! It’s just down this alley.”

“What is?” Euna asked.

A weird grin lit up Axel’s face. “The Horizontal Monster Mash.”

The stench made Kally gag. As soon as they entered the alley, it became overbearing. Trash and cigarette butts littered the ground. Ahead of them, she could see some people lined up along the wall, waiting to get inside. Although Kally had never been in a club, this struck Kally as odd. It seemed too early for a club to be busy.

Ahead of them, there were two ionic columns on either side of a doorway, with neon blue and purple lights spiraling down. The sign above blinked HMM every few seconds, like the club’s heartbeat.

Merry stopped running. Calex had to whisk her up. “Wait—no—there are evil baddies in that line!” she shouted.

“I know!” Axel said. “Everyone stick close to Ajax and me. Do not go off on your own. Do not talk to anyone who tries to talk to you. Flip your shirts inside out. Let me do the talking.”

For some reason, Kally didn’t trust him when he said that. As she ran, she glanced down at her shirt, wondering why he’d suggested they undress and redress in the middle of New York City. She
gulped. All of them had Camp Jupiter shirts on and were running into a den full of people that probably hated Camp Jupiter.

Merry was right about the “baddies”. There were monsters in the wait line. Now that Merry said it, everyone in that line was a monster or a ghost. One was reptilian. Another was half-phased out of a wall. Another stood over six and a half feet tall.

Though none of them were as tall as the eight foot bouncer tapping a clipboard in his hands. He was a Cyclops, wearing a biker jacket that must have been stolen off a statue of Sons of Anarchy.

Axel and Pax stripped off their shirts, flipped them inside out, and put them back on. When she glanced back, she saw Euna was struggling to do the same, not caring about flashing her green sports bra. Although difficult with Calex holding her, Merry fumbled with her shirt ends. Calex went bright red in the face and almost tripped.

With all their running and panic, Kally hadn’t realized how cold it was until she thought about taking off her shirt. Her chest burned with their constant sprint.

She swallowed. Out of all times for her priest’s and mom’s condemnations to ring in her ears, now was bad. Neither of them were here, and only God—the big G god—and whatever pervy Greek gods were watching, would know. And some monsters. And—

Suddenly, Pax dropped pace beside her. He took his shirt off again, and shoved it at her. “Put this on and take your shirt off under it—you owe me SO many drachma and Reese’s Sticks! Especially considering how badly I’d like to see your bra!”

“Thank you!” Kally gasped. She wanted to explain that the most revealing thing she’d ever worn was a one-piece swimsuit with a shirt over it, but now didn’t seem like the time.

She slipped his shirt on as they paused at the front of the line. Kally almost choked when she realized they’d cut all those grumbling monsters.

“Hey, demigod pipsqueaks—” the Cyclops growled.

Axel waved a hand in front of his face, like he was batting a fly. As he did, the Mist dissolved, and she could see his jaguar ears and fangs.

Merry made a, “Uh-huh,” noise. Kally had to wonder if she or Calex remembered Axel’s features from Santiago’s temple. Both of them had been so out of it. Calex was a little too distracted to notice. He coughed, staring off to the side, especially when Merry nuzzled against his chest to hide the SPQR symbol there. With carrying her, he didn’t have a chance to change.

Kally finished fishing her own shirt out from under Pax’s, flipped it inside out, and put it back on, starting the process back over to give Pax back his shirt. Pax gave her one of his token devilish grins, making her wonder if she’d accidentally flashed him her bra. Then she blushed, trying to remember what bra she was wearing—not that it mattered.

The Cyclops dropped his clipboard upon seeing Axel’s features.

“I am Axel Pax, leader of the Triple A Chimera, the bearer of the Lion’s Head—”

Pax dashed up beside him. “Hey Clops! How’s the tiny Clops? Is he looking all cute and single-eyed?”

The Cyclops snatched a Pax brother up in each arm. For a terrified moment, Kally thought he was
going to bash their heads together, but he laughed in excitement. “The guitarist for Orpheus Metal! And the drummer! You guys are so good! We haven’t had a concert as good as that one with the goats—”

Pax laughed gleefully. “Dude! I remember that one! It was so metal! Those babies flew!”

The monsters in line peered around to try to get a better look at the Pax brothers. Kally wished she could hide somewhere.

Calex grumbled, “That Orpheus Metal rubbish was real?”

Euna snorted.

Kally had heard songs of it from Pax, but she hadn’t put together that they would have a monster fan following.

The Cyclops set them down, then clapped his hands and shuffled from foot to foot.

“Yes, good times. Now, my friends and I need to get inside—” Axel tried to say, glancing at the alley entrance.

From what she could see, an SUV had pulled up where the taxivan had been.

“Not until you tell me when you’re having a reunion tour!” the Cyclops said and folded his arms.

Axel sighed and rubbed his temple with two fingers. “Our lead singer is dead.”

“Well, when he’s feeling better, you tell him that you need a reunion tour. Little Clops hasn’t seen you in concert,” the Cyclops sniffed.

Pax patted Clops’ huge arm. “Will do, Big Guy. We’ll get that message straight to Tartarus.”

Clops nodded happily, and side stepped to let them through. Axel paused, and pointed down the alley to the approaching Percy and gang. “Those guys aren’t with us.”

Merry’s eyes went wide, glancing around at the monsters standing in the alley. At first, Kally didn’t understand her concern, until she realized how it would look if they led the others down a dark alley to get attacked by waiting monsters.

“Wait—wait—this is a club right? Then they are with us!” Merry said.

Axel glowered. “Merry, we don’t have time—”

“Mr. Stoic,” she mimicked his serious tone. “If you can get all the monsters to cooperate with us, I can take out all the Heroes of Olympus.”

Kally gave her a bewildered look. “Merry, no offense, but you couldn’t take out a pillow.”

“Trust me. I just need you on the sound booth, I need about twenty Diet Cokes and a video camera to pay tribute to my dad—since I’ll need his help on this one, but he’ll want to help me—and I need everyone to do exactly as I say.”

Merry had that mad grin she sometimes got before she ruined one of the popular kids at school with a single stroke of wit.

“Let’s do it,” Kally decided. She almost flinched when Axel’s glare narrowed at her, but held firm.
“Merry’s good at preventing fights by humiliating people,” she squeaked. She should definitely know.

Axel made a low growl. He glanced from Merry, to the club, to the approaching demigods. Kally could hear their footsteps now; they were so close.

“Fine,” he snarled. “Let them in. But this had better be good, Merry.”

Thanks for reading guys! :D we’re back at the HMM and I’m excited to see how Calex reacts to being hit on by monsters XD And to see how Frank reacts to that whole.. ear thing… >>’

Footnotes:

[1] My friend just got ducklings, and I will say—though Pax is cuter than a baby panda—he is not cuter than a duckling. And apparently, Pax’s cuteness scale is vital to this book series.

[2] Out of all the impossible things in New York during this series—an open metered spot is the least believable.

[3] I apologize. For those of you who have read When the Stone Cracks, you’re going to see some descriptions and jokes reused. Since that short story is an AU, and written from the same point of view as this chapter, Kally is going to at least have some of the same thoughts. Though maybe a few less about how sexy Axel looks XD Ah, AUs purely created to make a friend’s ship happen….
Annabeth hated when things didn’t go according to plan, and being side-rammed by a unicorn hadn’t been part of the plan. As she pushed off the black pavement of the Brooklyn street, she thought about how she should recalculate this.

She’d been furious that her call with Frank had been interrupted. No matter how many drachmas she and Percy tried to throw at Iris, they kept getting the message, *Your rainbow has been disconnected. Please hang up, and try your rainbow again.*

The two most important parts of the message had been left out: Leo is alive and these demigods were probably terrified.

And now Frank and Hazel were here. Something must have gone wrong for them to ride all the way to the East coast on Arion.

Finding the right flight over had been child’s play. She knew which airlines the Romans had frequent flyer miles with because of some deals they’d worked out with the Amazon. She knew their preferred airports and the approximated time the flight would have left. They only ever did direct route flights, since layovers were bad news for ADHD, monster hunted demigods.

She had hoped Piper could talk to them first, using that line she never got to use on the Romans when they first got to Camp Jupiter, “*Lower your weapons. We just want to talk.*” Or Will, since he and the shy daughter of Apollo, Kally, seemed to get along well. Or Nico, her friend. Or Jason, who connected really well with Axel over Capture the Flag.

Something about this felt like a set up: the way the video of Euna Song turning people into trees had zoomed carefully onto hers, Kally’s, and Pax’s faces without any context as to why they were fighting against those people, the way the dialogue had been muted from the video of Axel attacking Leo, the way her phone, and the phone with the videos, malfunctioned so she couldn’t watch it again for a closer analysis, and the way the two ex-Kronos soldiers had ended up in a town whose policy was to execute ex-Kronos soldiers.

This group of half-bloods was suspicious, and very dangerous, but she also suspected something else was happening here, possibly something out of their control. From what she’d seen of Calex Rupin McKenzie and Merry Blythe at Camp Half-Blood and from Piper’s solid impression of them, neither seemed the type to associate with murders without reason.

But she also knew that desperation could crack a person. She wanted to know what was going on. They needed more data. Like where Axel had found Leo Valdez.

Percy gently touched her arm. “Are you alright?” he shouted over the sound of the getaway taxi-van zooming away and horns blaring from oncoming traffic.

Scraps and bruises. Minimal damage. They needed to focus on their target. She nodded, checking him over first. He looked the same—just dazed from being thrown off Blackjack.
Had he been hurt, she’d have to murder a unicorn.

They staggered to their feet in enough time to see the unicorn blur in retreat, Arion, riderless, was in quick pursuit. Annabeth wondered if that unicorn knew mythology was not on its side in a race against that horse.

“Is Blackjack okay?” she asked, assessing the situation. Percy’s pegasus stumbled to his hooves. Hazel was on foot, Frank had disappeared, and an SUV pulled up beside them. She didn’t get to see what had attacked Hazel and Frank to knock them off Arion.

Percy nodded, quoting in his best equestrian mimic, “Good as new, boss. I think I’m going to take it easy for a bit. I get a carrot for that, right?” He reached to pet Blackjack’s face. “Thanks for the ride, bud. Get to safety. You’ll get a whole bushel when we get back to camp.”

Blackjack huffed and flew off into the air. Percy turned to Annabeth. “I hope Arion teaches that unicorn to play nice with other ponies.”

Someone threw open the door to the SUV beside them, and Annabeth was glad to see Jason Grace motioning them inside. Piper gave them a happy wave from the back and a, “Hey guys! Tell me about NRU after we’re done doing some demigod hunting.”

Hazel hopped in from the other side, glancing towards the front in concern.

“Sorry I’m running late,” Jason apologized. “I couldn’t summon Tempest. I was scared my powers might throw off weather patterns around the airport.”

Something felt uncomfortable inside the SUV, and it took Annabeth a moment to realize it wasn’t because the driver was a French zombie. There was an argument happening.

“What’s the one thing I told you not to do?” Will demanded, his hands on his hips, despite being seated in the middle. If he hadn’t been such a firm believer in seatbelts, she was pretty sure he’d be leaning over Nico’s passenger seat.

Nico sighed and leaned his head against the headrest to stare at the ceiling. “Raise the dead.”

“And what did you do?”

“Raise the dead—but look Will, it’s been a month since my last incident, and it’s just summoning the dead—not rocket science or shadow travel—”[1]

Annabeth winced as they rearranged the seating. Everyone had promised to enforce Will’s no excess power usage for six months on Nico, but none of them predicted Apollo showing up to shake Nico like a ragdoll. It put Nico’s recovery back by a lot and terrified Will and pretty much everyone at camp.

Jason jumped into the back. Percy pulled Annabeth into his lap so they could conserve on seating. From the uncomfortable glance that Jason and Piper shared, Will and Nico had been arguing since the airport. Maybe a chat about rogue half-bloods or college entrance exams would be relaxing.

“Nico, I’m not saying this because I don’t have faith in you. I’m mad because we made an agreement and because I care about you and it would crush me if anything happened to you.”

Nico went bright red in the face and sank into his seat. “Will,” he grumbled, “Not in front
of everyone.”

Hazel cleared her throat. She looked concerned for her brother, but her expression also had serious problem written all over it. Something had gone wrong in Rome. Annabeth’s mind raced with ideas.

“It’s great to see you guys, but Frank scouted ahead. We should—”

A hummingbird darted through the door before Annabeth could shut it. When Frank turned back into a human, the SUV became uncomfortably cramped, and Annabeth started to really miss the expansiveness of the Argo II. Annabeth’s brain filed through excuses to push them past any cops that might pull them over for having too many people in a vehicle.

Normally, Frank would have been embarrassed to squish in the tiny bit of space between Will and she and Percy. Instead, he leaned forward to talk to the driver, jumped to find it an undead person, and turned in confusion to Nico. “Uh—hey Nico—they’re five blocks ahead, can you uh tell—”

“Monsieur Jules-Albert.”

“Yes, Monsieur Jules-Albert to follow—”

The zombie driver stepped on it. Their SUV lurched forward, knocking Frank back. Though they quickly jerked back to a stop in Brooklyn’s absurd traffic. Annabeth’s mind whirled to calculate if it would be faster to walk.

“Seatbelt,” Will said to Frank, folding his arms and frowning at the passenger seat in the best charades of, we’ll finish this later, that Annabeth had ever seen.

“Augh, dude, what happened to your ear?” Percy asked.

Annabeth was about to ask the same question. Frank had a hasty patch job of gauze on his ear with medical tape wrapped around his head to keep it in place. From the old blood dried on the gauze, she had a feeling there wasn’t much of an ear left under there.

“I can probably reattach it if you have the ear,” Will offered, sensing the same.

“I don’t,” Frank said grimly, like he’d forgotten a number two pencil on test day. “Axel bit it off after he set Reyna’s house on fire.

“He what?!” Nico demanded, sitting up in his seat and forgetting his prior embarrassment. “Is Reyna okay?”

“Physically, yea,” Frank said. He gave them a brief update on what happened as Jules drove.

“Wait—why were they in Reyna’s house? I thought she pretty much lived, ate, slept, and plotted punishments for bad legionnaires in the principia,” Percy asked.

Annabeth swatted him. She’d seen Reyna and Axel interact once, when Axel first parked outside Camp Half-Blood’s boundaries and refused to come inside. From what she’d seen then, and from a few comments Piper had made about the type of guy Reyna might like, Annabeth had a guess why Axel was in her house.

“They were on a breakfast date, sort of,” Hazel confirmed from the back of the SUV. “It
was... hard to convince her not to come on this quest, but she’s making sure Camp Half-Blood is safe, since she knows you guys are out.”

Annabeth hoped that wouldn’t make everyone lose focus. She kept reminding herself that they needed all the facts first, that something wasn’t adding up here, but Nico voiced the opinion of the group perfectly.

“I’m going to drag Axel to Tartarus and craft him a personal punishment for the rest of eternity. How dare he hurt Reyna,” Nico growled. As the SUV rolled to a stop, he glanced back. “Or Frank. Sorry about your ear, Frank.”

“It’s okay; it’s just gone for good.”

“Nico, we talked about this,” Will scolded.

Nico rolled his eyes and threw his door open. “Fine. In a few months, I’ll drag him to Tartarus and craft him a personal punishment.”

“There’s my responsible son of Hades.”

They got out of the SUV and took off down a wide alley between two brick buildings designed with the classic flare of late nineteenth century architecture. This was an old part of Brooklyn, one the gentrification hadn’t yet touched, but the neon blue and purple lights around two ionic columns were new. They stood on either side of a club entrance that Annabeth could see Euna, Calex, and Merry darted through.

They needed a plan.

The bouncer was a huge guy in a biker jacket—what you’d expect to find at a club in New York. Unlike what you’d expect, he stood off to the side of the door, leaning against the wall and grinning stupidly at their approach. He held a hand out to prevent the small line of guests from entering. The guests in line whispered, looking far less agitated than Annabeth would expect with a bouncer not letting anyone in.

From what Annabeth had read and seen, clubs weren’t usually active this early at night. She hoped this wouldn’t be a rerun of Club Lotus.

“Stop,” Annabeth said before they reached the entrance.

Everyone skittered to a stop, like she’d pulled a gear out of a watch. Jason, Percy, Piper, Hazel, Frank, and Nico all paused to glance at her expectantly. She forgot how well their team worked together. The only person who stumbled was Will.

“We need a plan.” Jason read off her face.

Annabeth’s mind spun. That was her territory. But she was missing some integral data to make a full plan. Her instinct told her not to go in with swords drawn. “We should try to parley. When they ran from the airport, and when they were in the cab, they didn’t attack any of us. The Pax brothers may have only done that in New Rome because they were cornered.”

They’d have to worry about Frank’s quest from Ares later. Right now, she wanted to know what was going on.

“Seeing Roman colors is going to probably scare them, so Hazel, use the Mist to hide what you and Frank look like. Stay to the entrance to make sure they don’t double back to escape.
“Find or walkie-talkie Jason and I,” Piper finished. “And I can make sure things don’t get out of hand.”

Annabeth was pleased to see Will open up his jacket to show off a charging station for walkie talkies beside his medical kit and a package of latex gloves. He handed one off to Percy and one to Hazel.

Because Iris Messaging had been so inconsistent, and the presence of a half-blood tended to make technology go haywire, she’d been experimenting with ways to keep in contact. Older walkie talkies proved somewhat reliable.

The other problem was getting into the club. If Axel Misted a group of underaged kids in, Hazel could probably do the same. Annabeth just hoped everyone either had a driver’s permit or a library card for Hazel to Mist.

The bouncer put a huge arm out across the door. “The guitarist says you’re with him. And he said you’re allowed to keep your weapons. And we aren’t supposed to kill you.”

Annabeth wanted to swear. She should have assumed the others had connections here, else they wouldn’t have ran straight to this club. Her brain pierced through the Mist to reregister the bouncer’s single eye, and how tall he was. Despite all the time she’d spent with Tyson, the seven year old in her always cowered at the sight of Cyclopes. But she was almost a legal adult now, a hero of Olympus and a daughter of Athena. Annabeth maintained steady eye contact. This guy wasn’t mimicking any of them, and didn’t even look interested in chowing down on one of their heads.

The people in line hazed into various monsters and ghosts.

“This is a club for monsters,” Frank said. The way he said it made her wonder when Frank would bring the entire legion here for a warm up drill.

Everyone else must have seen it too. They touched their weapons.

This Cyclops kept grinning, not seeming to realize which demigods he was stalling. “The guitarist says you can come in, but,” he said, “the tiny Pax said you can only come in if that one gives me a hug.” The Cyclops pointed at Jason Grace.

Jason Grace pointed at himself in confusion. “Me?”

The Cyclops nodded. “He said you love hugging Cyclopes. And the tiny Pax knows I love hugs.” The Cyclops folded his arms and stood up tall, like he had declared how much he liked breaking people’s necks.

Percy stifled a laugh. “Hey, Cyclopes give the best bear hugs, probably only second to Frank.”

“You’re not going to hurt him,” Piper asked her question as a statement, one enlaced with charm speak.

The Cyclops didn’t change his posture or expression at all. Maybe he really did like hugs. “Nope!” he affirmed.
Jason frowned as Hazel giggled and Nico and Will choked on laughs.

Percy patted Jason’s back. “He seems like a good Cyclops. Go get ‘em, tiger.”

Thanks you guys for reading! I hope you enjoyed. I had a ton of fun writing this chapter :D Hopefully that Cyclops doesn't hug too tight ;)

Footnotes:

[1] I need to thank both Gravity Falls and BruneGonda for this. I’ve been trying to find a way to slip her hilarious fanart in for three books.
Annabeth-- We Have an Inappropriately Timed Dance Party; Monsters Included

Sixteen: Annabeth

We Have an Inappropriately Timed Dance Party; Monsters Included

Everything about the club made Annabeth feel uncomfortable. There were too many areas for ambush, too many shadowed spots, and too many monsters she and Percy had previously sent back to Tartarus. This was the closest she’d felt to being the warden that ended up on the wrong side of the bars since… well, Tartarus.

The lighting was dim, with blinking swirls dipping down from an expansive ceiling. Dark shapes glided across the top, suggesting creatures existed beyond her sight. The entire dome faded to nothingness, like Morpheus himself had added little touches to make it shimmer and shift like an aurora.

There was a two story bar on one side, where two Gegenees—six-armed giants—were bartending with more efficiency than all the Time Square’s Starbucks baristas during morning rush. The stools along the bar could rotate out for stools of various other heights, some short enough for one of the Kabeiri—dwarf deities and sons of Hephaestus—to sit on, while another stretched tall enough for a ten foot frost giant to flirt with a winged woman on a second story patio above the bar.

The bar continued to curve opposite the entrance and ran alongside a small pool, where telekhines, merfolk, and ichthyocentaurs were cheering on a particularly small telekhine. “Jump! Jump! Jump!” they shouted until the telekhine did a trick flip off a ledge. They cheered and clanked their glasses of ambrosia together. One particularly excited fishperson dove into the water to throw an arm around the telekhine, “I love this guy! You’re a real, class-act fish, you know that?”

Most horrifying: there were some humans or—Annabeth assumed—older demigods. They sat on a small stage opposite the bar, laughing and shoving at each other. There was a giant cage above that stage, and the slightest hint of a disco ball tucked into the cage. Annabeth guessed it was appropriate. How else were you going to get people to disco anymore?

There was a dance floor in the center, with scattered tables and chairs. Several monsters and a half-blood were helping to pull the tables to the sides of the room, like they were preparing for a major event.

There was music, but it was too quiet for what Annabeth assumed a club should have. It was some kind of mix between swing and electronic.

When their group of eight entered, no one paid them mind. Nearby monsters seemed to intentionally ignore them, though they picked up their heads to sniff a few times. Annabeth found this particularly disturbing. Monsters did not ignore half-bloods.

Without another word, their group split. This was not where she wanted to split up, but they would all be within sight of each other. Hazel and Frank took a step to the side of the entrance, to keep track of the flow in and out and to assure they didn’t scare off Axel and Pax. Nico and Will walked towards the bar, where a group of ghosts had clustered. An inebriated looking ghoul made a whistle through a partially rotted mouth at Nico. It made Annabeth wonder if the undead could get
drunk, or if they just died that way, then she remembered Odysseus’ palace and shuddered.

From the corner of her eye, she could see Will’s hand slip into his jacket, likely to make an unpleasant rebuttal at the ghoul, but Nico—thankfully—stopped him.

Piper and Jason walked towards the stage.

“It’s not very often I get to take you clubbing,” Percy said, offering her his arm. “Now, would you rather I pull two clubs out of the back so we can start bashing monster heads or actually dance?”

Annabeth rolled her eyes. “Shut up Seaweed Brain,” she said and led him past the dance floor. Now was not the time. She remembered the first time they went to a dance together, with Thalia and Grover when they were looking for new demigods that turned out to be Bianca and Nico. Percy had been so flustered and cute. They'd had school dances since, ones where Annabeth had to ward off several members of the swim team, since Percy was too oblivious to realize they were flirting.

A relaxing time like that was well overdue.

Annabeth shook her head and forced herself to stop swaying to the beat of the music. She was surprised—she didn't even like this style of music, but something about the atmosphere was contagious.

She and Percy, naturally, went towards the telekhines doing water tricks. When Percy squeezed her hand to lead them towards the pool, she could tell he was humming along and bobbing his head.

They were close enough to the pool for a telekhine to snort at them when Annabeth caught sight of Merry.

Annabeth wondered if Axel had Misted Merry’s presence before. She seemed in such an obvious spot and they must have walked past her. The Indian girl sat cross-legged on top of a table on the dance floor that was pushed further towards the stage. Her burgundy parka looked black in the dim lighting. Her watch kept catching and reflecting tiny gleams from the ceiling. There were a few monsters nodding their heads to the music beside her, like this was a casual monster-demigod occurrence.

On the table around her, there were at least two dozen cans of Diet Coke.

Merry looked completely at ease for being amongst monsters and within six feet of Jason Grace.

Piper was talking to two older demigods that were sitting on the far side of the stage. She was swaying to the beat of the music, unaware Jason had caught sight of one of their fugitives.

Merry waved at him. That might have been the call for a peace treaty, but it could just have easily been a trap. Annabeth hoped Frank and Hazel would be comfortable ignoring their orders from Ares long enough for them to have a conversation.

Annabeth grabbed Percy's arm and motioned towards Merry. Percy nodded in understanding. Before they got more than a few feet, a hoard of telekhines—part seal, part dog monsters—hopped out of the pool and flooded them.

"Percy Jackson!" one cried. Annabeth went to draw her dragonbone sword.

"I heard he withstood a volcano."

"My brother was there—he saw it!"
"Will you take a selfie with us, Mr. Jackson?" another held out a waterproof encased iPhone, snickering. None of them made a move to attack, but all of them brandish iPhones at them with their webbed paws with the same ferocity as you would a weapon.

"Sorry, I don't usually pose for the paparazzi," he said. Annabeth could tell Percy was thinking about knocking them back into the pool with one quick wave of water. But the commotion of the telekhines caught the attention of a giant at the bar, the ghouls that were talking to Nico, and several winged lizard people on the second story balcony.

If Annabeth was ever going to get into a barfight with a hoard of monsters, these were the friends she would want as backup. They'd been through worse fights. A fight wouldn't do them any good though. All that would do is make a great cover for any escapes and destroy any chance to parley.

Then Merry's voice carried across the club. "You know, I love this song. No matter how upset I am, it can always cheer me up," she said. "What makes you happy? The smile of a lover? The yummy relaxation after a fierce fight or chase? Your favorite dessert?"

From what Annabeth could see, there was no microphone on Merry. That girl could project.

Although Annabeth should have kept focus on their current circumstance, her mind wandered to the image of Percy smiling. She could feel Percy's gaze fall onto her and a giddy sensation told her he was thinking the same thing.

Focus, she scolded herself. Although she had ADHD like the rest of the half-bloods, her thoughts didn't tend to wander during a potential fight; they usually hyper-focused.

The telekhine had gone silent. They were still in between them and Jason, but were now staring at Jason and Merry. Although everyone else in the club kept to their separate conversations, Annabeth had the distinct feeling those two were in the spotlight.

Jason Grace hesitantly took a few steps closer to Merry. As Annabeth was hoping, he didn't raise any weapons. Just his empty hands. "Hey, we just want to talk—"

"So do we, but a little encounter in New Rome gave some of our members the heebie-jeebies, so we'd rather do it after we've regrouped, listened to some therapeutic music, and aren't being chased by a group of seven scary half-bloods."

For a moment, Annabeth thought Merry had miscounted and didn't realize there were eight of them.

Merry shrugged. "Will doesn't count as a scary half-blood. He's too much of a cutiepie."

There was no verbal protest from Will at the bar. When Annabeth risked a glance over, she saw the blond medic frowning, with his arms crossed. The fact that his head kept bobbing to the music didn't make him any scarier. Nico patted his shoulder. "She's right," said the son of Hades.

"Until then," Merry's voice brought Annabeth's attention back over. "Have you heard of that old 2010's song, Party Rock Anthem?"

On cue, the music blended from the electronic jazz into someone shouting, "Party rock!" and a round of the chorus. The volume increased, until the synthesizers felt like they were shaking Annabeth's bones.

"Merry—" Jason started to say. Piper took a careful step closer to them, away from the stage.
"Clap," Merry said with the song, closed her eyes, and bobbed her head.

Jason and Piper both clapped. From the corner of her eye, she could see Will clap as well. He glanced down at his hands in confusion, a derpy smile touching his lips. The monsters nearby laughed and started to clap along to the chorus:

_Everybody just have a good time._

_And we gon' make you lose your mind._

_We just want to see you..._

Merry grinned and hopped off the table. She opened her eyes, and sang, _"Shake that,"_ with the music.

What happened next was the last thing Annabeth expected.

Jason pounded his fists in the air to the beat and kicked his feet about in a wild, mad dance.

Piper burst into hysterical giggles. She looked like she was trying to mouth the word, _"stop,"_ but the music completely drowned out her voice. Will began to disco beside a baffled Nico, in a way that would probably make his father quite proud.

Within a few beats, Jason danced his way over to Piper, and took her in his arms. Then the two were twirling in delirious glee.

The daughter of Dionysus snapped her fingers, and the monsters around them joined in their crazed revelry.

This _was_ a trap.

Annabeth tried to ignore the way her limbs shook. Her mind kept fluttering to happy memories—kissing Percy in the lake, her early acceptance letter to New Rome, being awarded the architect of Olympus. A giddiness threatened to break her mind. The energy from the party felt contagious in a way she hadn't felt since the sirens tried to drown her.

She could feel Percy sway at her side. The telkhines were hopping on their fins, like a tiny mosh pit of puppies. She tried to step through them, towards Jason and Piper, but was pushed backwards, into Percy.

“Hey! Watch it!” Percy snapped, helping her stay up.

When she stumbled, Annabeth made eye contact with Frank. He and Hazel were far away from Merry, still by the exit. They were seemingly unaffected. Their jaws had dropped in shock at seeing their former praetor and friend break into the electric slide next to a Scythian dracaena.

Two human figures split from the monsters near the entrance. Annabeth's eyes widened as Axel and Ajax Pax crept out of the darkness.

Annabeth tried to shout a warning over the music, but it was too late.

Axel had already politely tapped Frank's shoulder; Ajax, Hazel's.

When the Romans turned to them, the Pax brothers somersaulted towards the dance floor, instead of the exit like Annabeth would have expected. The acrobats sprang to their feet outside the forming crowd. Axel gave them a taunting wave. Ajax winked and blew Frank a kiss. They danced
backwards into the mass of monsters, engulfed by the crowd.

Hazel and Frank raced after them, disappearing into the throng.

Percy made the motion to laugh.

Annabeth slapped him. "FOCUS!" she shouted, but knew he couldn't hear her. "THIS ISN'T FUNNY!" she mouthed at him. "THIS IS A TRAP."

Percy shook his head, like he was trying to clear it. Percy pointed to where Will was using a monster’s tail as a fake microphone. His message was clear: he disagreed that this wasn’t funny. Nico rolled his eyes, grabbed Will, and dragged him towards Annabeth and Percy.

“We need to get over there!” Annabeth said. She drew her dragonbone sword. The smallest telekhines in the group flooded towards her, giving her puppy dog eyes and pouts. One even curled up on her leg, like her dog used to when she was little.

Despite knowing they were monsters, Annabeth struggled to bring her sword down, especially when they showed no signs of attacking.

Annabeth scanned the room to account for everyone and was horrified to find that she’d lost track of the Pax brothers and that they’d lost two more to the throbbing bass. Frank’s lumbering figure could be seen leading Hazel in a French gavotte dance. Both of them had the same maniac grins as the others. A giant cackled and patted Frank’s back as he went by. The Canadian almost flopped onto his face, making Hazel burst into crazed giggles.

Annabeth strained to concentrate despite the intense urge to let herself fold into the music and relax—a well earned relaxation after worrying so much over getting Percy to explore New Rome, over studying for midterms, over helping Jason erect the latest statue to the goddess Cloacina at camp—

Annabeth grabbed her hand. She’d dropped her sword. The limb had started to sway on its own accord. They needed to do something fast. Annabeth had only ever seen Pollux use his powers once. It was to make the Stoll brothers lose their minds, after a horrendous grape prank gone wrong, so she didn’t know much about how the children of Dionysus could fight. But, she could guess this whole party atmosphere must have been straining Merry. If they could just interrupt the party for a few seconds, Annabeth doubted Merry could start it up again.

Annabeth grabbed Percy’s hand and desperately resisted the urge to pull it around her. Instead, she motioned towards the pool.

Percy cracked a smile, knowing what to do.

He lifted one hand. The water surged up, twisted in a tunnel around she, Percy, Will, and Nico, and blasted the other partygoers like a fire hose.

There were complaints and shouts. Monsters slid onto the ground. Half-bloods were knocked over. The music paused, though Annabeth hoped Percy had fried the circuits at the DJ booth, wherever it was.

Hazel and Frank stumbled to their feet, looking dazed. Piper and Jason were still grinning at each other stupidly on the ground. Several monsters shook out their coats.

The party sensation seemed dead.

Then the distinct British accent of Calex Rupin McKenzie shouted, “Pool party, mates!” from the
second story patio.

Pax crawled out from under a giant and jumped up, hopping from one foot to another. “You heard him! Gentlemen, please remove your shirts and deposit them on the floor!” To provide an example, he pulled off his shirt and swung it over his head.

To her horror, several ghouls and clothed beasts followed suit.

A hand shot out of the pile of downed monsters and Merry dragged herself back up to be beside the table. She pressed something on her jacket, and Annabeth could feel the hum of an amp, like there were still functional electronics all around them. Annabeth couldn’t tell if the glistening on Merry’s forehead was sweat or water. She looked weak and pale, but had a psychotic grin plastered on her face.

Nico, beside them, just looked annoyed. He was struggling to keep Will from taking off his shirt. “What’s the plan?” he asked.

Annabeth’s mind spun. There was still a happy haze fogging her thoughts, but she knew she needed to concentrate. She thought about something she hated thinking about—all of her struggles in Tartarus, the pain, and the terror of failure. It sharpened her focus, rocking her out of the partying mood. She wondered if that’s how Nico was so unaffected.

Percy was barely holding it together. He kept bobbing his head, and swaying side to side, despite the lack of audible beat.

“I think we need to go after Merry,” Annabeth said. “But it looks like we’re more prone to her the closer we get.”

This part was delicate. The strange energy of the party felt like an effervescence about to be uncorked and Annabeth, Percy, and Nico needed to get their friends away from Merry before—

Merry righted herself, and shouted, “Every day I’m shuffling!”

The music thundered back into the club. If anything, the atmosphere shifted to be more manic. Axel and a few monsters picked up Frank and then Jason to crowd surf them towards the stage, the boys laughing along the way. Everyone jumped in excitement to the beat.

“Peter Johnson!” Merry sang and gave them a wave. “You’rrrrre next!”

Annabeth and Percy exchanged a glance. She knew he hated that name. Percy went to raise his hands again, ready to give them more than a single dousing of water. The liquid on the floor rippled back towards them. Another blast should be enough. Merry couldn’t start this mania up again. And if Percy could capture Axel and Pax with the pool water…

He took a step forward, and Annabeth could envision his voice as she read his lips, “Sorry guys, but its past demigod curfew.”

Annabeth flinched, furious at herself for assuming all six of their fugitives were in the dance crowd. She’d only seen three.

Merry winked and waved at someone on the second story patio.

Annabeth turned and saw something that made her insides freeze. The music turned into a din as her vision tunneled.
Calex Rupin McKenzie stood on the edge of the patio, his bow drawn. A dazzling arrow of sputtering light was notched on his string. His bow was aimed right at them. Even at this distance, she could swear he mouthed the words, *I'm sorry, Percy*, before firing.

Instinct took over.

Annabeth shoved Percy out of the way.

The arrow pierced into her back.

Thanks for reading! I’ve been feverish the last few days, and honestly couldn’t remember the name of this book when I went to post this chapter (seems appropriate for the chapter though). So! I hope my edits aren’t too terrible and you’re able to enjoy!
Leo figured people would get mad if he crashed the party with several tons of bronze dragon, so he parked Festus in sleep mode on the roof. He, Felix, and Calypso had an easy time breaking in through the roof entrance. He and Calypso talked about going through the front, but Felix seemed intent that the roof was the most direct route. That, and there were about a dozen monsters outside the front. Not the kind of place he’d want to charge in fists blazing.

Felix, his other “dragon,” tugged ahead on her leash. Well, she didn’t really look like Felix. Felix was supposed to be a silver dragon companion to Festus, and Calypso’s emergency search-and-ride if he and she ever got separated. Felix had been a beauty: all silver circuitry, with sapphire eyes, and lovely metal. Then Felix got blasted out of the sky by a discus and a Roman ballista when she was out on a rebellious stroll.

Now Felix was a small, silvery work table. A bit of a downsizing, but Leo figured they’d manage until he could get her original body. It was all he had on hand to immediately insert her control disk into.

Turns out, when Leo programmed her, he hadn’t been specific enough. Who would have known search-and-rescue would be so close to search-and-destroy in the language of programming? And, he didn’t specify Calypso of Ogygia. So, Felix flew off from Calypso and Leo’s Garage and found Kalypso Cassand, the daughter of Apollo who happened to now be traveling with Kronos’s scythe.

As he predicted, as soon as Felix’s disc was inserted into one of the replacement Buford prototypes, Felix continued her last command: find Kalypso Cassand. Leo would worry about the destroy part later. However, he kinda hoped a demigod could take a work table if things got messy.

When they were flying to find Kally and the group that trashed their shack with a party, Felix had suddenly jerked her attention away from California and towards the East.

“You better hope she hasn’t completely malfunctioned,” Calypso had muttered at the sudden change in direction. Calypso had been jumpy since she’d found out about Kronos’s scythe two weeks ago, and—Leo suspected—since she realized their search would lead them towards New Rome or Camp Half-Blood. It worried Leo that Felix detected these people so close to his friends.

Leo didn’t want his friends to be attacked by a jerk wielding Backbiter, but he couldn’t hide his disappointment when they landed in a different part of the Big City other than Long Island or Manhattan. He could really go for some of Sally Jackson’s blue cookies, or for some dryad served brisket, or Coach Gleeson telling him to eat some beef to beef up his arms. Not the most conventional satyr wisdom.

When they landed on this rooftop, he could tell—his friends were close. And that wasn’t just because he heard a hoard of people shout, “Percy Jackson!” somewhere in the floors under him. He knew before he even entered. He liked to think his demigod senses were tingling.

That’s why he asked Calypso to wait on the roof to guard Festus. She seemed to get agitated every time he mentioned his old pals. Besides, several thousand years of isolation didn’t make a great
He opened the shockingly unlocked roof access and let Felix drag him forward. There was no way Leo could sneak in with Felix. The walking table sounded less like someone on a stealth mission and more like someone wearing rollerblades that tripped into his dad's tool shed. But, with how loud the music was, the noise didn't seem to matter.

The club's set up was weird—or at least Leo thought it was. He was sure Annabeth could say if it was up to code for a monster jam bar. He and Felix went through the doorway, almost fell down a ladder, and onto a metal catwalk. The hanging walkway swung violently as Felix thrashed to jump over the hand railing.

"Wow! Felix, I know you’re excited to search-and-destroy, but cool your jets! I haven’t even installed jets in you yet!" Leo struggled to keep both of them from plummeting to a demigod's-lamest-death: splat onto the disco floor of a monster club, or at least that’s what he guessed was under him.

Felix whined and creaked in protest. Leo could hear it now, But I want to kill nooowwwww.

The ceiling was bizarre. Either Hephaestus set up a Talos sized fog-machine and engineered a hundred tiny fireflies to dart around, or someone took a piece of the sky and tucked it into the top of this building.

Leo couldn't fully appreciate it. He was struggling too much not to fall to his death. He slipped to the floor grate when Felix next jolted forward, apparently thinking a suicidal hop off this catwalk was the fastest route for both of them. Leo skidded forward on his butt with Felix’s tugs and would have flipped right down to splat onto the dance floor had he not slammed his feet into the railing. He dragged Felix back and restrained her. As quickly as he could, he jury-rigged a locking mechanism for Felix's chain leash. Normally, the average sentient table wouldn't pose too much of a threat of escaping, but Felix was a feisty one.

He just hoped Felix wouldn't bend the railing he tied her to.

From what Leo could see... well, he couldn't really see much. Just the dark fog, flashing lights below, and a few shapes fluttering through the mist. He was pretty sure there was a wall ten feet to his side, and—though he was disoriented—he'd guess this area would be on the right side of the club.

There wasn't much to work with up here. The catwalk made a solid square around a huge cage that dangled from four chains, one at each corner. There was a hole at the top of the cage, so—Leo assumed—the massive disco ball above could descend through the cage.

Leo was shocked Felix's clanking didn't attract any security guards. The music below was so loud though, Leo figured he could drop a screaming Coach Gleeson down there and no one would flinch.

Despite feeling an adrenaline rush at possibly seeing his pals for the first time in forever and getting totally pumped for a potential battle, Leo felt himself sway to the music. It was a club remix of some weird comedy song, and Leo could swear he recognized it, something with two guys singing, And I jizz in my pants, far too seriously.[1]

Before he did anything else, he needed to take care of that cage. Those metal bars looked like bad news for a demigod—or a T-Rex, based off how big the cage was. Leo patrolled along the exterior, making quick locks to jam the pulley system to avoid any lowering.
Next, Leo needed to figure out how to get down. From the looks of Felix, Kalypso and her group must have been right under—

Someone, that sounded a suspicious amount like Annabeth, shouted in pain.

Leo needed to get down there now.

He made a quick remote for the last non-jammed pulley. "Sorry girl! I'll come back for you! And I promise to bring you a souvenir fit for your search and destroy setting," Leo said to Felix.

The table squirmed and creaked in protest.

Leo lunged at the wires above the disco ball, barely catching it. From his tinkering with the pulley, he knew the metal cords could hold him, but balancing on a shiny, reflective sphere? Not quite as much like riding a metal dragon as he hoped. Maybe he should complain to management to make a disco ball seatbelt.

One button click and he was descending through the fog and into the unknown. The further he got, the more lightheaded he felt. An odd sense of euphoria hit him. He was going to see his friends. He hadn't seen them since—

The fog broke and Leo realized riding a disco ball into the unknown might not have been the best idea. Kinda like riding a reflective shoot here sign. There were monsters everywhere. None of them seemed to pay him mind. Winged ones flapped past him in a crazed dance. One even waved a giant foam hand at him that read I love Eating Romans.

He really wished he could have Festus in here. Having a several ton dragon burst through the roof might have been safer.

But he was already halfway down. As he descended, he saw a small patio balcony lining the second story appear out of the Mist. He quickly recognized two people standing on it from his earlier security footage: a tall African boy with a black and red beanie and a black scarf and an Asian girl with a video camera recording something under him.

The tall boy with ebony skin had a golden bow in his hands. He looked horrified and leaned heavily on the railing of the patio, like he'd just shot Chiron in the butt before remembering that Chiron didn't always have the best sense of humor about being shot in the horsehind.

While the ball lowered, Leo nodded his head to the club beat of Jizz in my Pants and made eye contact with the girl. He could feel the presence of Kronos's blade on her belt. He couldn't remember her name, but gave her his best wait-until-I-get-off-this-disco-ball-look that he could muster.

Leo glanced down to see what she was recording.

What he saw underneath him made his jaw drop. "Holy Toledo..." Leo muttered.

More monsters were dancing below. What he assumed was Annabeth's frizzy, blond hair bobbed in and out of the monsters in a manic search for something she must have dropped on the ground. She didn't appear physically injured, but he had to wonder why she'd shouted in pain. Annabeth didn't strike him as the type to freak out over losing a hair tie or something, but whatever it was must have been important for her to be sweeping the room in such a meticulous grid pattern.

His heart did a double thud. Piper and Hazel were standing nearby, seeming not to notice Annabeth's wondering. They cheered and danced. Something about their actions looked familiar. It
 kinda reminded him of when he'd met Dionysus' crazed fangirls, the Maenads.

Although he couldn't be sure, since the boy was half-covering his face, Leo thought Nico Di Angelo was standing beside Piper and Hazel. The boy looked gloomy and annoyed enough to be their resident goth.

There was a small stage directly under the disco ball's path, ending beside Hazel, Piper, and Nico. That's what made his jaw drop.

Excitement made him even more lightheaded. All his friends were here. Percy, Jason, Frank, and Will were on the stage, doing the electric slide and leading the monsters to clap to the beat.

When Jason spotted him, a cheer went up. The four boys jumped up and down. Percy pointed at Leo and shouted, "A ROUND OF APPLAUSE FOR THE RETURN OF LEO VALDEZ!" Leo couldn't really hear him over the throbbing subwoofers, but was able to read it off Percy's lips.

Leo didn't know how they knew he'd be here, but he felt honored that they'd prepared a dance number and a little confused why they'd planned it in a club full of monsters.

The disco ball touched the stage and Leo hopped off. This was definitely not what he'd expected to find. Before he could glance around to see if Kalypso or her other friends were in the crowd, or if the Asian girl had dashed off with Kronos's blade, the four boys were patting his back. Jason punched him in the shoulder.

Everyone was smiling. Some part of Leo whined to let this continue. They did care about him. He was important to the group, not just some junky mechanic comic relief. After months of being away, he missed these guys!

Leo tried to play it cool, but had trouble when Jason and Percy picked him up and threw him in the air. Once they caught him, Leo tried to shout, "Woo! Guys! We can party extreme later—we need to catch a person first!"

But no one seemed to hear him. To be fair, no one probably could over the music. He had to wonder where the sound booth was so he could mute it.

The monsters were shouting, "Dance! Dance!" in a throbbing beat of itself. Will motioned for him to take the center of the stage. Leo wasn't used to dancing like this, but—if one dance would get these guys to focus on their quest at hand—he figured he had to oblige.

The five male heroes of Olympus lined up on stage in just enough time to sing to the song's bridge: I jizz right in my pants every time you're next to me. Will and Jason were perfectly lined up with their significant others. Piper shouted out a giggled laugh as Jason winked at her and mouthed the words, And when we're holding hands, it's like having sex with me.

Nico looked like he wanted to kill someone, but what else was new? Or really, that he'd just resigned himself to the fact that the rest of the guys were being awesome.

Though… Jason’s behavior seemed a little… off? Leo hoped it was just because Jason was glad he was here, and not because he’d had another amnesia session.

Leo didn't care if he looked stupid while dancing. All five of them did. He kinda wished Calypso would be able to see this. She'd find it hilarious. He got giddy when he saw her walk up alongside Nico in the crowd. She must have found a way to come through the front.

Nico looked about ready to smash his face in with one of the nearby Scytherian Drycean's tails. He
sighed and motioned to where Will had taken off his shirt and was swinging it around. Leo didn't care. That kid needed to learn to chill out anyway.

*You say I'm premature? I just call it ecstasy. I wear a rubber around--all times it's a necessity.*

Calypso, of course, also looked annoyed. Then paled upon noticing everyone else on stage.

Once the song came to an end, the five of them burst into laughter. Percy stumbled, knocking Will and he to the ground. They both giggled.

Nico visibly flinched and looked away. Calypso sighed and pointed at the floor offstage in a *come right here Mister* motion.

Then it hit Leo how bizarre it was that they were able to convince Frank to do this. Percy and Will? Definitely. Jason? Probably with enough coaxing. Frank...?

Frank seemed to snap out of his revelry. He glanced down at his feet in concern and confusion. Dread coated his expression as he scanned their surroundings.

The song melted into another one by the Chainsmokers. With this song, Leo could see Frank's look of horror spread. Hazel suddenly grabbed Piper, forcing her to stop dancing. Jason's eyes went wide with realization.

Maybe they hadn't planned a dance number for his arrival.

Frank and Jason nodded at each other. Jason grabbed Percy and Frank grabbed Will to drag them off stage. Leo figured he'd better follow close behind. The monsters and some stray demigods cleared space by the stairs for them. Hazel, Piper, Calypso, and Nico made their way to the stage's exit.

The music clogged for a second and restarted, like it was changing stations. Everything quieted down to appropriate screaming level. As they hopped off stage, Leo could hear Piper gasp, "Oh gods. What just happened?!

"Nice break dance," a Cyclops laughed, patting Frank on the shoulder. Frank winced, trying to keep his eyes down.

"Thanks," he muttered.

"Yea, that was the best performance since the one with the goats!" a ghoul cheered and winked at Will.

Will fumbled to get his shirt back on. Nico walked over and broke the ghoul's hand. The ghoul whined but didn't dare raise a hand to the son of Hades. He crept away, sulking.

Nico gave Leo a weird grin. "Welcome back. I told everyone you weren't dead. And now you got to see the world's dumbest stage performance."

As though no one had seen his grand entrance with the disco ball, a wave of excitement washed over the others.

"Leo!" Piper gasped. She wrapped him up in a hug. Over his shoulder, he could see Calypso scowl. Leo gave her a helpless shrug, then tightened his arms around Piper.

"Hey Beauty Queen. I missed you!"
Hazel hopped in to join the hug with a laugh and a quick peck on the cheek. "Leo! We're glad to see you're okay!"

Calypso would kill him for this later.

"You're really here!" Jason said. Once Piper and Hazel released Leo, Jason punched Leo's shoulder, like he didn't remember punching it the first time. "That's for freaking us out."

Jason, miraculously, hit him in the same spot as before. Leo grabbed his arm, scared it might fall off if his amnesiac friend forgot again.

Percy grinned broadly until he caught sight of Calypso. Both their faces fell. She looked away awkwardly and hugged herself.

He mouthed the word, "Oh," softly, having a hard time not staring.

Leo's heart sank a few hundred feet through the floor, maybe stopping close to Tartarus.

"You must have all been enchanted to dance," Calypso shouted, breaking up their reunion revelry. "A child of Dionysus maybe?"

"Yea... enchanted..." Leo muttered. "That's the only way we could have all been dancing on stage."

"Shut up," Calypso snapped at him. He could tell that she knew he'd done that of his own free will. She looked so tense. Leo wanted to give her a hug, but—after all that hugging he'd done with Hazel and Piper—now might not be the time.

Will put an arm around Nico, seeming to want comfort more for himself than his... was Nico his boyfriend now? They looked kinda boyfriendish..? "Why weren't you affected?" Will asked.

"I don't dance," Nico growled with a blush. "But this girl is right. Calypso, I assume? Merry and her group disappeared. And I think we might want to leave now."

Leo remembered all the monsters around them. None looked ready to attack them. Most continued to dance with the music. Regardless, Frank and Hazel checked the weapons at their belts.

A Cyclops with a XXXXXXXXL biker jacket put a large hand over Frank and Jason's shoulder, making both Romans jump in consternation. But the Cyclops just chuckled like they were old buddies. "We have orders not to attack you. Great dance. Can't wait to see it on Hephaestus TV."

"Hephasteus TV?" Frank repeated in horror. "You mean—"

"Yea, that'll broadcast at some point. We aren't killing you in exchange for the video footage. It's already downloaded onto the magical intersnar—"

"Internet," Piper supplied, looking queasy at the thought.

"Yes, the internet. Now this way, little demigods and Cyclops hugger," he said. He ruffled Jason’s hair at the last part.

Leo glanced at Jason. "Cyclops hugger?"

Jason sighed, "Don’t ask."

Percy glanced away from Calypso, touching his hands to his pockets like he didn’t know what to do with them. He jumped when he realized someone was missing. “Where’s Annabeth?” he asked,
his eyes darting around.

He relaxed when he saw his blonde girlfriend crouched on the ground beside a harpy, scanning for something.

“Hey, Wise Girl—”

She raised her head, eyes distractingly searching the floor until she noticed Leo. “Oh! Leo, thank the gods you’re okay.” Annabeth stood up and stepped over to them. She tried to smile at him and look excited, but she looked agitated.

“Did you like Leo’s welcome home performance?” Percy asked. He still looked shaken by the sight of Calypso. He went to put an arm over Annabeth’s shoulder.

Annabeth stepped out of his reach. “Percy, I’m leaving you for a weasel. As soon as I can catch it.”

Leo coughed on a laugh. She’d said it so seriously. Everyone glanced at her, including the biker Cyclops.

“I didn’t think we danced that poorly,” Percy said lightheartedly.

“Don’t try to convince me otherwise. I know we’ve been through a lot, and I promise we’ll still be great friends—”

“Oh, Wise Girl—”

“But, I’ve made up my mind. I know this is sudden, but you can’t sway me from my new found love of this creature—”

Percy grabbed Annabeth’s arms, the pallor returning to his face. “Oh gods, you’re serious.” He searched the faces of everyone else in their group, most of which were holding off laughs, before landing on Piper. “What’s wrong with her?!?” he demanded.

“Calex must have gotten her,” Piper said, mystified. She had a hand over her mouth to contain a smile. “I wonder if one of the others thought Merry’s powers wouldn’t work on Annabeth for some reason.”


Annabeth removed Percy’s hands with calm determination. “There’s nothing to fix, Percy. We’re through. That’s just that.”

Piper shrugged helplessly. “I… don’t think I can. Eros’ powers of love tend to be more powerful than Aphrodite’s. From what Calex said, I think you just need to wait for it to wear off.”

“And get teasing material for months in the meantime,” Leo cheered. He fumbled in his tool belt to see if he had a recorder. “Annabeth, in your most romantic words, can you describe this weasel to me?”

Annabeth and Percy both scowled at him.

Annabeth lifted her nose. “This is serious, Valdez.”

He was shocked Percy couldn’t find the humor in this. Everyone else looked ready to burst into giggles, even Frank. Well, one other person didn’t seem mirthful. Leo’s heart crumbled again when he noticed Calypso. She seemed near tears, still avoiding eye contact with any of them.
Occasionally though, her gaze would slip up to Annabeth with a hateful sneer.

What would happen if Annabeth and Percy broke up? Not necessarily over a weasel, but—

“This way, little demigods,” the biker Cyclops cheered.

He rounded their whole group up, Hazel, Frank, Percy, Annabeth, Nico, Will, Piper, Jason, Calypso, and Leo, and directed them towards the exit. Leo stepped to be beside Calypso, but she wouldn’t look at him. He wanted to introduce her properly, but she didn’t seem to want that right now. Maybe it would be better outside of the club, where there was less imminent danger.

“Well…” Hazel said with a little blush, “That was… um… I didn’t know you could dance, Frank.”

Frank blushed. “Let’s never talk about this again.”

“Until it shows up on Hephaestus TV,” Jason groaned. “I wonder if we can find out when it’s airing and get the Stoll brothers to steal Dionysus’ TV that day.”

“I kinda wanna know how we looked,” Will said with a laugh. Nico’s cheeks went a dark red. Leo had a feeling their son of Hades rather enjoyed how Will had looked while dancing. “Whatever, now we’ve lost our main lead on Kronos’s blade and the others. Unless Frank can sniff them out, they’re gone.”

Leo forced his mind away from what must have happened when Percy was on the island with Calypso, and gave everyone a broad grin. Everything would be fine. Annabeth wouldn’t really leave Percy. And Calypso loved him, right?

Besides, they had a job to do. “It’s okay, guys. The Leoman has that covered! Once Superman here flies me to the roof, we can catch a ride on Festus and, I can introduce you to Felix.”

“The dragon?” Frank asked hopefully.

“No,” Leo said with gusto, “The table.”

As they went into the night air, and the Cyclops demanded Jason give him a hug goodbye, Leo calmed down and genuinely smiled. All his friends started asking him the typical questions he’d guess they would ask. Where have you been? What have you been doing? Did you send a silver dragon to attack our camp?

They were excited to meet Calypso, though she seemed really reserved. Leo understood. This was a lot of new people at once. And Percy, but he was trying not to think about that. And the girl Percy left Calypso for that happened to be madly in love with a weasel at the moment.

Leo paused before Jason sky lifted him. “Wait—what weasel did Annabeth see?”

This scene was one of the whole reasons I wrote this book (Mr. D would be proud) so I hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it! Thanks for reading and please avoid hopping on your local disco ball. They’re more fragile then they look.
Footnote:

[1] I know Lonely Island put this song out eight years ago at this point… but it was still the most appropriate song for this scene. Though “I just had sex” came as a close second.
Everyone was laughing as they ran out of the club. Pax scrambled to pull his shirt back on. Axel surprised her and Euna with a quick front flip as they ran. He laughed like a maniac and Kally realized Merry’s power had affected more than the Heroes of Olympus.

The outside cold snapped Kally more into reality. The gleeful tears that streaked down her cheeks now turned to trails of ice. She’d been in a sound booth tucked into one of the walls with protective Plexiglas. Apparently, it wasn’t uncommon for the merfolk to splash the electronics whenever they disliked a song so everything had been waterproofed. Also effective for, In Case of Percy Jackson. Despite that, Merry had taken over the music halfway through with her jacket, allowing Kally to dance in the isolation of her box without any responsibilities.

“Okay, Merry, I owe you an apology,” Axel admitted. “I didn’t think whatever idea you had was going to work. I mean… the Diet Cokes?”

“The sacrifice to Dad,” Merry giggled. “I ain’t that powerful.” Calex carried her bridal style as they ran down the alleyway. She kept throwing her head back and forth, like she was still dancing to the music, making it as difficult for Calex to carry her as possible.

Merry had collapsed in the club. That party had completely drained her. Kally had seen Merry talk her way out of tons of exercising in gym class and wasn’t used to Merry looking so exhausted. Now, she kept giggling nonsensically, waving her fingers haphazardly to a beat no one could hear, nuzzling up against Calex’s chest, and mumbling the words to Bollywood songs. The grin on her face was absolutely silly and contagious.

“You two—” Merry flicked her hand at Pax and Axel, making Kally duck to avoid being struck. “—are great at the whole war thing, but you’re not very god at peace, are you two?”

Pax laughed and stated, “No, all we’ve ever known is violence,” in the least comforting manner he could.

The image of Pax’s bedroom fluttered to the surface of Kally’s memory—the corner with the chains, clubs, and whips. All the mirth flushed out of her. Instead, she thought about laying beside Pax on his bed, and about what Pax must have done to make Frank flustered the other day. Did other demigods have this problem? Worrying about their traumatized not-boyfriends making out with unwary praetors?

“Merry, that was brilliant, though you’re a mad woman,” Calex said, interrupting Kally’s thoughts on her muddled emotions.

They turned out of the alley onto the main street. Axel slowed them to normal walking pace to draw less attention. The sky was dark now—as dark, Kally figured, as the sky could get in Brooklyn. It gleamed with an ominous orange haze that washed out most of the stars, like Hephaestus was hammering away new New York Part II to impress Athena somewhere nearby.
The streets were busy with the night crowd. Some people made Kally happy that Euna had Backbiter and that someone as intimidating as Axel was leading them.

Now that they’d left the energy of the club and were walking, Kally could feel herself shake in the cold. Merry was the only one with a real jacket in the group. Calex’s beanie and scarf couldn’t have kept him that much warmer.

“Why did you need me to shoot Percy?” Calex asked.

Merry giggled. “Oh, that wasn’t for the plan. I just thought Pax would get a kick out of seeing Percy fall in love with Jason.”

Calex’s jaw dropped. Axel choked on a laugh. Pax burst into one. Even Euna cracked a half-smile, though Kally thought Euna’s grin might have been in reaction to her own musings due to the distant glint in her eyes.

“You had me shoot at the SON OF POSEIDON because this idiotic block might get ‘a kick out of it?!?’” he demanded.

“Yes.”

“M-Merry, you’re am-mazing,” Pax said, wiping happy tears from his eyes. “I g-give you 10 out of 10 on app-preciating your efforts—HUNNIE! BALLER!”

Before Calex could drop Merry on the sidewalk or toss her into Pax to knock both of them over, a shriek erupted from a passing group of girls in high heels and boys in button downs. “Ew! Rats!”

Two furry creatures darted through their prancing feet and, upon reaching Pax’s legs, scampered up his pants. Once they reached his belt, they burrowed under his shirt, incurring several shouts of glee and pain.

“Ow—ow! Ha ha! Ow! Guys—I missed you—aye! Who fixed you up, Hunnie?!” he asked.

Axel smiled. Then his eyes widened. “Wait—Ajax, if they’re here—”

“We can have weasel death battles again!” Pax exclaimed, and hugged a squirming bulge along his waist.

“That… too, but it means—”

“That means the Paxmobile is nearby!” Pax scrambled to withdraw the two weasels from his shirt. As he pulled them out, they wriggled and bit as his arms. “Ow—ow—go forth my—ow—pretties! F-find us our mobile home!”

Kally wasn’t sure how much time passed before Sam Datta’s taxi-van stopped. They’d tried walking after Hunnie and Baller for ten minutes before calling Sam, all of them shaking from the cold and exhausted.

Sam was a little skeptical about letting a pair of weasels direct their movement, but the skepticism turned to wonder when Pax handed him a pocket full of denari and drachma.
“Is this… pirate edition Monopoly money?” he asked. He glanced in concern to where Merry, Calex, and Euna had immediately collapsed in the back seats. Merry was out after a delirious greeting, “vanakkam."[2]

“It’s what Frank and Jason had in their pockets,” Pax said, hopping in the passenger seat. “So, they’re probably made out of gold. Can you imagine if New Rome was using monopoly money though?” Pax shook his head. “We could use inflation to destroy their economy. Mu ha ha.”

Sam shrugged. “That credit card from earlier didn’t bounce yet. Did you guys beat up her stalker and their cavalry reinforcements?” He pointed a thumb at Kally.

Kally frowned. She wished that wasn’t the story they’d gone with. She sat in the middle with Axel.

“We showed them how to party,” Merry sleepily murmured from the back.

Sam shook his head. Despite the late hour, his eyes were still lit up with excitement. “Hey man, I want details. I’m not driving you places for monopoly money and Mr. Stoic’s angry glare. Now, before I hear how you kicked mythological ass, I’m not going to get dive bombed by like, a dragon, this time, am I?”

Kally thought about Festus, the bronze dragon that Leo had.

“No,” Axel said with firm confidence.

At the same time, Pax said, “Possibly.”

Sam’s eyes sparkled more. “Ah, awesome. Well, I hope you can make sense of my biostat notes, because you’re going to help me study between story time.”

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Pax sat in the front to watch the weasels dash across the dashboard and verbalize their movement to Sam. Axel sat up, alert, and vigilantly scanned the horizon.

Kally wanted to stay awake, to make sure they didn’t derail too far from Camp Half-Blood to find the Paxmobile, though it would be nice to have their own transportation. Honestly though, Kally didn’t know if they were going away from Camp Half-Blood, considering her lack of knowledge about the geography of New York.

Apparently, something about the weasels’ dance across the dashboard was mesmerizing enough for Kally to nod off. When she felt the car roll to a stop, she could smell the cloy mix of spicy chocolate and sweat in her nostrils. Her face and right arm felt toasty despite the cold of the van. Kally glanced up, looking past a torn and bloody Camp Jupiter shirt to where Axel was staring out the window.

Her face was pressed against Axel’s chest and his arm was loosely around her shoulder. When he noticed her wake up, he gave her a soft smile, ruffled her hair, and removed his arm.

Kally’s face felt even toastier.

For a disorienting moment, Kally had a weird flashback to her brother, John. Before he’d became a total jerk, when Kally was really little, he used to help carry her inside the house whenever she fell
asleep on long car rides. Sometimes, she’d pretend to have fallen asleep, just so John would complain about how heavy she was while tossing her over one shoulder.

The memory faded when Axel startled and shouted, “STOP!”

Sleepy grumbles erupted from the back.

They squeaked to a sharp halt. From the ease of the break, they couldn’t have been going that fast. From what Kally could see in the scattered street lamps, they were in a suburban neighborhood, with concrete sidewalk forming a horseshoe in a cul-de-sac. They’d braked at the entrance of the cul-de-sac.

The houses were nice, middle-income family homes, bigger than Kally’s house, but she was used to her friends’ houses being bigger. Each had about an acre of land, with minor landscaping and a few scattered trees.

There wasn’t anything that should have made Axel shout for them to stop. Except maybe Hunnie and Baller. They were going nuts and doing flips. One scratched at the front windshield while the other sprinted in circles around the dashboard.

“Unicorn or something?” Sam asked, ducking his head back and forth like he might see something.

Axel pointed to the last house in the cul-de-sac.

Amidst the overgrown grass of that last house, there was indeed a unicorn grazing in the grass. Kally was relieved to see the sputtering rainbow sparkles erupt out of the red and black stallion ahead. Vinyl was okay and happily munching on the lawn.

A white, dented pharmaceutical van was parked in the house’s narrow parking lot.

Kally hoped that was their Paxmobile, and not Lapis and Hiro’s. But she could see the faintest hint of paint on the side, from where the Pax brothers had scribbled Pax Extraction Team. A weird nostalgia hit her as she thought about playing card games with Pax’s holographic deck in the back.

A golden donkey poked its head out from the other side of the Paxmobile: Lucius the Golden Ass.

“That’s just a deer du—oh.” Sam’s eyes went wide. “Oh, man, are most deer secretly unicorns? Have I hit a unicorn with my car before without even knowing it?”

He edged the taxi forward at a slow roll.

Axel shot forward and grabbed Sam’s shoulder. “I said stop.”

The taxi halted again. “Are unicorns deadly?” Sam asked, wide-eyed.

“Very,” Pax said absently. “I heard they eat human livers.” He sat rigidly in the passenger seat, leaning forward slightly. He bounced slightly back and forth in a motion recognized as his I want to hop but I’m sitting.

“Krios and Luke only told you that so you’d stop asking for one,” Axel said. His normal sigh didn’t follow. Instead, his gaze was steady. The Mist fluttered for a moment, and Kally could see his pupils had widened, leaving a thin rim of his iris, like a cat ready to pounce.

“There’s a rune barrier around that house,” he said. Kally didn’t see anything, but she assumed this was a true sight thing.
“Like..?” Pax asked.

“A child of Hecate rune barrier,” Axel clarified.

Pax went silent. Kally thought he might break his seat if he bounced anymore. She could imagine the internal, chibi version of Pax clawing at his seatbelt, squealing, “Release me!”

Something small and ghostly darted from under the Paxmobile, gliding bouncily towards their taxi, like the most menacing of specter bunnies.

One of the weasels on the dashboard made a loud squeak and phased through the windshield. Kally blinked, watching as the remaining one bit and attacked the glass in attempt to follow after.

“Wow! Your ferret can—”

The weasel left in the car shrieked at Sam before continuing to attack the glass.

“Weasel,” Pax corrected absently. He looked stunned as he watched their weasel scamper up and intercept the approaching white figure.

“Baller does that sometimes,” Axel said. His posture was rigid. He absently grabbed at his belt, where a weapon should have been. This was the tensest Kally had seen him since he interacted with Aphrodite. “Kally, wake up the others. Everybody needs to get out.”

As soon as the doors opened, Hunnie darted off to join Baller in attacking that floating spectral thing. Once Pax remembered to remove his seatbelt, he bolted after them. Merry wouldn’t budge. Calex, sleepily, had to carry her out. None of them wanted to wake up Euna. They took Joey’s old piece of advice about throwing things at her, mostly crumbled up pieces of Sam’s notebook. Fortunately, she didn’t assault any of them on waking. She just glared.

Sam said he’d wait at the bottom of the cul-de-sac until he heard everything was okay. He hefted up his biostats book and cracked it open for some studying. “Unicorns and golden donkeys make the perfect backdrop for studying. Besides, knowing my luck, you’ll make the house explode or something.” He made it sound like that really would be lucky. Kally was starting to wonder what this guy did on weekends, other than pick up random kids with stolen credit cards and take them to strange houses by weasel direction.

As they walked up the small incline of the sidewalk, towards the house, Axel seemed deaf to Calex’s questions about where they were and what they were doing and why they weren’t at Camp Half-Blood yet. Though his questions quieted to glee at seeing Vinyl in the yard.

Ahead of them, Pax reached the three battling creatures and dropped onto the pavement, crying, “Nietz! Nietz!” Kally thought *neats* was a weird thing to call when being overrun by—

“Oh gods,” Calex groaned, “Are there really three of those damned things?”

When she got close enough, Kally recognize the small specter to be another weasel, this one albino. The three weasels decided Pax’s body was a battle ground, bounding over his limbs, hiding, and ambushing one another.

Tears streamed down Pax’s cheeks as he scrambled to snatch up the albino weasel. “Axel—Axel, it’s Nietz! Do—do you think—”
They were at the house’s property line when Axel knelt down. He touched a part of the concrete, and a green rune appeared on the ground, glowing dimly. “It’s an alarm ward,” he said absently. He clenched his jaw.

The three weasels bound away from Pax to scamper around Axel’s legs. He reached down to pet the white weasel, who dropped onto its back and curled to bite and scratch his fingers. “Hey Nietzsche,” he greeted with a soft smile. He stood up, inhaled shakily, and said, “Whoever lives in that house will already know we’re here. Let’s check to see if everything is in the van. I want to be armed. Just in case.”

Thanks for reading! Are you ready to meet the new Seventh Traitor of Olympus? :D

Footnotes:

[1] My niece does this when you carry her and it is terrifying since you never know when she’ll drive to dive out of your arms.

All the weapons were accountable in the Paxmobile, though it looked like someone had tidied up. The van normally looked like a trashier version of the Mystery Machine, with benches lining both walls, a trunk behind the passenger seat and two bins of broken metal behind the driver’s seat. There were new, fancier cushions on the benches in the back.

Every weapon seemed to sparkle in the racks along the van walls. Axel said someone had oiled and sharpened all of them. He touched the boomerang and throwing stick beside the bolas, muttering something about proper treatment. Even the Pax boys’ shirts, which were normally strewn on the floor in dirty piles, were neatly washed and stacked beside the benches.

Kally found her messenger bag inside, beside a pile of clothing. Something in her almost broke when she saw the raggedy, torn fabric. Mr. Paine’s golden Argonaut statue was in the main pocket, seeming to wave at her in annoyance. Don’t lose me again.

Mostly, she was relieved to see her notebook. Hazel had given her one to write in at Camp Jupiter, but she’d felt like a piece of her past had been eviscerated upon losing all her story ideas and notes about the last few months.

To her horror, though, she found someone must have read it. When she flipped through, she found grammar corrections in dark green ink in the margins and notes that answered any of the questions she’d jotted down about mythology. Whoever wrote them seemed unabashed by the invasion of privacy until one of her tear streaked pages. Her own handwriting glared at her from off the page, asking, like she’d been wondering for months, Did Apollo rape my mother?

Underneath the single question, in the neat green handwriting, was a note that read, I’m sorry for the intrusion. I hope you find the answers you want, and that you can do what whatever action those answers require.

That was the last of the green ink.

Kally tried not to cry. She felt her eyes and cheeks burn.

The slam of a trunk distracted her. Axel exhaled, “The helmets are gone. We need to go inside.”

Calex had stopped his questioning when he went over to greet Vinyl. The unicorn ignored him (and Merry) with masterful indifference. Euna stood outside while Kally sat on the edge and Axel and Pax explored.

Now, Calex frowned, walked over, and adjusted Merry in his arms. “Those helmets were bad news, mate. Something is amiss here. How did the Paxmobile wind up here anyway?”

“Mattias programmed it with a feature to ‘go home’ if we got separated,” Axel answered, hopping out from the back.

“Have you been here before?” Euna grumbled, glaring at the driveway like she could explode it into grass. Kally frowned. Euna probably could with her last two god droplets.

Pax jumped out at Axel’s side. Both shook their heads, glancing at the pathway to the front door. The recognition and excitement in their eyes told otherwise.

Pax popped his cheeks. He ruffled his overgrown fauxhawk, withdrew a small pithos pendent from
under his shirt so it was on display, and then adjusted his utility belt. He opened and shut his mouth, and popped his cheeks again, more jittery than a bookstore cash register the day a Riordan book was released.

“Do I look okay? I mean, after what happened—what if—” Pax started, but Axel ruffled his hair and took a step onto the house’s walkway.

Calex looked horrified at Pax’s uncharacteristic concern. “Oh gods, what’s wrong with him?”

Kally didn’t know. She’d never seen Pax like this. He stepped up the house’s walkway in a sort of trance, mindlessly fingering items on his utility belt. The weasels hopped around his and Axel’s feet as they stopped at the floor mat outside the door. Baller phased in and out of the wood, like he was waiting for the others to join him.

Kally jumped off the edge of the van, taking her messenger bag with her. She had to debate on shutting the doors, since she felt like the slam would shatter the Pax boys’ weird hypnosis. Finally, she shut the doors as quietly as she could. She, Calex with Merry in tow, and Euna warily followed after the boys.

“Who lives here?” Euna asked.

“Not sure,” Axel said, examining the peephole in the wooden door. “It could be a trap, but…” He turned to give them a huge grin. “I think it’s one of our old friends.”

Pax’s hand violently shook as he reached out and knocked in a short rhythm of one beat, four fast beats, and two slower beats.

Kally wasn’t sure what she was expecting. A monster? A Titan? Some super badass demigod with a lightsaber?

She certainly wasn’t expecting a grumpy, middle-aged gentleman to open the door with a scowl on his face. He scanned them with the ferocity of someone who could rip your brain out with telekinesis, flip it over to read everything about you, and shove it in with utter disinterest and the mild irritation of time poorly wasted.

Both Axel and Pax jumped backwards.

The weasels darted in. The man didn’t seem to notice.

“Children,” he growled. “It’s a bit late to be selling cookies. Go home before I call the cops on you for trespassing.” One of his hands lingered behind the door, like he had a phone ready.

Opposite his anger, Kally could hear the gentle strumming of a stringed instrument inside. The rift was melodious, tragic, and beautiful.

Axel swallowed. His jaw had dropped. “You—you—you’re Dr. Howard Claymore!” he exclaimed in a way that told everyone he’d never met this man but had always wanted to. “Your works in atheism, agnosticism, the afterlife, and, science are—how you discuss their use to subjugate—I mean—the most recent release on your post-mortem notes about Road to Death…” Axel trailed off, seeming to realize something he said didn’t line up.

All of them stared at Axel.

Axel sheepishly coughed into one hand.
If possible, the man’s scowl deepened. “God is real, kid, and so is Santa,” he said bitterly and slammed the door shut.

They shared a moment of confused silence.

Pax glared at Axel. “You sounded more fanboyish than Calex seeing Annabeth do homework.”

“Hey,” Calex snapped. “Annabeth is brilliant. Now who was that bloke?”

“You ask ‘em, teddy bear,” Merry muttered sleepily from his arms.

Euna sighed and stared off at their surroundings. She placed a careful hand on top of Backbiter’s pommel.

Axel shrugged, flustered. “Sorry, he’s an author that Alabaster got me really into who’s really good at pointing out how institutions are used to violate the rights of—that’s not important—”

Pax rolled his eyes and knocked on the door again.

Kally assumed the man would yell at them to go away. She felt the sheer fight-or-flight of embarrassment at having the wrong house. But the door immediately swung open again.

This time, Claymore seemed enraged. Seeing the fury in his gaze, she felt like this man held more than a cell phone on the other side of the door and that finding cover would be wise. She resisted the urge to duck behind Calex. “Listen, if you don’t—”

“We’re here for Alabaster,” Pax interrupted.

The man paused. Those fierce eyes examined them thoroughly.

“Tell him… the Triple A Chimera is here for him,” Pax added, popping his cheeks at the end.

“I see,” Claymore said. The anger deflated. After a pause that felt as calculated as a showman’s, he continued, “Wait here.”

Claymore shut the door, much gentler than before.

There was some conversation inside, too soft for Kally to hear. The knob didn’t fully latched. She felt uncomfortable, standing out here in the cold, waiting for the door of a stranger’s house to open a third time, when they should have been rushing off to Camp Half-Blood in the Paxmobile. It suddenly struck her that she doubted the keys had been inside the van. Plus, they still needed somewhere for Euna, Pax, and Axel to hide out until they figured out what to do.

If Pax hadn’t been agitated earlier, his fingers danced across his utility belt now. He rocked back and forth absentmindedly until Axel put a hand on his shoulder. “The Triple A Chimera is here for him?” Axel asked.

Kally could hear Pax’s grin as he said, “Oh, come on. He couldn’t have lost his humor completely since we last saw him.”

The door lurched open.

Kally gasped and reflexively gripped her Argonaut statue.

A tall brunette teen had a handgun aimed at Pax’s head. His fingers shook violently. “Hands up and back up,” he commanded. Though his freckled face looked determined, his voice cracked.
Pax yelped, went rigid, and put his hands up. Tears welled in his eyes as he cried, “*Cho!* Can people I love *please* stop aiming guns at my head?!”

Much slower, Axel put his hands in the air. The carefree anticipation had evaporated. His gaze narrowed. As subtly as he could, he glanced back at Kally and Euna.

She hadn’t realized it, but she’d pulled the Argonaut statue halfway out of her messenger bag. Euna gripped her xiphos. Calex swallowed while looking helplessly down at Merry, like he didn’t know how to inform this guy that he couldn’t put his “hands up.”

For a sickening instant, Kally could perfectly picture Kouta, Pax’s eldest brother, stepping out of a shack in California with a gun aimed at Pax. That’s how they’d ended up in Santiago’s temple. That’s how Joey ended up dying.

Last time, they’d listened to Axel and stood down.

This time, Kally wasn’t going to listen to Axel if he told them to stand down.

“Alabaster,” Axel said the name like each syllable was weighed down by a landmine, “Put—”

“Shut up, Axel,” the boy snarled. “I don’t know how the Romans twisted you into doing this but, I want you off my property right now. I can see your little van of reinforcements at the end of the cul-de-sac. Take them and get out of here.”

In the silhouetted porch lighting, Kally couldn’t quite tell, but Alabaster’s face seemed sickly pale. He looked scared. Maybe not scared… hurt.

“We’re not Roman,” Euna stated. Although Kally didn’t dare another glance over, she had a feeling Euna meant that as a confused statement more than a diplomatic one.

Kally wondered why—

“You think I’m dumb enough to fall for you flipping your shirts inside out?” Alabaster demanded. “A Cyclops could still tell those say SPQR on the other side.”

Everyone but Merry glanced down at their purple clothing.

Kally had forgotten about their shirts.

“Actually, funny story—” Pax started.

“Shut it, Ajax,” Alabaster snapped. “I don’t want any of your circular half-truths.”

Kally dug her fingers into the Argonaut statue. She got the vibe that Alabaster didn’t want to shoot any of them. He didn’t have the queer malice of Kouta. He wanted to avoid a fight. Their intentions did look bad. If he was from Kronos’ army and all the Romans wanted to kill those people and they’d come in Roman uniform with the weapons they grabbed from the van…

Kally cleared her throat. When she spoke, her voice shook quietly, but she tried to sound firm. “A-Axel, Pax, let’s leave. We don’t need the van.”

Or someone else to get shot.

Alabaster’s eyes flicked to her messenger bag, up to her face, then back to Pax. “Is she a charm speaker?” he asked.
Axel sighed. “N—”

“I didn’t ask you. You’d lie about your chiich’s grave if it suited you,” Alabaster said, with, from what Kally heard in the voice, intent to insult.

Axel glowered.

“If she is a charm speaker, she’s clearly a really bad one,” Pax half-joked through tears.

“Speak directly,” Alabaster ordered.

Pax stared at Alabaster for a beat of tense silence. Another tear dripped off his chin onto his shirt to make a darkened wet patch. The hands he had in the air sagged down a few inches and his shoulder slumped. “She is not a charm speaker,” Pax said. “She’s a daughter of Apollo’s Greek aspect.”

Kally and Calex stared at Pax. Whatever magic children of Hecate knew must have been powerful stuff to make Pax answer a question directly.

Alabaster’s eyes widened, like what Pax said made him nervous. He glanced back into the house for a split second before refocusing his gaze on Pax.

“We’re not here to arrest you or hurt you or steal your Reese’s Sticks,” Pax finished. He bit his lower lip, trying not to sob.

Axel popped his cheeks.

Alabaster frowned. Although he still trembled, he slowly lowered his handgun.

As soon as the point was aimed at the floor mat, Axel bolted forward and slammed into him.

Kally waited to hear the gun go off.

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Beta notes from Mel: THIS IS NOT HOW I THOUGHT THIS WOULD TURN OUT JACK!! WHY DID YOU HAVE TO MAKE IT HURT! DO NOT HARM THE SQUISHY ALABASTER!

Author notes: Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed! You’re about to read one of my favorite introductions next week in The Witch Boy and the Guitar-Wielding Maniac, where the book picks up a slightly different tone. I hope you liked Son of Magic by Haley Riordan as much as I did and are excited to get more of Alabaster!
Kalypso: The Witch Boy and the Guitar-Wielding Maniac

Twenty: Kalypso

The Witch Boy and the Guitar-Wielding Maniac

Kally tensed. She expected Axel to tear his teeth into Alabaster’s neck, for blood to explode backwards when Alabaster fired his weapon, for the bullet to rip through Axel and stray into her, Merry, Calex, or Euna and, then, they’d have to watch as another one of their friends died.

The gun never went off.

Instead, Axel scooped the thinner boy off the ground in a tackle-hug and spun him around. When Pax darted forward, Axel dragged his little brother into the bear-hug.

“Alabaster! Alabaster!” Pax giggled with glee. Once Axel had picked him up, Pax threw his arms around Alabaster and nuzzled into his shoulder.

“You’re alive!” Axel laughed.

The shift in atmosphere was bizarre. Kally had to wonder if Merry was casting some kind of party power in her sleep. Sleep walking party. Could that be a thing? She’d have to ask Phobetor next time he haunted her.

The whirling mass of the Triple A Chimera crashed onto the floor when Axel’s foot caught on a rug. The three fell into a pile of laughter and tears.

Kally felt like the rest of them were intruding on a private reunion.

“Should we..?” Calex started to ask, motioning with Merry towards the van. He got the same invasive vibe.

Kally wanted to nod. Especially since she didn’t know Alabaster, she felt uncomfortable seeing him sob into Axel’s shoulder. But it was like watching fauns fight over a denari—for some macabre reason, she couldn’t look away.

“I—I thought you died in—in the Slaughter of Mount Othrys—” Alabaster hiccupped. Pax wounded himself around the overwhelmed teen from the side, still nuzzling into his neck. “A—after we got into our big argument—”

From what Kally could see, even Axel’s eyes were red rimmed. He released Alabaster with one arm to lick a thumb and rub under Alabaster’s eyes. “Hey, Witch Boy, you got some hemlock in your eyes again,” he said.

Alabaster hiccupped again. Kally could tell he wished he hadn’t cried. He sniffed and rubbed his sleeve against his face vigorously. With how pale he was… Kally knew he’d have the same blotchy, red-faced problem she had when crying.

Axel let go of Alabaster and Pax and stood up. He patted Alabaster’s shoulder, like their hug and the tears hadn’t happened.

Pax, meanwhile, clung to Alabaster like the boy might fall apart if he released him.
“Ajax,” Axel sighed, “Give him some room.”

“No!” Pax said. “No one can make me!” He burrowed in closer and kissed Alabaster’s neck.

Alabaster touched a scribble on his black pants. The rune glowed green. Any part of Pax touching him flashed into flames. The fire lasted a split second, but Pax still screamed, flopped backwards, and slapped his lips, arms, and legs.

Alabaster rose to his feet, and dusted off his shirt and pants like nothing had happened.

Kally went numb watching the last part. She hadn’t even noticed the middle aged man standing off to the side, tentatively holding a handgun. Claymore watched everything silently until then. Now, he cleared his throat, “I guess we have evening guests. Now that we’re done holding them at gunpoint, should we offer them some tea?” the way he asked it was more like a wry reminder.

“Of course,” Alabaster said. He straightened and nodded to Calex, Merry, Euna, and Kally. “You may come in. There’s much to discuss.”

The house was meticulously kept. When Kally walked into the living room, she felt horrifically intimidated. There were two ceiling-to-floor bookshelves that would have normally made her heart skip, but she found one inhabited with textbooks on mythology, religion, and theology. The other side was stacked with ancient looking tomes in Latin and other various languages, chemistry textbooks, and occult books. Her priest would have set this place on fire and then put out the flames with holy water.

There were two whiteboards on one wall. One had architectural designs on it. The other had more odd looking symbols sloppily scrawled, in a pattern that looked like a chemistry formula. There was a couch with a simple coffee table near a fireplace. Other than that, the place was simply furnished and felt quiet and comfortable.

Somewhere above them, someone strummed a guitar of some kind, playing something sad and lovely that Kally recognized from one of her dad’s Beatles albums. *Yesterday?* She couldn’t remember but it must have been a recording, since the music sounded too perfect.

Calex stopped dead in his tracks when he entered the living room.

“What is it?” she asked and glanced at him before remembering she hated making eye contact with Calex.

Fortunately, Calex was too distracted. He pointed above the fireplace.

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Fortunately, Calex was too distracted. He pointed above the fireplace.

There were three helmets on a mantel above the fireplace. She immediately recognized Axel’s *Leonis Caput* helmet: an imperial gold, Roman style helmet with feline attributes and red, flowing plumes. On the opposite side, there was a bronze, Greek-style helmet with a diamond shape, similar to a serpent’s mouth. Fangs sprouted from the bottom of the mask. Pax’s *Silver Tongued Snake* mask. The last one in the center, she’d never seen before.

This one was made from a giant goat’s skull, with eyeholes where the goat’s would have
Strange, black metal warped and curled along the bone. Twisting black antlers erupted on either side.

Yep, her priest would have definitely told her God would forgive her for a quick act of arson.

“Those,” Pax said gleefully, “are our helmets.” Helpful, as always.

There weren’t enough chairs, but Claymore seemed to prefer standing by one of the bookshelves. Upon a second glance, she realized there were more guns tucked away amongst the books.

Was Claymore this guy’s… father? This guy’s paranoid, psychotic father? Other than the height, they didn’t look alike.

Kally felt awfully confused.

“Did you just finish infiltrating the Romans?” Alabaster asked. He still looked shaken, but scrambled to regain his composure. Now that Kally could see him in full lighting, he had brown hair, a freckled face, and eyes a purer green than her own. He was taller than his thinness warranted, like a huff from Mrs. O’Leary might send him airborne and up to Hemera’s floating palace. He wore a dark grey sweatshirt and black pajama pants. Something about him reminded Kally of someone she might run into in her Dice & Drakin groups, or theater, or… something reminded her vaguely of Nico Di Angelo.

Maybe it was the hollowness of his eyes, like he’d seen something no one should and hadn’t had proper recompense for it.

Kally was confused when her cheeks warmed. She chose a seat on the floor across from the couch with a stairwell at her back. She knelt and sat on top of her feet. Euna dropped onto her other side, snatching up some carrots from a relish tray. Calex set Merry on the only armchair in the room and joined them on Euna’s other side.

Pax beamed with excitement as he plopped onto the couch beside Alabaster. Despite being set on fire earlier, Pax kept in close proximity to the boy. “I released all their weasels and stole a stick from one of Rome’s praetor,” he said proudly.

Alabaster wouldn’t make eye contact with Pax. He paused in pouring tea from a ceramic pot into four matching teacups and four assorted mugs. “That’s exactly the kind of revenge I’d expect out of you, Ajax,” he said evenly.

Pax continued with the same energy. “And Axel bit off the same praetor’s ear. Here, I saved it for you.” He reached into his pocket and withdrew Frank’s bloodied body part.

Kally felt her stomach flip. That thing was starting to smell.

“Oh, gods,” Calex hissed, scrambling backwards from getting a cup of tea.

“Ajax!” Axel snapped. If he hadn’t been sitting on Alabaster’s other side, she was certain he’d twist Pax’s ear off to add to the collection.

Alabaster slowly set the teapot down and stared at Pax.

Pax flicked the ear between his fingers like it was a tempting offer. “The ear belonged to a shape shifter.”
Alabaster’s neutral expression weakened. He snatched up a napkin. As he reached out with the napkin, he said, in a scarcely placid voice, “So you know, Lamia tried to kill me for months after the end of the war.”

Pax’s smile faded, replaced by slack-jawed horror. He looked at the coffee table and shrank away from Alabaster.

Alabaster paused and turned an apologetic frown to Claymore. “Excuse me, Dr. Claymore. Would you be able to get the formaldehyde and—”

A disgusted, but resigned, expression traced over Claymore’s wrinkles. He took another napkin to pluck up the one holding the ear. “I’ll give you children a moment to catch up.” Then he disappeared through a doorway that Kally assumed hid away a basement.

Kally hadn’t realized it, but a moment was exactly what they needed. Kally vaguely remembered Pax talking about Alabaster, but she didn’t know who he was, or if he could help them. There was a sleeping bag in the van that belonged to him, the one that Pax loaned her when they’d camped outside. For some reason, the thought made her squirm.

Pax regained his buoyancy as he went around the room, introducing everyone, by their name, godly parent, and rating on Pax’s coolness scale. Merry half-woke up for introductions, blurrily searching around their environment in confusion. Calex rated exceptionally low on the coolness scale. Euna had almost eaten the entire relish tray when he introduced her. Pax saved Kally for last, and Kally already knew why. She was hoping she’d have a chance to stop him before the embarrassment melted off her face.

“And Alabaster, this is Kally, my best friend and sort-of-not—”

“Not,” she corrected, shifting so she could sit on the floor and pull her knees against her chest.

“—girlfriend. Kally, meet Alabaster, my other best friend and ex-ish-sort-of-not—”

Pax abruptly stopped. For an instant, Kally wondered if Alabaster had touched another rune on his clothing for *diverting awkward situations.* Instead, Pax frantically shook his head, eyes wide with panic. “N—no. Never mind. Don’t meet each other. As a matter of fact—you two should never talk, have never talked! Kally, you’ll um, sit in the other room and Alabaster—we’ll get walkie-talkies—or—”

Kally hugged her knees and leaned to the side so she had a better look at Alabaster, past the teapot. He looked as annoyed about this conversation as she felt miserable.

“It’s sheer optimism to think his persistence or weirdness ever becomes reasonable, isn’t it?” she asked.

Alabaster gave a genuine laugh. “Yes. He gets worse with time.” He gave her a wry smile.

Kally felt her cheeks get hot. She lowered her face down to press the lower half into her knees. For an instant, she’d forgotten everyone else was in the room when she said that or that Alabaster would respond.

“No—stop that,” Pax said, leaning forward so he could put a hand between Kally and Alabaster in a cutting motion. “Don’t bond over your mutual annoyance of me.”
“You’re making it worse, you dumb bloke,” Calex said. “If there’s a prophecy, it’s already sorted.”

Kally paused. Prophecy? For once, Calex didn’t sound irritated with Pax, just… pitying. Alabaster looked as confused as she. She opened her mouth to ask, when a horrific cacophony creaked on the stairwell behind her.

“Three surrogate brothers,
And two tragic lovers,
Reunite.

At the toss of the coin,
To spit in the sordid,
Mask of Strife.”[2]

Kally thought she’d see a monster, or someone possessed by a prophetic spirit, lurching in a backwards crabwalk down the stairs.

The sound was repulsive, like the squealing of animals that can sense the oncoming of their death. Kally felt nauseous. Some instinctual revulsion and sense of self-preservation told her to GET OUT. Euna dropped a carrot. Merry shot awake. Axel and Pax put their hands to their ears. They gawked in horror at whatever was in the stairwell.

Alabaster stood up.

But once the poem—was that shrieking a poem?—was done, she could hear the soothing strum of a beautiful guitar melody behind her.

“Jack, I told you to stay upstairs,” Alabaster said.

Kally turned.

Instead of an abomination, there was a guy. He was probably college aged from his gaunt features.[3] He had a flare of short, flaming red hair, accented with occasional black streaks. He wore a Get Scared band shirt, black skinny jeans, and brilliantly colored converses. He held an acoustic guitar. His black-painted fingertips continued to flash across the guitar neck without pause as he descended.

His smile was disarming and his eyes flicked about the room with a queer anticipation, like he expected a clown to pop out of one corner with flowers and a hatchet. His skin was pale, except for the queasy green, purple, and black bruises encircling his neck. A thin collar settled below the marks. He was unhealthily thin but attractive, how Kally would expect the singer of a teen angst band to look.

“How could I? I heard Axel and Ajax. Welcome home, boys!” Jack said with a grin. He stopped playing, so he could extend his arms out, despite being too far away for a hug. Although he spoke softer, so it was more tolerable, Kally refrained from grinding her teeth at his words. The noise was wretched.

“Jack…” Axel stared at him in shock. “What happened to your voice?”
Pax snapped out of his horror long enough to raise a trembling hand, like he was in a classroom. “Yea, pause on that for a second. Uh, you’re dead. I watched you die. Like blood everywhere. Broken limbs. You were there...?”

Kally had to wonder if it was rude to remind someone they were dead. She remembered Pax saying something about one of his childhood caretakers named Jack dying.

Jack lowered a hand to rub his bruised neck. “Oh, yes. I got to see God and Hell and what Tartarus was like during this time of year. Hot.”

When he said it, Jack twitched, and clutched his guitar. His eyes flicked down and his fingers rapidly went through the motions of tuning the instrument. Everything sounded perfect. He sighed in relief, shaking.

Alabaster’s fingers hovered over a rune on his sleeve. He frowned, slowly lowering his hand. “The Doors of Death opened last summer and Gaea called upon all of Olympia’s strongest enemies from Tartarus to help fight the gods. She brought him back from the dead.”

Jack laughed, a horrible cackle that rolled like broken glass in a metal bowl. “She patched me all up, except my windpipe. She thought it would be more fitting.” He closed his eyes and hummed, though it came out more grating, “The whims of nature once obeyed you because you had the hymn of an angel staggered to earth. Now the ground and air will wither for you out of disgust.’ The Scourge of New Rome at her service. But I never got to join the party. She sent Al’s sister to kill him, and I wasn’t going to be a dog for someone who messes with our Al.”

“Don’t call me that,” Alabaster said, glaring.

At the mention of Alabaster’s sister, Pax sank a little more into the couch.

Jack pouted, opening his arms back up. “So... hug a zombie?”

Kally, at this point, had no idea what was going on. Alabaster’s sister? Was that Lamia? And Rome’s worst enemies come back from Tartarus... she remembered hearing something about that, maybe from Grover a few months ago. From a glance around, Euna had lost all interest, munching on the last of the carrots. Calex and Merry seemed alarmed, noticing something she hadn’t.

“Mmmm, Paxy boys,” Merry said warily. “Why exactly do you have us chatting with these fine specimens of character?”

Axel blinked and shook his head, making Jack shrug and strum his guitar. Jack didn’t seem to notice her or the others, although Axel’s eyes flicked from Merry, Calex, to Kally. Axel’s jaw clenched. From the hardened expression, Kally had the distinct feeling Axel had done something wrong, but didn’t want them to know. “Euna, Ajax, and I might be able to keep low here for a bit.” He glanced at Alabaster. “Romans are after us.”

Alabaster nodded. “They shouldn’t be able to find you unless they already know the house is here or are led in by someone. The rune circle is designed to keep unwelcome demigods from seeing the property.”

Calex frowned and set his cup of tea down. “I wonder how Leo found us back at the club. Percy or one of the others could have Iris Messaged him to join up, but I didn’t think they were chatting.”

“Percy Jackson,” Alabaster repeated with enough disgust to make Kally uncomfortable. She
didn’t know Percy personally; she’d only run into him a few times at camp before today. But he was always referred to as a hero.

“There a problem, mate?” Calex asked, his fingers tapping the pencil pouch in his pocket.

Jack tilted his head, eyes examining Merry like he was trying to count every pore on her face. “You’re an Ol-sissy, aren’t you?” he asked.

“What?” Euna asked. She’d run out of carrots.

“Olympic sympathizers,” Alabaster clarified. As he took another sip of tea, his eyes narrowed at the purple Roman shirts.

Kally felt her stomach churn. What?

“No,” Axel answered for them. Pax made a low cutting motion with his hand, in the least subtle shut up she’d seen in a long time. Calex scowled at him. Merry cocked her jaw to the side. Kally pulled her messenger bag into her lap. She thought about the note in her journal, and felt nauseous.

Without pause, Axel continued, “We needed the Golden Net to capture Santiago, and a vehicle that could give us a quick escape if something went wrong. Eris said it was in Camp Half-Blood’s Bunker Nine. We couldn’t get in there, but, if we made friends…”

Jack gave that glass shattering chuckle. His eyes drifted from Merry, to Calex, to Euna. “So, you brought us some—” He paused on Kally.

Kally wasn’t used to getting a lot of attention. She didn’t like how much she’d been getting that night, and liked it even less when Jack’s eyes widened with glee. He took two steps towards her, reaching a hand out to her hair.

Axel and Pax both stood up.

“Hey!” was all Kally could get out. She gripped her Argonaut statue and cringed when she heard Jack’s awful song:

“Through every forest, above the trees,
Within my stomach, scraped off my knees—”

Pax stepped in front of her left side; Axel, her right. Jack disappeared from her line of sight, beyond their tattered jeans. Kally cold see Alabaster put his hand back over the rune on his sleeve. She felt queasy when she realized how much it resembled the collar around Jack’s neck.

“Not ‘ha ha’ funny, Jak-Jak,” Pax squeaked. “She’s a friend.”

“—I’ll drink the honey inside your hive,
You are the reason I stayed alive—”[4]

“Jack, she’s not a daughter of Apollo,” Axel hissed, his voice tight, “She’s a daughter of Aphrodite.”

When Kally had first been told she was one of her parents must have cheated on the other one with a god, she’d been in denial. Now that she’d accepted it, she almost reflexively corrected Axel that her father was Apollo. Why does that even matter? Dread froze her mouth shut.
Jack hadn’t been armed with anything but a guitar. Not that she was the best fighter, but she had to wonder what they were afraid that stick would do, especially in front of everyone.

“Dr. Cenote talked about this,” Alabaster said, calmly, “Go sit on the stairs.”

Axel and Pax tensed.

Then the guitar strumming resumed.

They relaxed.

Alabaster sank back onto the couch, looking exhausted. Axel and Pax went to sit back beside him, but Pax paused to tug Kally to her feet. She didn’t resist when they led her further from the stairs, to take Axel’s spot. Axel stood beside her like a sentry and Pax wrapped an arm around her shoulder. She shoved him off, but was glad to have the boys on either side of her.

Jack plopped onto the stairs. He gave her a weird smile. “My father is a whore. You look like one of my many siblings.”

Kally wanted to ask what he would have done if she was one of his many siblings. Something told her Jack knew more about Apollo than anyone in Cabin Seven. Maybe he could give her some clues as to what happened between Apollo and her mother, clues she wouldn’t want to hear.

But the hardened glance Axel shot her made the message clear: keep your mouth shut.

“Common mistake,” she said instead.

“So, Pax boys, your friends seem like interesting darlings. How long are we staying with them?” Merry asked. She looked pale, clutching her jacket. For a sickening moment, Kally realized that Merry was too weak to stop a fight.

“And, what in Hades was that about, mate?” Calex demanded with a scowl. He’d assembled his bow and held three fingers tentatively over the string.

Euna’s fist wrapped around Backbiter’s hilt. She rolled what Kally assumed were seeds in her other hand.

At least she knew her friends had her back if a guitar-wielding maniac ever came after her.

“Jack’s got a creative view on the world,” Pax supplied shakily.

“Euphemisms don’t suit the situation well,” Alabaster said and took a sip of tea.

“As my mom used to say, ‘I have a demon in my head,’” Jack said with that disarming grin. “But, don’t worry. If you’re friends of my boys, I won’t hurt you.”

Kally glanced from Axel to Pax. They were both shaking.

“On purpose,” Alabaster growled. “Jack had been medicated for paranoid schizophrenia since he was a child. Spending time in the Fields of Punishment didn’t help. We’re working on it. Now, I want to hear your full story to decide if you’re allowed to stay.”

Kally swallowed. She glanced at Merry—whose question had been ignored—and Calex—who hadn’t set his bow down. She was beginning to think staying here might be more dangerous than being captured by Romans.
I’m sorry I took so long to post! Otakon slayed me last weekend and I haven’t fully recovered. Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoy! :D

Footnotes:

[1] Mel would like to point out, a huff from Mrs. O’Leary might push anyone backwards.


[3] So, Jack the character and Jack the author look nothing alike… just had to state that here >>”Other than, maybe, a shared fashion sense.

[4] Nine Inch Nails, Closer lyrics. However, Jack altered the verb in the last sentence. Although I love Trent Resner, I think the Asking Alexandria version is better for Jack.
As Axel told their story, Alabaster forced his hand to stop shaking. Each time he picked up the teacup, he had to concentrate not to spill. But he didn’t want to look weak around Axel or Jack, and he didn’t want Pax to see any emotion on his face.

He tried to pay full attention to everyone’s reactions as Axel spoke of returning to his father, Santiago Pax, running away again, kidnapping Rachel Elizabeth Dare, bargaining with Hephaestus for Leo Valdez’s location, trading for the reforging of Kronos’s scythe, about how Santiago Pax had caught his sons, murdered their friend, Joey Song, and how the daughter of Demter, Euna Song, had ripped Santiago and his men apart from the inside.

Jack supplied appropriate music for the tale, strumming into a crescendo when Euna faced off with Eris, before Phobetor lulled them all to sleep. In too brief a sentence, Axel ended with, “We ended up in New Rome, the Romans realized who we were, and tried to capture us. We ran.”

“How about congratulations on killing your pops?” Jack cheered. He folded his middle finger and index finger down to make a rock on symbol before going back to his five string base.

Two of Axel’s friends, the tall boy with ebony skin and the Indian girl with curves worthy of a Renaissance painting, were ill at ease during the retelling. They exchanged a glance when Axel mentioned Rachel. Though, the girl was so exhausted, she had trouble not nodding off in his chair.

The Pax brothers must have suffered, crawling back to their father after the Slaughter of Mount Othrys, withering under his tyranny until Eris told Pax there was a way out, and a way to fight back. Seeing them alive gave Alabaster hope.

“Do you think Eris and the others are staging a strike against Mount Olympus?” Alabaster asked.

Axel shook his head. “Knowing Eris, it’s far pettier than that. I think she only wants Camp Half-Blood, though I’m not sure what her plan of attack is. She’s kidnapped Hemera and has the Olympians arguing amongst themselves.”

Alabaster frowned. He wondered if the Pax brothers could convince Eris and the other minor gods to aim at something bigger. If they joined forces, they would have access to a god-killing weapon and a net to capture deities. They could never do another all-out assault on Olympus, but that wasn’t the Sabotage and Magic Unit’s style.

Though, that could wait until morning. Everyone looked exhausted, and Alabaster was too numb to discuss battle plans.
Pax tugged at the ends of his sweater and Alabaster had an uncomfortable memory of giddy, twelve-year-old Ajax, brown and hazel eyes wide with awe, asking, “Can you really do magic?”

Alabaster shook off the memory. Pax had grown up a lot in the last year. His shoulders had broadened, foreshadowing that he’d have a build closer to Axel later in life. His cheeks still retained their round cuteness, but his jaw line had hardened. His smile still held that air of innocent mischief, like Pax hadn’t been traumatized on multiple occasions. Above all, one thing hadn’t changed: he was still short.

“Where’s our Potter been?” Pax asked.

If Alabaster hadn’t already used up the fire rune, he’d set Pax ablaze on the principle of the matter. Though, hearing the stupid nickname gave him nostalgia. The smile it brought dribbled away at the thought of the Battle of Manhattan.

“Hundreds died. The Olympians… spared me in exchange for Hecate’s compliance with the peace,” Alabaster explained.

“They blackmailed her,” Axel snarled, “At least we can rely on them to use their traditional methods.”

Alabaster felt some relief at Axel’s anger. Although Alabaster knew the nightmares he’d been having the last few months were ridiculous, he couldn’t help but wince at the thought of Axel becoming a Roman or sympathetic to their enemies.

“Blackmailed her?” Kally asked. Alabaster could barely see her poking around Pax’s shoulder. She’d finally stopped shaking from Jack’s approach.

Axel and Pax must not have given her their welcoming speech yet.

“He can give you the full riveting lecture tomorrow, so you have a slightly higher chance of staying awake during the Alternative History of Olympus. Or, as I like to call it, Watching Paint Dry Part II: Too Many Shades of Grey,” Pax said to her.

Although Alabaster knew he’d never met Kally before, she reminded him of something he couldn’t place. Before Alabaster could figure it out, Pax tugged Alabaster’s sweater again. “So you were adopted by a famous writer after the battle. That seems legit.”

Adopted…? Alabaster shook his head. “No. He can’t legally adopt me; he’s dead.” His mind spun. At the thought of explaining from the beginning, he looked away from Pax. “I assume you’re familiar with Gaea’s rise to power?”

Everyone nodded, except Merry. The girl’s tangled, shoulder length hair splayed on the armrest, where she was napping fitfully. Calex’s bow was still in his lap. He held it in one hand, the other touching Merry’s sleeve, like his fingertips were her anchor to this world. His grey eyes narrowed in suspicion at Alabaster. If he really was an Olympic sympathizer…

The other girl, Euna, watched absently as Nietzsche, Xbalanque, and Hanapu thundered into the room, rolled under the couch, and rumbled out of sight.

“Gaea sent Lamia to kill me, so Lamia could become the leader of Hecate’s children.” Although Alabaster wasn’t looking at Pax, he could feel the smaller boy sink more into the couch. “I killed her over and over, but she wouldn’t die. So I sought the help of an expert on death, Professor Howard Claymore.”
Axel nodded, though Alabaster caught a glint of his ears perking up in excitement. He still stood beside Kally protectively, but he looked away from Jack when Jack made an uncomfortable tongue gesture at him.

“So, Clay swooped in all vampire hunter style and kicked ass?” Pax asked. His voice shook, though he tried to sound playful.

“No, he died, as I said,” Alabaster explained, “Mother used his life force for a spell to separate Lamia and me. Then she brought him back to life as a Mist form.”

“Mist form? Like the weasels?” Euna asked, pointing to where Nietzsche scrambled to crawl out from under the couch. Xbalanque and Hanapu tackled him back down.

Alabaster nodded. He guessed Claymore wouldn’t like that comparison, but it was a sufficient example. What was taking Claymore so long downstairs? The professor must have been stalling to give them more time alone. Alabaster just hoped Claymore remembered to snip off a section of the ear to be dried into a powder before he tucked it into Alabaster’s ingredients cabinet.

“Claymore and I were theorizing about how to bring the children of Hecate some peace, though someone else must have risen to power in my absence—”

“Lou Ellen,” Axel supplied. “She’s the head counselor of Hecate’s new cabin.”

Alabaster scowled. That name sounded familiar. His head ached thinking about it, and he had the nauseating feeling he was forgetting something important. And a cabin to Hecate? Next time he could contact his mother, he’d have to ask her, though, that was the other problem.

“Claymore and I were also researching how lucid dreaming can help with dream visions. I __”

Alabaster tensed. He didn’t want to talk about his nightmares. Demigods’ dreams were never just dreams, but normally Alabaster had more control over what he saw. Something had been infringing on his nighttime wanderings, and it wasn’t as pleasant as the times Morpheus decided to mess with him.

From the apprehension on everyone’s face, Alabaster could tell he wasn’t the only one having nightmares.

“We’ve all been having dream-prophecies,” Kally spoke up. When Alabaster glanced over at her, she blushed and shifted like she was going to lean back into the couch. After a pause, she exhaled and lifted her chin. “That’s what Phobetor has been doing to us. He’s been giving all the other demigods in Camp Half-Blood and New Rome reruns of monsters from their pasts, but the seven—six of us have been getting dream-prophecies. What have you been dreaming about?”

The Pax brothers went pale and still. Jack strummed out something tense and high-pitched.[11]

Alabaster cupped one hand around his teacup, wishing it was warmer. He gazed at the fire in the corner, keeping his voice as even as he could. “Children of Hecate get everything in threes. I see Ajax laughing with Hermes’ Cabin beside Matthias Severre Hanson and Chris Rodriguez, giving praise to the same gods that killed my siblings. In the second, Axel is with that Roman praetor, the one that stormed Mount Othrys with Jason Grace and destroyed our home. He’s discussing joining the legion with her and that he doesn’t mind scrubbing the streets of Camp Jupiter if that’s what it takes to join…”
Alabaster didn’t want to look at his two friends. They were more than friends. Axel had become an older brother and great strategizing partner during their time at Camp Othrys. And Ajax had started off as an obnoxious puppy that followed him around camp, but later...

The thought of these two spitting at the memory of their friends fallen in battle and all the ideals they fought for... Nausea twisted his stomach.

Alabaster glanced up from the fire. Although Axel’s jaw was clenched to keep his emotions neutral, his tufted ears drooped in shame. He kept eye contact with Alabaster with calculated steadiness.

Alabaster didn’t want to look at Pax. A sense of betrayal made him tremble.

“Those are your nightmares?” Kally asked, confused. She touched her lip. “You said that you had a third one?”

He nodded. If those two had already come true—then—

“It’s also about Axel and Ajax,” he said. Alabaster tried to stop shaking. If these things were really happening, he couldn’t ignore it. But, what was he supposed to think? He’d just gotten them back, only to find out they were either considering or had already joined their enemies.

“Let’s not talk about them,” Pax suggested, “Let’s talk about happier thoughts, like Mom’s evil plan and—”

Alabaster swallowed. “Axel is hunting down Ajax in my last nightmare. He’s killing him.”

“NO!” Pax shouted and jumped to his feet, nearly knocking Kally off the couch. “NO! He’s not. It’s the Leonis Caput—and he wouldn’t do it anyway—he—he’s my older brother and Axel would never—” Tears streamed down Pax’s cheeks.

Axel closed his eyes. His brow furrowed, and he sighed in pained realization.

All three of them were having the same nightmare. Even if they had betrayed their cause, Alabaster’s stomach still churned at the thought.

“Axel—” Axel tried.

“NO!” Pax repeated. “I’m going to go storm up those stairs in protest!” he stated, stomped once, then paused to glance at Alabaster with red-rimmed eyes. “No runes are going to blow me up if I storm up those stairs, right? I need my protest to be uninterrupted.”

Alabaster waved him on numbly.

Pax pointed a finger at Axel. “And it isn’t you, and that’s not what I dreamed about anyway. I dreamed about a boar with a bowtie, thank you very much.” He huffed and scurried towards the stairs.

“Interrupted,” Jack said, snatching Pax and dragging him into his lap. Pax sniffled and squirmed, though he couldn’t have been putting up any real struggle, since Jack managed to hold onto him. “It’s okay, kid. Tartarus isn’t that bad. You’ll get to say hi to Luke and our other friends.”[2]

“Jack,” Alabaster and Axel snapped at the same time.
“What? I’m helping,” Jack protested, ruffling Pax’s hair.

“No, you’re not,” Alabaster said.

This was too much.

Alabaster glanced around the room. Kally had caught her balance on the couch and covered her mouth with one hand. Calex’s eyes had widened. Euna glared at the ground. Nietzsche, Xbalanque, and Hanapu poked their heads from under the couch to stare at them. Hanapu nipped at Xbalanque’s ear, as though to say, You know I wouldn’t try to stab you to death, right bro?

“How’d they find you?” Pax sniffled quietly into Jack’s shoulder.

“Shortly after meeting up with Claymore,” Alabaster answered, “I saw a new report that bubonic plague hit a mental health institution in New Mexico. Claymore made a few calls on my hunch and it turned out to be correct,” Alabaster said wearily. He left out the information about how much of a mess Jack was or how Claymore repeatedly suggested they rid the world of him.

Everyone was too exhausted and scared for this conversation to be productive.

“I think that’s enough for tonight.”

Alabaster jumped. He hadn’t heard Claymore come back up the stairs and reenter the living room. Since he’d become a Mist form, he was incredibly stealthy. He returned to his position beside the bookshelf, where he stored several enchanted guns should something go wrong.

“I take it these children are staying the night,” Claymore asked, “It looks like two have taken the liberty of deciding for themselves.” He nodded to where Merry was out cold on the couch and where Pax was pretending to sleep on Jack’s shoulder. Pax mustn’t have realized that Jack probably couldn’t carry him up the stairs anymore, though Alabaster bet Jack would kill both of them trying.

Alabaster nodded. “The girls can take the upstairs guest room. The boys can sleep in the attic.” He wondered how much sleep any of them were actually going to get, and how many of them would wake up screaming from nightmares.

Thanks for reading! I’m sorry the chapter is so late-things have been crazy here. I hope you enjoyed regardless! :D


[2] So, I meant to address this in the next chapter, since I’m aware Luke says he’s going to be reborn when he dies, but I haven’t found a point where it naturally works into the conversation. So, the explanation behind this will probably come up later, assuming the author doesn’t disappear into a field of leprechauns.
The next fifteen minutes progressed exactly as Alabaster expected they would. He’d locked his room up, resigned from restructuring his spell book for the night, and shut the light off. That’s when he heard the jiggling of his doorknob.

Alabaster tried to ignore it and the ache of nostalgia he felt. He didn’t have the time or energy to renew the flame incantation that he’d used earlier. Although he’d positioned his sheets precisely as he preferred them, he shoved them and the comforter down in irritation.

He’d guess it would take about three seconds before—

Someone yipped as the secondary hex on the lock shocked the picklock user.

Despite the ward, the door opened. There was no noise between that, a breath of darkness, and the weight at the edge of Alabaster’s mattress shifting down.

Alabaster thought about rolling away or summoning Claymore, but he couldn’t bring himself to do either. He’d thought… he’d thought Ajax was dead for too long to kick him out immediately. And… Alabaster thought he, himself, would be isolated and exiled from his family forever, that he’d never have an assistant helping him craft his spells, that he’d be chased by his demonic sister until she wore him down with exhaustion and taunts, that he’d die purposeless with the guilt of his siblings’ deaths shattering his sleep every night.

Pax’s lips brushed Alabaster’s ear as he whispered, “I had this horrible dream about a boar with a bowtie. Can I examine your PJs so I know not everyone has such boorish taste in night gear?”

Alabaster wanted to punch him in the face.

“You actually had a dream about a boar with a bowtie?” Alabaster asked, staring at the blackness of the ceiling. Neither of them wanted to talk about their shared nightmare. What would make Axel murder his brother? In Alabaster’s dream, assuming all their dreams were the same, Pax didn’t have a real chance to fight back, not that Pax would ever fight against Axel.

The thought threatened a stronger sense of dread. Alabaster had just gotten these two back.
Pax hesitated. “Yea. That was the one with Phobetor. He and Atē have interrupted my nightmares a few times. She… she gave me two more dreams tonight. Aphrodite occasionally kidnaps Axel on little forced dates to get him out of his nightmares, though I’m not sure how that’ll work with the whole ‘Reyna’ thing now.”

Alabaster felt like Pax had just said Percy Jackson was the best hero alive. He tensed, tightening his fingers into fists, making him swallow any sentimentality. “So, Axel really is sinking to the level of Roman scum for that witch.”

“A: irony alert on hearing you call someone a witch, B: don’t discourage Axel. We need him to breed his awesome genes with someone, and C: I’m pretty sure they broke up after he set her room on fire. Though you never know, they flirt weird.” Although Alabaster couldn’t see him, he could envision Pax shrugging. “How’s that saying go? Love always finds away even if it wrecks people emotionally and physically.”

“You would know,” Alabaster snapped. He bit his lip. That was harsher than he meant it to be.

Pax paused. Then he slipped into the sheets beside him, nuzzling into Alabaster’s neck, tickling his skin. “I know a lot more about love than I did last time you read a book to me in bed.”

Alabaster did not like his tone. “I did that because you were an illiterate child,” he said.

“I’m still illiterate. Though… I’m not a little kid anymore.”

He wasn’t. This had been less complicated when Pax’s emotions could be chalked up to a childish infatuation. And when Alabaster had a solid reason for rejecting him. Other than, “I’m straight,” since Pax had crunched that away with a bite from one of his mother’s morph apples. “I kinda wish you were,” Alabaster muttered, wondering how long before Pax crossed the line. He gave him 5 seconds.

Pax laughed and slipped a hand around Alabaster’s waistline, gracing the strap of his pajama pants. None of this was helping Alabaster relax. “Perv…” Pax whispered, “I missed you. At least I’m old enough now that it isn’t creepy when I hit on you.”

“It’ll always be creepy. You’re not guilting me into anything.”

“Not even cuddling?”

“No,” Alabaster said. He focused on the calculated calm Claymore always retained in uncomfortable situations. “It’ll set the precedent for future interactions, making you think I’ll just forgive you for everything because of external circumstances. I’m still mad at you. We’ll talk about everything in the morning, with everyone around.”

Pax sniffled. Alabaster was about to snarl at him not to fake crying, when Pax whispered, “I don’t want what happened with Dad and Uncle Frasco to happen to Axel and me.”

Alabaster wanted to curse. He remembered how scared Pax had been when he first got to Camp Othrys, and how suspicious Axel had been of everyone. They’d just seen their father beat their uncle and aunt out of existence.

For an instant, Alabaster wanted to pull Pax into a hug. They’d both suffered a lot. Most likely, neither of them had properly mourned the deaths from the war. From their story, the Pax boys had lost the rest of their siblings, Hiro and Lapis, to Eris. Pax’s family was crumbling.

Then Alabaster remembered everything with Lamia and how Pax joined Camp Half-Blood.
He pinched Pax’s hand and removed it from his waistline. Alabaster sat up, not caring how Pax hiccupsed and said, “W-witch Boy, I’m not gonna pull anything. I just needed to talk—”

“We’ll talk tomorrow. Go to sleep,” Alabaster commanded. He got out of bed and snatched his spell book off the nightstand. Ignoring Pax as best he could, Alabaster made his way around the dark room, shutting the door behind him.

He sighed in relief when he didn’t hear Pax shuffling in the room to get up.

There was no way he could sleep now. He needed fresh air and something to make his head stop spinning.

Despite the cold, he made his way downstairs, past the helmets hung in the living room, past Hanapu, Xbalanque, and Nietzsche curled by the roaring fireplace, to the back door.

He was surprised to see someone on the back porch. Kally sat on the top step, hunched over a notebook. She stared up at the cloudless sky, at the brilliant moon, like she was waiting for Artemis to high five her.[1]

Before everyone settled down, he’d offered them a change of clothing to sleep in. He frowned to see Kally wore his oversized Mist sweater that one of his siblings made him. He knew it read *Hecate’s Babes* on the front and *Witches and Bitches* on the back. He couldn’t remember which siblings gave it to him, but did remember them swearing that Pax had nothing to do with the construction.

Had she not glanced back at him, he would have headed back inside. When she startled, he exhaled, watching his breath steam out in the silvery light. “Did Ajax try to break into your room?” he guessed.

She hesitated. “Um… I’m not sure… well… yes, he did. Someone tried to come in and stepped on Euna. You really don’t want to step on Euna when she’s sleeping.”

Alabaster wondered if Pax was limping when he crept into his room. Alabaster stepped closer to Kally, wishing he’d put on some shoes instead of just socks. From what he could see, Kally’s feet and legs were wrapped in one of the Triple A sleeping bags: his.[2]

Something about seeing Kally in his sweater and sleeping bag made Alabaster pause. She wore glasses, the ones he saw inside her messenger bag when he went through everything.

“Do you mind if I…” he gestured beside her.

Kally lifted up the edge of the sleeping bag to offer the material where Morpheus signed his name. Alabaster had only meant to sit down, not to share the sleeping bag, but the mischievous, twinkling grin on the fabric reminded him of how warm it was.

Alabaster sat beside Kally, wrapping the other half of the sleep bag around his feet.

She blushed and stared down at her notebook. “You looked cold.”

“Thank you,” he said. Then Alabaster realized he’d done something horrifying: he’d sat within a foot of someone he didn’t know without any conversation prompt beyond sharing a kinda-sorta-not-ex-boyfriend. At Camp Othrys, he was always working on some project that he could talk about, but he doubted she’d know anything about how concealment incantations cast during REM
sleep might affect lucid dreaming.

The moonlight made her skin glow in contrast with her hair. She must have let it down to sleep. Alabaster hadn’t noticed how long it was when it was in that messy bun. She still reminded him of something.

He hated the idea of talking about Pax, but he wanted to know. “What did Ajax do to you?” he asked, assuming she wouldn’t need any clarification if she really was one of Pax’s not-relationships.

Kally inhaled shakily. She stared at the grass of the backyard. The house backed up to the woods—not as nice a fortification as his last house on a cliff, but an acceptable replacement.

“He messed around with Praetor Zhang to steal a ‘mysteriously important stick.’ He twists the truth a lot. He and Axel threatened me when I first found out about Backbiter… and I—I think he and Axel only saved me originally to get into Camp Half-Blood.”[3]

The last part was quieter than the rest. Her knuckles were white as they gripped her notebook. “You?” she asked.

Alabaster hadn’t talked to anyone about it. That would have meant admitting to relations with Ajax. Despite that, he swallowed. “He cheated on me with my sister, Lamia, a monster. He claimed he was trying to ‘make things better’ in proper Pax fashion.”

“Oh…” she whispered.

“Yea… that and his hyper invasive, disrespectful attitude. At least he’s calmed down now.”

Kally smiled. “Calmed down? You’ve gotta be joking. What—did he send Baller to spy on you?”

“He doesn’t for you?”

Alabaster hadn’t meant it as a joke. He was startled when she laughed.

They quieted down and Kally seemed to relax while staring at the sky.

He glanced at her journal, feeling uneasy. He wondered if she realized where the note came from. “I’m sorry I read what you wrote,” he said.

Normally, privacy was all-important to Alabaster. He didn’t know who was traveling with Axel and Ajax—curiosity had consumed him. The Pax brothers weren’t the type to keep logs. When the van showed up, he would have accepted any form of information about them, or anyone who lived through the Battle of Manhattan or Slaughter of Mount Othrys.

“It’s…” she hesitated. Her shoulder slumped.

“I’m sorry you and your mother’s first interaction with the Olympians was so thuggish,” he said, struggling to contain his bitterness. Axel and Pax had always been better at easing ignorant demigods into the truth. All Alabaster wanted to say was, at least you won’t be deluded later.

“You mentioned we were Olympic sympathizers… and you made it sound like you wanted Camp Half-Blood destroyed…” Kally paused. She looked nervous. She exhaled and made eye contact with him, her face grave. “Wanting to save Camp Half-Blood has nothing to do with the Olympians. Even if Apollo did… rape my mother and even if I am the product of a mistake, I’d still want to stop Eris from whatever she’s doing.”

“Because, my personal anger is pointless here,” she said. “I’ve been thinking about it a lot. Even if Axel and Pax kidnapped Rachel as a set up to gain the camp’s trust, and even if she’s Apollo’s favorite and I hate that narcissistic womanizer and—uh—mananizer, I’d still save Rachel from Python again. She’s still a person exterior to all of that, just like the campers are still people.”

“Those ‘people’ you’re referring to are Olympia’s soldiers. You need to kill off soldiers to immobilize a leader,” he snapped.

Kally flinched but kept her lips in a firm line. “We’re not talking about that war here. We’re talking about my half-siblings, and your half-siblings dying because the Goddess of Strife is bored.”

Alabaster tensed. He wanted to slap Kally.

“Besides…” she sighed and pulled her knees up to lean her chin on them. “Maybe, after we save Camp Half-Blood, we can make another camp. Not one for war, just somewhere people can go that don’t belong in Camp Jupiter or Camp Half-Blood. Axel and Pax can’t go back. I… I don’t think I’ll want to go back. And I don’t think Euna will want to.”

Alabaster glared. “The other two camps would attack us and wipe us out.” He didn’t mean to say us. The word slipped out. He’d thought about restarting a camp, but Zeus would never allow that.

“Maybe…” She frowned. “But, maybe not if we have someone like Merry or Nico to act as a convoy between camps. Then we could have visitations for games or something. Didn’t they do something like that in Ancient Greece? Even cities that didn’t like each other could get along for festivals and stuff?”

“They’re called poleis,” Alabaster corrected. He stared off to collect his thoughts. He and Claymore wanted to bring the children of Hecate to peace. Then he lost his position as their leader and he found Jack. If they had someone on neutral terms with the Greeks and Romans, could they start a new home for more than just the three of them?

He shook his head. It was too late for them to having this conversation. He was too rattled about Axel and Pax being alive, about finding out his nightmares were coming true, and that Pax and Axel were having the same final nightmare he was. Plus, the way she’d pulled her knees up let cold air into the sleeping bag.

“Can I try something on you?” Kally asked suddenly.

When he glanced back at her, she blushed. “Oh that sounded—um—it’s nothing ba—it’s a healing technique Merry and Will were experimenting with that’s supposed to help Pollux with his bro—I don’t even know if it’ll work…” she trailed off and looked away.

A daughter of Dionysus and a child of Apollo teaming up for a healing technique? The idea was interesting. Alabaster’s mind spun at the possibilities for psychology. He wasn’t stupid enough to think he didn’t need help. Both he and Jack had been seeing Dr. Cenote under Claymore’s orders. Without Merry around though, could Kally do anything?

“Can you sing quietly enough for Jack not to hear you?” he asked.

She nodded, though still wouldn’t look at him. “He gives me the creeps.”

“He should. He doesn’t get along well with his siblings,” Alabaster said absently. If they could make song magic heal psychological wounds, maybe it could help Jack. He narrowed his eyes. “So
you know, children of Hecate can sense when people try to alter memories or erase them. And my defensive runes will set off if you try to give me an illness."

Kally stared at him. “Are you this suspicious of everyone? I don’t even know how to do what you said.”

“I—I’m sorry. It’s been a long day,” Alabaster admitted. Jack’s paranoia must have been wearing off on him. He’d forgotten she was on the run from Camp Jupiter as well, and a friend of Axel and Pax.

Kally hesitated. “Um…” she said and angled herself towards him, putting her legs back on the top step. Her notebook started to slip down the sleeping bag. Alabaster caught it before the journal could tumble off the porch. When he glanced back up, Kally hovered her hands an inch away from either side of his temple, like she was about to smack him cartoon style with invisible cymbals.

Before she sang, Alabaster thought about how impractical it would be to kill someone like that, unless you were Hercules.

“You’re a mess, tangled with your confidence.

You think you haven’t sinned.

Well, you’re unstoppable,

Your walls are impassible.”

Her voice was lovely, as would be expected from a daughter of Apollo. But he couldn’t focus on that. As the notes whispered out, Alabaster felt his eyes flutter closed.

The Battle of Manhattan played in fast forward—the soldiers that were washed away when Percy collapsed the Williamsburg Bridge, the soldiers engulfed in flames when they had to split ranks around the reservoirs, Hades and Nico’s indestructible undead army cutting off any retreat for a full platoon, the mindless skeletons massacring monsters and demigods alike, with no regard to those who dropped their weapons in surrender, because the skeletons couldn’t tell the difference and didn’t care.

The half-charred, half-drowned, and diced siblings he couldn’t heal, because Ethan Nakamura convinced Kronos to leave their best healer, Jack, at Mount Othrys, saying the Silver Tongued Snake, the Leonis Caput, and the Scourge of Rome were in conspiracy with the spy and were allowing Luke too much control over his body.

The bitterness and anger threatened to overtake Alabaster. Did Percy even know how many died in that war? Did he even care? And after all his conniving, Ethan Nakamura himself betrayed them?

But something gave. A tightness in Alabaster’s stomach eased. The deaths were too numerous to conceptualize, and he remembered the smiles on each of his siblings faces’ during the games and concerts Ajax and Jack organized to keep up the army’s moral. He remembered the time Matthias painted Kronos’s chariot pink, and the way Krios and Prometheus tried not to crack up in front of Kronos’s face. The way Mercedes would laugh when Axel dragged her into one of their festival dances. How their tiny toddler Charlie would climb giants as a jungle gym.

When Alabaster gained awareness of his current surroundings, he could feel his chest heaving. He could smell eucalyptus and mint as he inhaled sharply through sobs. Alabaster thought crying was useless, despite everything Dr. Cenote said, and was furious this was the second time in a day he’d let himself go.
Kally’s voice was trembling as she sang:

“I know you lay in bed,

Contemplating all of your dead,

And you look at what you’ve done,

Please, don’t forget the sun.”[4]

Her forehead had pressed into his. There were tears streaking down her cheeks. Had she seen all of it too? Could a child of Apollo do that? He knew they could heal any physical damage but… was she trying to accelerate healing his mind?

Alabaster pressed a hand up to her lips, so she’d stop singing. He wanted to tell her to stop, but his mouth was already producing words he hadn’t registered until that moment, “—why? It all feels so pointless. Everything we worked for—everything—” He caught himself. He didn’t know this girl. There was no reason for him to be babbling this off to her. Normally, he wouldn’t even talk to Claymore.

Slower, without the hiccup of sobs, he whispered, “Th—thank you. Th—that was a good experiment. But that’s—this is too much, right now—”

Kally leaned forward and hugged him.

Alabaster let her. After a moment, he hugged her back. They sat on the porch, Kally trembling with her own tears. She had seen. He was glad she didn’t say she understood or tried to give a stupid apology. Just the warmth of a touch.

Although Alabaster felt dismal, something was… calmer. A tension eased in his chest. He focused on the chill of the air and the way the sleeping bag winked.

Kally withdrew her face from his shoulder and disentangled her hands to wipe away her tears. “I—I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to get your sweater gross with tears and snot—”

Alabaster tried not to give a half-hearted laugh, but only managed to choke it off. That’s what she was apologizing for. He should have apologized for being so suspicious earlier.

When she took off her glasses to wipe her eyes—

“A Livemont Art Nouveau poster,” Alabaster realized, “That’s what you remind me of.”

“Excuse me?” Kally asked. The comment surprised her out of the tears.

Alabaster shrugged, trying to calm his trembles. He picked her notebook off the ground—it fell when he hugged her. “When my father was studying at Columbia, they made him take an art appreciation class during his undergraduate. As much as he hated it, Mother said that’s when he started hanging Livemont posters of beautiful women all over the house. He even commissioned one of her...”

The lack of sleep and memory overload must have been getting to Alabaster. He didn’t understand why Kally was blushing in the silvery lighting until his mind sluggishly made the connection by transitive property of equality: Kally=Art Nouveau poster. Art Nouveau poster=beautiful women. Therefore, Kally=beautiful.
“I didn’t mean to say—” Alabaster cut himself off from ending that train wreck of a sentence. He had meant it, it was just… “I’m sorry. I’ve exclusively been talking to Jack and Claymore recently. I’m not used to having other company.”

The warmth of her knee pressed into his became agonizingly prominent.

Kally pushed her glasses back onto her face. “Does Jack look like an Art Nouveau poster?” she asked, sniffling the remains of her tears.

“Gods no,” Alabaster hissed.

She laughed softly. “We just have soccer trophies, family portraits and pictures of Jesus on our walls. I don’t think we have artwork to compare people to.”

An actual home with a full family. Alabaster frowned. He hadn’t had one of those since his father died. These houses only ever lasted a few years before something went wrong, though Camp Othrys had come close to being a solid home.

He wondered, now, if Kally thought about Apollo attacking her mother every time she thought about home. From the hesitation in her voice, he thought she might.

Maybe he could repay some of her attempted kindness.

“Do you miss any of it?” he asked.

“Yes… a lot. Whenever I was having trouble in chemistry or other stuff at school, my older brother, John, would sit on the back porch with me—kinda like this—and talk about it,” she said the last part in a voice too light. Kally didn’t want him recognizing her worry.

“Problems with chemistry?” Alabaster asked in confusion. “It’s a lot like the formulas I need for potions and spells. If we see each other after tomorrow, I can give you some pointers. Now, describe your backyard,” he said.

As she gave the details, Alabaster felt a tug in his gut. He reached out to the Mist lingering around them and twisted it to mimic her memory. Alabaster knew her mind would need to fill in the holes he couldn’t create, but that’s what everyone always did—they liked to see what they wanted to see, regardless of reality.

But as he crafted, something shifted behind them. Kally and Alabaster jumped, glancing at the door to the back porch. No one was there.

Alabaster felt uneasy. Neither of them was armed for a sudden attack. He’d have to withdraw his Mist sword and he thought Kally’s weapon was in her bag, inside. Though, the magical barrier around his house should guard them from sight as long as no one stepped out.

They should be alright.

He exhaled and turned back to Kally. “Continue,” he requested, “But close your eyes this time. When you open them, imagine you’re in your backyard. You’ll be pleasantly surprised.”

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Thanks for reading guys! As per usual, I hope you enjoyed. Also, good luck to everyone with their
first few weeks of school!

Footnotes:

[1] Betanote from Mel, a paragraph before this: “I’m going to be so low key mad if he meets Kally outside because I still ship Pax x Kally and also Pax X Alabaster, but also low key shipping Kally x Alabaster and cheering the meet. The struggle for a multishipper is becoming real.”

[2] Another Beta Note from Mel: “OH MY FUCKING GOSH. JACK. HAVE YOU BEEN SECRETLY SHIPPING THESE TWO SINCE THE BEGINNING??? IMMA BE SO MAD AT YOU BUT ALSO HIGH FIVING YOU DAMNIT.”

[3] Beta Note from Mel: “WE’RE GOING TO LEAVE OUT THE NICO THING” Note from Jack: Yep. If I were her, I would absolutely never want to explain that one to someone I might like.

[4] These are altered lyrics from Don’t you Dare forget the Sun by Get Scared.
Normally, Pax’s list of *Ways Things Could Go Wrong* was WAY too creative and masterfully crafted for the fates to come close to guessing every item enlisted. Today, they must have been high-fiving each other around that stupid ball of fately yarn.

Everything started with Pax’s nightmare. Well, everything *actually* started for Pax when his father, Santiago, tortured an opposing mob leader and that mob leader’s family to death, and Eris found this an attractive mating call. However, Pax thought that was *not* an appropriate story for any eldest brother to tell his little brother, *thank you Kouta*. Pax would have rather been told that his parents met at a mixer for singles who liked to limbo, as he’d rewritten the story in his head.

Regardless of awesome limbo singles mixers, Pax’s jokes, hopes, and wishes for fluffy bunnies failed him when he fell asleep. The beginning was always fuzzy, but clarity hit when he fell on the deck of a ship. Pax could never focus on what ship.

*The smell of rot intermixed with saltwater.*

*Pain kept him from pushing off the slimy floorboards. One of his arms wouldn’t move. The other trembled violently when he tried to sit up. As his gaze hardened on his functional hand, he internally screamed. And probably externally, he couldn’t be sure.*

*He managed to press his working hand into the floorboard, just in time for his own bronze dagger to stab through his palm, pinning him to the deck.*

*Glittery blood smeared onto the slimy wood.*

*Someone released a booming laugh somewhere nearby.*

*Pax cussed, shrieked, and sobbed at the laugher, especially insulting the laugher’s mother, but, he couldn’t look at the laugher. No, because he could sense the approach of something worse.*

*Mist and smoke twisted around the animalistic arches of his brother’s calves as the Leonis Caput stalked out of the shadows. Normally, Pax could see right through Axel’s fear magic and Mist manipulation, but Axel had become the monster. The half-decayed feline skeleton crept closer, obsidian claws fully extended from one hand, Pax’s remaining dagger clutched in the other. Blood and saliva dripped from the helmet’s jaws as it leisurely performed the flickering dance at the end of its hunt.*

*Pax cried and struggled to unpin his functional arm, but his palm felt like it was on fire. When he*
thrust his forearm upward to dislodge the dagger, the world went white momentarily. When he regained clarity of the deck, there was more blood oozing from his hand, but it still had a bronze blade pinned through it, like some serial killer decided to organize body parts on a corkboard.

And he knew the Leonis Caput was that serial killer.

When the dream shifted, Pax decided he would make a thank you basket for Atë. Not one with flowers and chocolates. She didn’t strike him as that kind of girl. Maybe something with laughing gas, so she could drop that on the next Olympian meeting she snuck into. The image of Poseidon giggling uncontrollably at Hades’ stupid helmet brought Pax more joy than twenty Reese’s Sticks.

“Without Hades’ permission to walk the earth, I’ll need a shadow bridge—something weak I can suspend between here and the Underworld. Then my ghost army can walk freely and… oh…” A hissing laugh, that Pax thought befit a mid-level villain. “Does Camp Half-Blood have a lot of restless ghosts.”

They were in a shack, somewhere hot.

For an instance, Pax thought the person speaking was his dead brother Kouta, a Native American with long, black hair pulled into a bun and stray locks in braids with feathers. The “oh no, you were dead!” was a little hackneyed after seeing Jack, but he realized that wasn’t his brother when the person released a second hissing laugh.

Fog warped around her, twisting away the shade of his brother to leave a different corpse. Well, sort of. She looked like two morticians got into a fight over preparing a body, flipped a coin, and the coin landed stubbornly on its edge, so one mortician mummified half her face and body into a blackened, hardened heap, and the other sucked all the blood out the other half to leave a chalky pale… thing. Split right down the middle hot dog style. Pax wondered if they’d discussed splitting her at the waist instead, and decided no one wanted to touch both her feet.

Her eyes were pits of nothingness.

There were two other people with the corpse lady. One, he readily recognized as his mother. She didn’t look like his mother right now. She looked like a floating triangle with a top hat, stick arms, and feet, but Pax just knew it was Eris the Goddess of Strife. She held a martini glass in one hand and a cup with a sting attached in the other. Only his mom would have that much style.

The last woman in the room, Pax assumed, was Hemera, the primordial Goddess of Day that his mother had godnapped. She would have been pretty, if her sapphire dress wasn’t in shreds and her golden hair wasn’t tangled and she didn’t have a pink sock tied around her mouth. She looked how Pax would imagine a distraught queen to look. Memo to self: Ask Calex if he’s ever met the Queen, and if he’s ever seen her distraught before. Her skin blazed intermittently, like an emergency lighthouse.

Pax assumed she’d be under the Golden Net that they’d stolen from Camp Half-Blood, but instead her hands were chained to the ground. The chains dazzled and flashed a Made in Sparta: Keep Your God Here each time she twisted to get out.

“We’ll get you a shadow bridge soon, Two-Faced—” Eris said.

“Melinoe,” Two-Faced corrected.

“—and your little gift of extended darkness… or we’ll have the Olympians crush us like roaches, but—eh—who has time to keep track of their attention. Lapis, darling henchie—” The yellow
triangle held the cup up to her slit of a mouth, like a walkie-talkie. “—how’s delivering that ultimatum to my mother? Is it as nightmarish as your heart could hope there?” The triangle winked at Hemera.

Hemera huffed back.

“Sunshine and freaking rainbows, Ajaxamamma. Why does your afterlife have so many lines and so many rivers? It’s stupid.”

Lapis’s irritation came through the cup clearly. Pax wanted to dance at hearing her voice. Atē had pulled through after all—though he wished he could actually see his siblings. Disembodied, cup-voices were a close second.

A delivery to Pax’s grandmother though? With an ultimatum? Although Pax desperately tried to forget all the lectures Alabaster gave him on mythology, he was pretty sure he’d heard his mother complain that Hemera was Nyx’s favorite, despite being the least dark of Nyx’s children. And Nyx did live somewhere below the Underworld. Below the Underworld… huh, good name for a metal band.

And what did Eris need the Golden Net for if she had chained down Hemera?

“We’ve been telling Hades for centuries that his stupid single-file system is outdated. Thanatos and I tried suggesting a computerized system. I suggested we let waiting spirits wonder among the living, but noooo, too much chaos,” Two-Faced Melinoe growled.

The triangle spun a few times in the air, waving a hand at Melinoe to quiet down. “Now, Lapis, sweetie, did you find a good place to take a snack break and help Hiro extort Mr. Percy Jackson? You know he works much better in a team,” Eris said. “Our little champion got Frank’s extortion all good to go.” The triangle raised her martini glass. Upon examining it, Pax realized the stirring stick with two olives was Frank’s mysterious wizarding wand. Or, what Pax hoped was his wizarding wand. Maybe Frank just really liked wood and had a secret collection in his praetorian house.

Eris giggled. “Imagine? Just one little flame and we could squash Frank Zhang right now, leaving his friends to watch him wither, all in confusion of his malady. Oh, maybe another day.”

Pax felt his stomach drop and promptly fight with his intestines to see who could sink to his feet first. That stick was Frank’s lifeline?!?! That was the stupidest thing he’d ever heard! What—was Percy’s lifeline tied to a goldfish somewhere?

No, he knew what Percy’s was: his Bat Signal, Grover Underwood. But Grover was a Lord of the Wild now. Maybe Pax was lacking faith in his little brother, Hiro, but kidnapping Grover wouldn’t be stealing candy from a baby. It would be a walk in the park. One infested with angry dryads and nature spirits armed with deadly flowers, sleep incantations, and club-signs about saving the trees.

Like the dream knew about Pax’s concern, the scenery shifted again.

This time, he was in a small room, probably in an apartment. Although muted, Pax could still hear the thrum of a city outside the closed window. There was a heavy, oak bassinet in one corner, and a changing table beside it. Baby diapers littered the changing table. A baby monitor sat nearby. Pax could see a stray sock on the ground. This was a travesty: somewhere, somehow, a baby only had one sock on.

Weird spot for Grover Underwood to be, but maybe Camp Half-Blood was desperate for recruits.
and had started far younger. Or, maybe Grover was recruiting baby ecoterrorists. It was like the same thing.

Although Pax knew he couldn’t touch anything as a dream projection, he still stepped over to the crib. There was a tiny human inside. His heart did a little disco. The baby did only have one sock on, and he couldn’t return the sock. It had beautiful blue eyes, staring directly at him, despite his dream projection status.

Pax made a face at the baby and it giggled and kicked at the pink blankets around it. Girl? Unless this was a hyper progressive, awesome household, he assumed so.

Pax wished he could pick up this stranger’s baby and play with her until she laughed herself to sleep. That wasn’t super illegal or creepy, right? He couldn’t wait to have at least ten children.

All her toys were ocean themed and the twirling, dangling toy-thing that hung over her bed—it had beads he recognized from Camp Half-Blood’s crafting sessions.

Sweat broke out on Pax’s face. One of the blankets wrapped around her was artfully woven with little owls decorating the edges. Something Annabeth Chase might make. As a matter of fact, the corner of the blanket had a tiny, cursive signature that read, May Athena grant you wisdom, Love Annabeth.

Something creaked behind him. Pax whirled to find someone pushing the window open. A boy, fourteen years old, crawled noiselessly through the crack. His long, black hair slid over the window sill as he righted himself. He wore a burgundy button down shirt with suspenders. As per usual, they were lined with darts. Now though, he wore shoulder holsters over them, armed with two handguns, one much larger than the other. Those had been Kouta’s, their oldest brother’s, revolvers.

His Asiatic features broke into an impish smile as Hiro danced into the room.

“No—No—Hiro—stop!” Pax shouted.

The only one that seemed to hear him was the baby. She stopped kicking.

Pax could see how Hiro’s feet wouldn’t make any noise: he wore his acrobatics shoes. He stepped alongside the crib and stuck his tongue out at the baby.

She giggled again.

Hiro made the motion to clap his hands in excitement. Pax could tell the emotion was genuine. Hiro was struggling not to continue dancing around the baby’s room.

Instead, he withdrew a radio from his belt and set it beside the baby monitor. Once done, he reached into the crib and wrapped the baby up in her blankets. Upon noticing the sock on the floor, he—as he should—put the sock back onto her foot.

At least Hiro had manners while kidnapping.

Then Hiro hoisted her into his left arm, careful to position her so she wouldn’t get stabbed by a dart.

Pax hoped that would be it.

It wasn’t.
Hiro pulled out his brother’s huge revolver: the cold metal of the Taurus Judge gleamed in the nightlight. He tapped it on the changing table.

A low, feminine voice hummed through his radio into the baby monitor. Within a few notes, Pax recognized his sister, Lapis’s voice, singing, “I’ve got the whole world in my hands! I’ve got the whoooolle world in my hands—”

Within seconds two people burst through the door in pajamas. From his old days in reconnaissance, Pax recognized the forty-year-old women to be Sally Jackson. He assumed the man was Paul Blofis, Percy Jackson’s step-father.

Sally’s jaw dropped. She took a step into the room.

Paul’s face went blanch white. He held a handgun but immediately lowered it when he saw what was in Hiro’s hands.

Hiro gestured the revolver towards the baby. Sally and Paul froze.

“Gods no,” Sally whispered.

“What do you want?” Paul demanded. “Put her down!”

The baby made a soft whine.

Hiro bounced her a few times and nuzzled his forehead to the baby’s. He gestured at Paul’s weapon with his elbow. Slowly, Paul put it on the floor.

From the radio, Lapis said, “Hey, Dart Face, I assume that’s them?”

Hiro made a sharp, upward whistle of affirmation.

“Oh, holy Hun-Batz,” Lapis hissed. “Okay, well, hello Mrs. Jackson and Mr. Blofis. I’m sorry I can’t be there to help threaten you in person, but I don’t have the stomach to kill tiny people, so I got sent on the nicer job of trudging through the Underworld—”

“Don’t hurt her,” Sally begged. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

“Hey—rude, Mrs. Jackson. Do I interrupt people when they’re threatening me? Well, yes, but I shoot them with lightning. Anyway, the person you’re looking at is my dumb baby brother, and I’d think of him if I were looking at your child, so I can’t be there. Grime-licking Dart Face—I can tell you’re making that stupid face—”

Lapis was accurate. Hiro was smirking at the radio in his best, haha! You love me! look he could give.

“Anyway, Hiro doesn’t have a little sibling. He doesn’t understand what it would mean to lose something that depends on you to live. As such, I think he could actually break her neck. That gun definitely has enough firepower to turn her into modern wall art.”

Sally sobbed.

Paul sank to his knees.

Pax couldn’t stop trembling. This was bad. This was way worse than he thought it would be, and he was a creative genius when it came to worst case scenarios.
From Hiro’s placid smile, Pax got the feeling she was right: Hiro could do it, go home, make some soba, and catch Attack on Titan’s latest episode without a blink. If his hands weren’t full, he’d probably be signing some inappropriate jokes in ASL.

There was a pause. Pax could tell, from the hesitation, that Lapis didn’t want to be doing this. She inhaled shakily. “So, please, I know the temptation to do something stupid is strong, but let’s show that your genes are smart enough to deserve going to the next generation, right? Now, our employer isn’t totally heartless. Ajaxapax and his crew want to give you a chance here.”

Pax puffed up his cheeks to pop them. He needed to stop thinking that things couldn’t get worse. That was like telling the Fates that machines would replace them in the next year because handcrafting thread was out of style.

Hiro glared at the radio. Apparently Lapis hadn’t said something they’d rehearsed earlier. Hiro kicked the changing table, making the radio flop on its side.

“Augh, fine Dart Face. You see, we’re his little henchmen, and we take our job with pride. We do our best to please him and stay on his good side. And Ajax doesn’t want Percy in the fight at Camp Half-Blood…”

Pax trembled. He didn’t want Hiro to hurt the Jackson family, but Pax realized the icing on top of the cake—except it really wasn’t icing, because baked goods were delicious and this problem was not. Once Percy found out about this, Eris would succeed in causing her little war. Percy would kill him.

Thanks for reading! I hope you’re excited for things to blow up in the next few chapter :D

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[1] Lyrics from Kidnap the Sandy Claws. The Korn version of the song was inspiration for this scene. That and my sister calling me up in the middle of sleep hours saying, “I have the best way to kidnap a baby.” Thanks, Sis. -.-
All Pax wanted when he woke up was to cuddle with someone that he would share a Reese’s Stick with.

He couldn’t bother Axel. Axel looked so peaceful for once. And he’d probably wake up screaming, in a few hours. Likely because he dreamed about stabbing Pax’s hand and going in for the kill. Plus, seeing Axel stab him didn’t really put Pax in a brotherly mood.

Pax wondered what made Axel snap. He liked to think it had something to do with sneaking a condom into Axel’s pocket on his date with Reyna—but it wasn’t Pax’s fault that he wanted Axel to be responsible when he knew his brother wouldn’t have forethought for it. It was the system’s fault for not teaching proper sex education.[1]

Sneaking into the girls’ room left Pax with a contusion on his calf. He should have known Merry would put Euna by the door. She was like an alarm system and a taser all in a tiny ball of Korean. And going to Alabaster’s room just left him enumerating all the things he’d done wrong in the last year and a half. Quite an impressive list, one that might outweigh how much of a jerk Odysseus was in the Odyssey. But only maybe.

When he walked downstairs to express the immensity of this list to Alabaster, apologize and explain that he really needed to talk about his nightmares, he found Kally and Alabaster on the porch, and Aphrodite’s prophecy rang like the worst commercial jingle in his head, the person you love will fall in love with your best friend. By now, the tune he’d devised for it was obnoxiously catchy.

His two best friends and ex-sort-of-not-lovers were falling in love. He would say it was hot—because seeing them together was hot—but he doubted they’d let him squeeze between them in that sleeping bag.

As he watched, Alabaster touched her shoulder, warping the Mist in front of them to look like some other forest, the way Alabaster used to warp the Mist to show Pax and Axel the jungles of Belize when they were homesick.
Pax was already shaking. Nausea made him woozy every time he thought about Hiro holding that gun near Percy’s baby sister. Sweat had soaked his brow from his first dream—seeing his blade jam through his palm and pin him to the ground so the one family member that cared about him could stab him to death.

As he watched his two friends, he recognized Kally’s painfully shy flirtation and Alabaster’s standard obliviousness to his own attraction to another, thinly covered by random muttering about science or magic. It was the weirdest way to pick up a person that Pax had ever seen, and he’d seen Axel and Reyna flirt.

Pax realized how little he could do for them. He couldn’t tutor Kally in chemistry. He couldn’t accelerate Alabaster’s emotional healing with song. Pax couldn’t go for a full day without severely screwing up everything for everyone.

He stepped backwards away from the back porch door. Pax didn’t notice the three weasels that watched him step through the living room to the front of the house.

All he could do was rub his palm, where his brother would inevitably pin him. Why couldn’t he make a joke about it? He’d been having the same nightmare for months and didn’t have any standup comedy prepared. Probably because he couldn’t stand up in the dream-prophecy. Well, if he couldn’t “stand up” he could at least give a hand to swab the deck.[2]

That didn’t even make him crack a smile. He felt too nauseous and overwhelmed, like he’d ingested a squirrel’s winter reserve of tree nuts and left his EpiPen back in New Rome. Pax walked out the front porch, feeling the icy air blast his bare chest. Normally, Pax hated the cold, but he couldn’t tell if his shakes were from the temperature or from his nightmare.

He didn’t stop walking until the edge of the property line, cleanly distinguishable by how overgrown Alabaster’s lawn was compared to that of his neighbors. And the tiny gleam of rune barrier encircling the property.

Pax stopped there and did the manliest thing he could: he sank to his knees to cry.

And landed directly on a nail.

“Cho!” Pax cursed. Why was there a nail in the middle of the lawn?

Someone giggled.

That was when Pax realized he was in his boxers without any weapons. He sat up, attempting to compose himself to look like the scariest cute creature alive. Though, first, he plucked the nail out of his knee with dignity.

“So much mythology and literature lingers on heroes being crushed and breaking down.” Someone poofed into existence on the neighbor’s lawn, a foot outside the rune barrier. “Is it for a noble cause? Like the excitement of watching them get back up? Or the sadistic pleasure of knowing someone extraordinary crumbles just like you.”

That cheerful sentiment only befit one person. Pax tried to say something clever and witty, but could only say, “Atē,” in greeting.

From what Pax could see in the brilliant moonlight and street lamps, Atē was curled in a blanket that was made from sewn newspaper articles. Since it didn’t crinkle with her movement, he assumed they were printed on fabric. There were pictures of beheadings, half-blown buildings, fire spewing out of the Twin Towers, starving children, and an Asian man standing in front of a tank.
Oh, and what Pax recognized as a cancelation of Legend of Korra.

She wore an oversized white nightshirt with black script, a black choker, and multicolored ribbons along her arms. Her jagged black hair was longer, slightly curled, and had purple, red, and white streaks this time. She looked... less like she’d rolled in a dumpster, though dirt still streaked her face and arms.

Atë tossed something at Pax that clocked him in the face.

Whatever it was didn’t kill him. The material was soft, and shockingly didn’t smell like a fresh corpse. Very considerate. When Pax unraveled the folded piece, he found a sweatshirt with the image of monster-sized weasels eating tiny stick-figure humans.

Pax wasn’t sure if the gesture was meant to upset him. Weasels normally made him happy. Whatever the intention, he felt himself choke up. “You made me a homemade sweater?” he asked.

Atë stared at him with those unblinking red eyes. Her matching lips twitched down slightly.

Pax puffed up his cheeks and popped them. Slowly, hoping there weren’t spiders bundled inside, he slipped the material on. Nothing. Either it was the world’s slowest reacting poison, or she needed to do something to set it off.

“Th—thank you,” Pax said, wrapping his arms around himself. He didn’t realize how cold he was until he felt the sweater’s warmth. He sniffled. He also didn’t realize how horrible he felt before the contrast of a kind act. He tried to talk again, but shuddered.

Atë nodded at the nail in his hand. “That was meant for someone else, but I’ll take two demigods with one nail... I thought you’d be happy to see your siblings and find out Mom’s plan.”

“Infanticide and traveling through the Underworld aren’t in the top ten ways I want my siblings to spend their free time,” Pax said. “Especially when they’re only doing it because they’re mad at me.”

Atë shrugged. “Hiro isn’t just mad at you. He’d kidnap everyone’s little sister if he could,” she assured him.

“Thanks, Atë. It’s comforting to know my little brother is an aspiring serial killer.”

She laughed. “Ajax, I like you. I don’t want Axel to be driven mad and cut you up.” She sat up and leaned closer to him. As her shirt collar hung away from her body, Pax became uncomfortably aware of the black lace of her bra. She had matched it to her choker.

“You really screwed up with Alabaster and Kalypso,” she said.

Pax wanted to laugh it off, but everything felt like it was tunneling, Alice in Wonderland style. He looked away. “I can’t blame them,” he whispered, “It’s like you said. I’m reckless, clumsy, and especially prone to screwing up. Not great dating material. Or person material.” He could imagine someone building a Lego Pax out of baby panda images and mistakes.

“Improvising,” she corrected.

“What?”

“You’re phenomenal at improvising, not screwing up,” she said. From the deadpan expression, Pax couldn’t tell if she was mocking him or serious. Maybe both. “But, you did screw up. Of course you
were going to screw up.”

Pax flinched at the way she said “you.” But, then she continued, “Everyone screws up: humans, gods, cute rodents… I know that better than anyone.” She glanced off to the side.

“Are you, the Goddess of Mischief and Ruin, trying to cheer me up?” Pax asked. The nail slipped from his fingers as he stared at her.

Atē sat back in her blanket.

“Ajax, do you know why I like you?”

“Because I’m as cute as a baby panda,” he guessed.

“The fact that you’re as cute as a dead panda is nice—”

“—I said baby—”

“—but, you’re always nice to me and you’re fun. Most people are really mean when I’m around.” She kicked her feet underneath the blanket, making an illustration of a mushroom cloud billow up like another bomb had gone off within the newspaper article. “Children of Strife are always outcasts and we always hurt the people we love. We’re designed to be bad guys—”

“We’re not bad guys!” Pax cried, “We’re j-just—”

“Clumsy…” she finished with a weird grin. Atē opened up her arms, letting all the colorful ribbons on her arms dangle. “Ajax, can I have a hug?”

That was all Pax had wanted since he woke up. He crawled into the neighbor’s yard. As soon as he touched Atē, she and the blanket poofed. When they reappeared, the blanket was tightly wrapped around the two of them and Atē nuzzled into his shoulder. Pax leaned onto his side, not expecting her to be so close.

Despite that, he relaxed, ecstatic to be curled up with someone. And warm. Now he fully realized how cold out it was.

She didn’t smell like blood for once, an afterthought Pax was thankful for. “Atē, I have a really important question, one that might change the entire situation,” he said, “What does your shirt say?”

She bit his neck, hard.

“Aye! Knock it off, you little empousa,” Pax complained.

“Ajax, we’re young and reckless. Do you wanna take things way too far?”

“Did you just quote Taylor Swift at me—” She shifted to wrap her legs around him and Pax became very aware she wasn’t wearing PJ pants with her nightshirt. Her fingers felt like ice as they rolled down his back. Pax felt like his mouth had gone completely dry. “—Oh! Uh—Atē, aren’t you my half-sister? And Eris’s daughter? And my half-sister?”

Had he just stroked out or suffered from a major bout of amnesia? Very possible. Maybe he’d had all Greek mythology wrong this whole time. Maybe he was actually a child of Hera—somehow—
and this was all just a joke—Yea, he thought Atē was hot, but—but—

“Mom says that’s like thirteenth cousin in the Greek world,” Atē said. She raised her head and fixated those cold, red eyes on him. Pax could feel her warm breathe on his face, how he’d imagine a gasmask might feel before you go under for dental work.

She slid one hand up to press a finger to the bottom of his chin, forcing him to maintain eye contact. “The gods all fucked their siblings. I’m a god and you’re mostly god. Besides, I have too low a self-esteem to care that I’m a rebound—sorry—a rebound off a rebound. A double rebound? And you’re too emotionally compromised to say no.”

The number of times Pax didn’t know what to say was rare, but steadily rising. This was one of those times. What!?! sounded appropriate, but he couldn’t get the word out before Atē ran her tongue along his lower lip.

“Um—” was his second attempt when she nipped his upper lip.

A sense of panic made him tremble when she pressed her mouth to his. Everything felt clammy. The sudden image of Flynn’s teary face flashed through his memory when Flynn had whispered, “Don’t talk.”

Pax shoved Atē back. “No!” he snapped. His mind stumbled over what to say—his voice had been too serious and too alarmed. “Only after dinner and a date. By the gods, did Mom teach you any manners? You haven’t bought me flowers or chocolates or a chinchilla!” he babbled.

Atē’s eyes widened, then she gave him that unblinking smile. “This is why I like you Ajax. You’re so full of surprises. You know how I said we always hurt the people we love?”

He nodded. He couldn’t decide if he was desperate enough for a hug to stay out here, or if he wanted to go inside and be alone. Where he’d think about Alabaster and Kally. And Hiro and Lapis. And Axel killing him. Man, tonight sucked. He wanted to shake a foam middle finger at the Fates, but he figured that would be like telling them… that they were uncreative… like he’d thought earlier.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

The comment didn’t sound like it was directed at kissing him.

Something light dropped on Pax from above.

Atē and her blanket poofed in a vacuum of smoke.

Pax scrambled to rip whatever was on him off, only to find his fingers caught in a tightly woven mesh net. The net constricted and he felt himself drag about a yard away from Alabaster’s house and his protective rune barrier. Had this not been a horrifying situation, he might have shouted, “Weee!”

“Got him!” a boy cheered. “The Silver Festus was right about their location.”

Had Pax known this was about to happen anyway, he wouldn’t have held off from flicking off the Fates. He would have stolen all of the money out of Camp Half-Blood’s store registers to buy the world’s biggest foam middle finger and slapped each Fate with it, dueling style.

As they were some distance away from the store, Pax resorted to a quick shout.
“It’s okay. Calm down. We’re not here to hurt you,” a girl said.

Although the night was going miserably, Pax felt some of his stress ease. She was telling the truth. Though… hearing what he readily identified as charmspeak threatened to twist his stomach back into a ball of heebie jeebies.

He didn’t have his headphones on him to cancel her out or any weapons. He was out of solution for his sleep darts anyway. Pax bit and tore at the net, but the fabric wouldn’t give.

In the street light, Pax could see three figures approaching from a hide out by the neighbor’s house. One was in a full, black camouflage outfit, except for a bright spike of blond bouncing from the boy’s head. From that and the bow, Pax could guess that was Will Solace.

He and Piper McLean flanked either side of Annabeth Chase as she walked towards Pax. The other two were more sensibly dressed in grey camo. Other than Solace, no one had a weapon drawn. If anything, Piper had her hands up to show that she was unarmed.

“Dude,” Pax said, “You have gotta start covering your hair when you’re in stealth operations.”

Will snorted. “You didn’t see me.”

Pax almost said he was distracted by his sister trying to make out with him, but he decided that was something best left quiet. Forever.[51]

“We come in peace,” Piper said. From the way she grinned over at Annabeth, Pax had the feeling she’d been waiting to say that all night.

Annabeth stopped a foot from Pax and stared down at him. Although Pax couldn’t see them directly, he could imagine the cold analysis of her grey eyes. She could be the first replaced human in a robot invasion and no one would know. She’s probably a robot right now…. “We’re a diplomacy party. The others are on standby if something goes wrong, but let’s try to make sure nothing goes wrong.”

Pax wanted to cry from happiness at the robot. He could feel a tear freeze on his cheek. Maybe he shouldn’t slap the Fates with a foam flick off finger. Maybe this was exactly what they needed.

Excellent batch of ambassadors. No one with a short temper, and the best girl ever for crowd control. Pax just had to refrain from insulting Jason or Percy…. That could be difficult.

Best of all, no Romans.

Annabeth and Piper knelt beside him.

“Connor and Matthias said you’re skittish and very quick, so we’re going to leave you in the net for now, okay?” Annabeth said.

“But we’re not going to hurt you or arrest you,” Piper added, “So stay calm.”

Pax nodded, sniffing. “That’s fine. Can I have a hug? Or a lollypop?” he asked.

“No hugs,” Will said, “I’ve examined the people you’ve stunned in the past. You’re exceptionally good at finding people’s pressure points. But here is a lollypop.” He withdrew something from a medical fanny pack around his waist and tossed it to Pax.

Piper stared at Will. “Do you keep lollipops with you everywhere you go?”
Will shrugged. “I never know when I’ll need to treat a patient.”

Pax managed to squeeze the lollypop through the net and unwrap it. He sat up and popped it into his mouth. Cherry. Acceptable. Between that and Piper’s charmspeak, he felt his breath level out. Though his teeth started to chatter in the cold.

Now, he needed to clear up stuff—and fast. Hopefully before anyone other than Merry, Calex, or Kally heard any of this. Hopefully, no one heard his first yelp. “I wasn’t part of and didn’t know Hiro was going to kidnap Percy’s little sister—”

“Someone kidnapped her?” Annabeth snapped. Her fist tightened over her dragon bone sword hilt. Piper and Will exchanged glances.

Pax swallowed. “Okay, well, that sounded bad. I just got a dream vision that it happened. My brother and sister are working for my mom—” Pax paused. He hated admitting who his mother was. “And she’s been setting me, Axel, and the others up to look like nice, furry scapegoats, or scape-satyrs—oh, I like that—”

“Focus,” Piper requested gently.

“Right,” he said. “I mean, you know Calex could never betray you guys. If you weren’t dating Percy and he didn’t have his major thing for Merry, you know he’d marry you in a heartbeat—haha —Merry—”

Annabeth made a face.

“—and Merry’s just been trying to keep us from fighting. My mom has some big evil plan to attack Camp Half-Blood with Phobetor, Melinoe, Python, and—and Atë, and all we want to do is warn camp.”


“We needed those to… to arrest my dad. He was a bad guy.” Pax glanced off to the side. “Mom took the net. And I don’t know where the tiny Jackson is.”

Annabeth frowned. “Did Euna kill your father?”

Pax nodded, puffing up his cheeks and popping them. “After he sacrificed her sister in a Mesoamerican ceremony and put a string of thorns through my tongue, but let’s not get into semantics.”

Piper winced.

Annabeth tapped her fingers on the hilt of her sword. “Pax… I think I have a hunch on your mother.” Pax tensed. “Is your mother someone petty enough to attack Camp Half-Blood purely to show off that she’s better than her siblings? That she’s ‘the darkest?’”

Pax coughed. As badly as his instinct was to talk in circles, time was of the essence, and there was only one answer to that question. “Um… yes. Yes, she is.”

Annabeth rubbed her temple. “Oh my gods. This is all because of a conversation Percy and I had with Nyx when we went through Tartarus. We got her children to argue over who was the darkest to distract them.”
“You’re joking,” Will said.

“No—no—that sounds exactly like something that would set my mom off to craft an elaborate scheme to cause a lot of chaos. Or no scheme. Mom’s not much of a full planner. She just sets things up and watches them fall apart,” Pax said. He shifted in the net. Now that he wasn’t curled up with Atë and distracted from his despair, he re-remembered the cold.

“If this is who I think it is, she started the Trojan War because she wasn’t invited to a party,” Annabeth said. “Pax, Matthias and Chris said you were once called the Silver Tongued Snake because of your skills in dodging the truth.”

“Way to sell a brother out,” Pax grumbled.

“But, they also said you’re well intentioned. I think you’re being honest. Something doesn’t add up here if this isn’t some kind of set up.”

“Awes-some,” Pax said. He puffed up his cheeks and popped them. “But—I-listen—I’m cool with this whole ‘being captured in a net th-thing’ but you g-guys need to get out of here. You can s-set up a secret s-surveillance team if you want, like a badass-s-s cop movie, but I need you out of s-sight of the—”

Somewhere behind Pax, he could hear a door thump shut and the soft strum of a guitar.

All the blood felt like it drained from Pax’s body.

“Enter! Jak-Jak the Plague Bringer, stage left!” came a horrific whisper.

Pax twisted to the right, his eyes wide. Striding across the yard was a twiggy redhead in flamboyantly pink pajamas with a five string base.

Pax puffed up his cheeks and popped them. “No—no—you need to leave, n-now! Like, fly-l-like-the-wind-Bullseye kinda leave—”

“You’re going to want to release my friend,” Jack said.

Annabeth and Piper stood up.

“We came here in peace,” Piper said. She didn’t sound as calm as last time.

Jack paused, about a yard away and gave Annabeth a dashing grin. “Oh my! Luke’s pedophilic crush! Do you wanna know why the Leonis Caupt, Witch Boy and I wouldn’t let him see you unescorted when you were captured? You wouldn’t believe the things he wanted to do to the body of a tiny, innocent… what were you? Thirteen-year-old?”

Annabeth went rigid and paled. “Luke wouldn’t have—” She gritted her teeth. “Who are you?” she demanded.

Piper put her hands up again. “Hey—wait—”


“Jack—I’m okay—just go inside,” Pax begged. Jack hadn’t yet noticed—

Jack did an excited jump. He clutched the neck of his base tightly. “That flaxen hair—that curvaceous bow—an athletic and lithe build—and a medical fanny pack,” he gasped and licked his
“I know you’re a child of that whore.”

Will clenched his bow. “That’s unwarranted to talk about my mom—”

“Sexist. I’m sure your mother is a lovely saint. I’m talking about the other half of our family.”
Jack’s grin broadened. “Tell me… what’s your name?”

“Will Solace,” Will said, scowling.

“Well, Will Solace, tell me too… Have you ever danced with a devil in the pale moonlight?” Jack asked. “And would you rather dance alone? Or do you want your friends to join us?”

From the way Jack jittered with excitement, Pax could tell this wasn’t about Pax’s capture anymore. Jack’s mind had honed in on his sibling and wouldn’t hear anyone else. Pax didn’t know if it would make it better or worse to shout out for Axel and Alabaster. Alabaster might not stop the fight. He might help Jack.

Maybe Piper could cut him off—or Annabeth would—

Jack laughed and strummed on his base.

“*Submissive my body, tender and weak.*

*Closer to death, my body must be.*

*If I must attest, then it’s fluids at best.*

*Submissive my body, the pain and the rest.*”[6]

As he sang, Will’s eyes went wide. He opened his mouth—likely to sing to counter Jack—but choked on a cough.

Piper went to speak, probably to say, *Hey, you sound a little crazy, cool it down a few notches,* but made a wrenching sound instead. She doubled over, vomiting onto the lawn. Annabeth stumbled to the side, clutching her head.

“You know, I meant to give you acute laryngitis,” Jack hissed, strumming his strings. “But I’m a sloppy bard. Now that we made it so our two birdies can’t sing, let’s get this rock show started.”

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Footnotes:

[1] Mel would like to point out that Pax and Axel were in the school system far too young for them to be teaching sex ed, so he has no right to blame the Belizean school system for his crassness.

[2] If Pax is making jokes like this now, and he’s 16, think about the Dad jokes he’ll be making if he gets old enough to be a dad.

Mel first read this as, “you’re so full of puppies.” Pax and I both prefer her interpretation of the text.

False. Pax should tell someone about this, but uh—we’ve already solidly established that he makes bad decisions.

Influenza in the Winter, Ryan A. Flourney. Feb 2014.
Warning! Graphic depictions of violence. Sad Pax baby. Unfortunately no weasels. But seriously, this chapter is the majority of the reason this book is rated M. Regardless, thanks for reading! :D I hope you love... love/hate it?

Pax felt like he’d really screwed up Alabaster’s Daily To Do List big time. He imagined the first note was consistently: keep Jack from murdering people. When trapped under a net, Pax didn’t think he could do that. He wasn’t sure he could do that when he wasn’t trapped under a net.

Will Solace gasped in air. Although he couldn’t sing, he still must have had some healing capabilities. Unlike Piper or Annabeth, he managed to keep on his feet, mouthing the words to some song. Pax liked to imagine it was Steal My Sunshine.

Will fumbled in his medical fanny back, jamming something into his mouth—likely an ambrosia square. Then he tossed one to Annabeth and one to Piper.

There was no way Piper could ingest it. She’d collapsed onto the ground. The ends of her feathers were soaked in vomit. In the eerie cast of silver light, Pax could see a darker, thicker substance dribbling from her beautiful mouth. She clutched her stomach, her breath rattling like a hoard of tiny chipmunks were going nuts on… well, some nuts in her throat.

Jack stepped up and kicked the square from Annabeth’s outstretched hand. He’d never stopped producing the abominable screeches of song with the occasional retch of laughter.

“Stand apart and fall together.

Nothing ever lasts forever.”

When they were back at Camp Othrys, Pax remembered how euphonic and soothing Jack’s voice had been. When they had nightmares, Jack would sing them back to sleep. Here, now, this shriek was that of monsters and machines. On the ground, beside the two withering from pain and expedited atrophy, Pax understood the emotion The Plague Bringer’s name conjured. It wasn’t happy.

Will had regained enough strength to whisper-sing a heal. As the words came out, Pax winced. It
was a song Will probably sang to Nico when they were curled up. “Every time you kiss me, it’s like sunshine and—”

Pax could tell Will must have an amazing country voice when he was at full power, but he wasn’t. His voice was hoarse and sickly. He’d just gotten enough strength to notch an arrow on his bow. Pax wondered if he could even pull it back.

But Pax couldn’t focus on them.

Annabeth had collapsed onto her face. She stared at him with glassy eyes and mouthed the words, help them.

Yep, that was going to haunt him.

Pax scrambled, dropping the lollipop Will had given him. He rolled the net, snatched up the fallen ambrosia squares, twisted to Annabeth, and shoved the square into her mouth.

Beside him, he could hear Jack’s thrilled giggle as he hissed, “Have you ever had chickenpox, Will? Because I’m going to give you a late stage of shingles. I’ve been told it’s very painful.”

Something cracked beside him. The shattered splinters of a long bow exploded over Pax’s head and showered into the grass. Trying not to focus on it was like trying to ignore a goat licking your foot, but Pax twisted to Piper.

He also tried to ignore the liquidy thing that went squish as he knelt by her. The soil reeked of bile and iron. When he offered the ambrosia square to her lips, she sputtered out more spittle and blood.

“Holy Titans,” Pax sobbed. By this point, he was surprised he could still be crying, but he choked on tears. This was like a triathlon for his tear ducts. He didn’t want Piper to die. She was sickly pale and black nodes were sticking out of her neck. One had broken open, leaking something white and red down her neck and into her jacket.

She needed this ambrosia inside her system. But—

“Sorry-not-sorry,” he whispered and shoved the ambrosia square into the open sore.

Piper whimpered. Although she remained curled forward, clutching her stomach, she stopped vomiting. She tried to speak, but nothing would come out.

Now, on to the fun task: Jack.

“‘Cus Dad loves you more,

I’ll put your face through the floor.

Haiku that, you bitch!”

Jack shrieked with glee.

Pax had to give him props for composing poetry while on a homicidal rampage.

When Pax glanced up, he saw Jack prepare to dive at Will. Not to say his surrogate father figure would lose the fight, but even a trembling, rash-covered Will could probably wrestle the pink-clad Jack to the floor. Will stepped backwards to brace for impact, holding a scalpel in one hand. His breath was raspy as he kept trying to sing.
Jack tossed his electric base to the side as he dove. The corner of the instrument was cracked. He must have used it earlier as a weapon. There was blood soaking his forearm, probably where Will tried to slice his wrist.

When Will’s foot made contact with the grass, he grunted in pain and stumbled, completely losing his footing.

Pax remembered what the Goddess of Mischief and Ruin said: *Two demigods with one nail.*

Will stumbled backwards and crashed onto his back. His shirt slid up, revealing red rashes encasing his torso.

His aim was off when Jack followed after him. Instead of cutting through Jack’s jugular—where Pax assumed he was aiming—his scalpel jammed into and through Jack’s cheek.

With the misstep, Jack smashed him into grass.

When Will tried to withdraw the scalpel to jam it into Jack’s neck, Jack grabbed Will’s wrist.

“I’m going to heal you,” Jack shrieked with mirth as he straddled him, “And then I’m going to cut your foot open and give you accelerated gangrene so you can watch your leg rot!” He didn’t care about the hole in his cheek; something Will neglected to point out as a horrific misstep in clinical cleanliness. To be fair, Pax realized Will was distracted.

Jack spat blood into Will’s face. Will reached up to jam his thumbs at Jack’s eyes.

Instead of wrangling Will’s other hand, Jack dug his nails into the rashes on Will’s torso.

Will released the hoarsest scream Pax had ever heard, almost like someone had done chest compressions on a corpse for kicks and giggles. Will writhed in pain. Tears glistened on his cheeks. Although Pax felt like he was trying to scowl stoically at Jack, Will looked scared.

“That’s right, little brother. Because you’re one of Dad’s favorites. I just wish it was daytime, so Dad could hear you shriek and scream to die. Maybe I’ll give you appendicitis next. I’d *love* to feel your organs rupture.”

Jack jerked his head down and snapped his teeth into the rashes.

Will released another airy squeal. With Jack off balance, he bucked and managed to dislodge his older half-brother. But Pax could tell Will was getting too weak to fight back. He trembled violently from whatever fever he had and couldn’t seem to lift himself more than a few inches off the ground.

Someone tugged on Pax’s arm gently and almost made Pax yelp. He didn’t realize he’d been frozen in horror until Annabeth, sweaty and crawling, touched his arm. She’d cut a section of his net with her dragon bone sword.

The rest of her strength was spent by whatever illness she was suffering. Annabeth collapsed, staring at him.

Fortunately, Pax didn’t need to be a daughter of wisdom for this part.

He snatched up her sword, cutting the hole wider.

“Jack—Jack stop!” Pax begged. He needed to act fast. As soon as he’d squirmed through the net,
Pax grabbed the closest thing to him—Jack’s ankle.

Pax pulled.

“Not ‘ha ha’ funny, Jack! Please stop—”

Jack kicked him in the face.

Pax flopped backwards, dropping Annabeth’s sword.

When Pax looked up, he could see Jack crouched. He ripped an embedded scalpel out of his arm. Blood spurted out. “You went for my brachiocephalic artery, you little bitch!” Jack laughed. “Well, if we wanna play like that—Walk in the world, it’s so empty and dull—”

Jack reached behind himself and picked up his electric base by the neck.

From where Pax had landed, he couldn’t see much more of Will than where his legs squirmed. Pax scrambled to grab Jack as the child of Apollo hefted the electric base like a battle axe.

“In the land of the beautiful, beauty is cold.”

Before Pax could get close enough, Jack brought his electric base down.

There was a loud crack.

Will’s legs twitched violently.

The base broke at the neck. Jack snatched up the main part of the body and slammed it downward again.

Pax cried. He wasn’t sure what he was shouting at Jack, but he knew it didn’t matter anymore. This time, he slammed bodily into Jack, knocking him off his little brother.

Far in the distance, Pax heard a horrible wail of rage and pain.

This time, the loud crack came from the ground beside them as a fissure split open.

They had to roll to avoid tumbling into the crevasse of blackness.

“Oh no,” Pax whispered.

Somewhere, probably several houses down by how faint the call was, he could hear, “NICO! STOP!”

Pax dragged Jack to his feet. Although Jack grinned like a monster, Pax needed to get him out of here. First, he had to give Will ambrosia—or a smilie Band-Aid—or find the lollipop he’d dropped as a sorry my friend tried to kill you—

Pax glanced over at Will, hoping the electric base had been a glancing blow.

Tried…

Tried was the wrong word for what Jack had done.

A dark shade rose from beside Will’s body. All the grass around Will withered into dried shrivels. When Nico stepped out of the shadows, the intensity in his black eyes was more terrifying than
anything Pax had seen from Jack… and clearly Jack wasn’t right in the head.

Nico didn’t look completely human. His form flickered in and out of shadow like the scattered reels from an old movie.

Pax cowered backward, edging around the fissure that Nico must have caused.

He thought he’d have time to tell Jack to run, even if he didn’t think Jack would run.

Nico leaned forward to sprint—

--disappeared into shadows—

--and reappeared beside the Plague Bringer with his sword drawn.

Jack couldn’t sing a single verse.

Three feet of stygian iron sliced cleanly through his neck.

A thump hit the ground by Pax’s feet.

A second later, Jack’s corpse crumbled.

Pax opened and shut his mouth. That happened so fast, he wasn’t sure he’d seen it. Faintly, he thought he could hear Jack singing about losing his mind over love, but that couldn’t be right. Jack’s vocal cords were too far from his lungs to do that.

Nico turned to Pax. Sort of. His form fuzzed in and out of shadow. Pax remembered Will—back at camp—cutey fussing over Nico for using his powers, scared Nico might puff into moonshine, vapors, and Halloween decorations. The thought of the sunboy’s happy disposition contrasted with Will’s current smashed and bloodied face…

Pax tried to think of how to talk his way out of this. I didn’t—So, I know this looks bad, but you don’t really want to wish me out of existence, right? I really am thinking about your own good…

But Pax didn’t have to. As soon as he took another step backwards, a skeleton hand shot out of the dirt, anchoring his foot.

Nico’s sword slipped out of his hands. Really, through was a better word.

Then death boy froze like a statue.

The skeletal hand slackened on Pax’s ankle.

A woman laughed—someone he’d heard earlier that night.

A half-mummified, half-blood drained shade shifted into Pax’s sight: Melinoe.

Her blackened stump of a hand clenched beside Nico’s stiff form, like she’d wrapped him in bubble wrap and held the ends there. “Percy can’t save you this time, Nico,” she hissed. “In this condition, you’ll make the perfect shadow bridge for my ghosts to come in their true form.”

Pax thought Jack’s singing was getting louder. “Shut up,” he whispered. In the distance, from the same direction he’d heard the shouts, several figures were rapidly approaching.

“L-let him go!” Pax snapped at Melinoe.
She hissed out a laugh. “Oh, if I do that now, he’ll disperse into shadows. Now,” she spoke louder as the others grew near, “Thank you, Ajax. I couldn’t have done any of this without you.”

Song inspiration: Scene idea was conceived to Hollywood Undead’s Disease, but the scene was written to Aria—inflammation (Kill Bill music video), Dear Alice—Arai Tasuku (Fake-AMV/MAD) and Sufjan Stevens—4th of July (Tokyo Ghoul “Why do you Cry?”).

[1] Like father, like son.

[2] Mel Beta Note: I feel like Pax’s existence messes up all of Alabaster’s lists. “I didn’t plan to do this, didn’t plan to do that, I didn’t plan to question my sexuality….”

[3] This, and the quote about beauty later, are from the song “Disease” by Hollywood Undead. This is also the song Jack is strumming when he introduces himself in the last chapter.
Warning! There’s a mildly grotesque… thing (?) in this chapter. I’m not really sure it needs a warning or what that warning would fall under, but… you’ve been warned? Regardless, I hope you enjoy! Or love to hate it after the events of that last chapter! Your choice!

Alabaster hadn’t faced such a paralyzing conundrum in years: if he stood up, he might wake up Kally, but if he stayed where he was, he wouldn’t be able to sleep. Being this considerate was highly illogical.

What he should have been thinking about was what other ingredients he could mix that shape shifter’s ear with to make a more poignant transmodification potion or what he was going to do with the Pax brothers and their band of Ol-Sissies in the morning. In particular, how he was supposed to feed them, considering he remembered Axel tearing through half a box of cereal before Alabaster had his morning tea steeped.

But here he was: his heart panging erratically each time he or Kally moved in their shared sleeping bag. He didn’t know this girl. Well, he sort of knew her—he’d read her journal, about her mother, her adventures with the Pax brothers and her story ideas. But that shouldn’t have been enough. He wasn’t like Ajax, just falling in love—er—liking—er—infatuating over someone because. He had to think things through. They had to make sense.

This must have been Eros’ or Aphrodite’s folly. He refused to be their puppet, or fall to the whims of—

Until Kally shivered and he debated whether or not he should shift closer or put an arm around her. Was that horrendously inappropriate?

Relief came to him in the worst way possible: the sound of a guitar, a wretched song, and some shriek-mutterings.

“Oh, Jack must have escaped,” Alabaster muttered, wanting to groan.

“Escaped?” Kally asked, her voice too alert to have been sleeping. She sat up, and Alabaster saw their chance to go inside, though he couldn’t will himself to get up. He felt dumb for how much he liked sitting beside her. From the disconcerted look on her face, she might have been thinking the same thing.

“Claymore and I keep him gagged and locked up for safekeeping,” he said. With assigning everyone a room and everything with Pax, he’d forgotten their nightly ritual of detaining Jack. Plus, at Camp Othrys, they didn’t have to, and Alabaster couldn’t help but feel nostalgia with the Pax brothers around.

At her disturbed stare, Alabaster assured, “He should be okay. When he’s alone, he
normally just wanders around the yard composing ballads—"

Someone shouted. After a delay of recognition, Alabaster and Kally locked eyes. That had been Ajax, his voice weakened from sobbing. Had there been other shouting? Alabaster had been so focused on Kally, he’d written off other sounds as the neighbors.

A loud split, like thunder had torn a crater in the earth, cracked in the air. The ground trembled once.

They shoved the sleeping bag away and scrambled to their feet. Neither was armed—they should have gone inside for weapons earlier. He had extra spell prepared on his pants but…

Alabaster stumbled when one of the runes on his pajama pants glowed brilliant green. He gritted his teeth.

Kally grabbed Alabaster’s arm to help pull him up. “What’s that?!” she asked, her eyes searching the yard for Pax.

“How someone is trying to break through my barrier,” he hissed.

A very powerful someone. He could feel the Mist twisting to the command of another.

“Are there any children of Hecate after you?” he demanded. This was almost as bad as Lamia.

Kally shook her head. “No. Uh—unless—I think Leo’s girlfriend could do magic? Was the original Calypso a child of Hecate?”

Alabaster’s eyes widened. “The sorceress? Why didn’t you say—” he cut off. No one but the Pax brothers would have realized how vital that was, and they might have been sparing Jack’s feelings about Calypso.

A dark figure skirted around the side of the house. Alabaster flinched. Something shouldn’t have gotten through his barrier without him detecting—

Alabaster relaxed when he recognized the single glint of Pax’s hazel eye and heard the racking hackle of Jack’s song. Alabaster tensed all over when he saw that Pax was alone. No—not alone—

Pax scrambled up the stairs. He trembled and choked on sobs when he skittered to a halt in front of them. He was pale. Mud smeared his knees, and there was a nasty bruise forming on his neck, like someone had tried to take a chunk out of it. He bent over and put his free hand on his knee. His other fingers were tightly clenched in a mess of short, dripping red hair.

A mess that was definitely talking.

“—okay, kiddo, it was just Nico, and we hate that—” the head said.

Pax gathered himself enough to say, “Jack’s dead.”

“I see that,” Alabaster said, unable to look away.

When Pax registered Alabaster’s and Kally’s looks of horror, he gave another sob—this one of relief. “Can all of you hear him too?”

Alabaster nodded.
He could see Kally do the same from the corner of his eye.

Some part of him was fascinated. The other part of him wondered if his fascination signified how much more therapy he needed. Had this been another situation, Alabaster might have chastised Pax for bringing home wartime trophies. Alabaster already thought it was gross when the weasels did it.

Pax let out a hysterical laugh, twisting the mess of hair. Alabaster’s stomach clenched. He’d had to dissect plenty of bodies for spells, but he didn’t often recognize them. Jack’s face was ghastly pale. His eyes were sunken and his lips looked parched and blue under the spittle and blood. There was a hole in his cheek, leaking more fluids. Despite all of that, his eyes were alert and his mouth wouldn’t stop moving. Now, he was humming the tune to, Don’t Stop Me Now.

Pax laugh-cried, “Oh, thank the gods! Not that I’m happy all of you are going crazy too, just that it isn’t just me.”

Kally reached a hesitant hand out towards Pax, but stopped. “Ajax, are you—”

“No!” he cried, “No, I’m not okay!” Alabaster guessed she was going to say, hurt, but knew stopping a Pax mid-rant was like stopping a train with a school crossing sign. “I’m holding a decapitated—”

“—very handsome—” Jack interjected.

“—very handsome, talking head of a surrogate father I’ve had to watch die twice! And I’ve probably been exposed to all kinds of diseases, like ebola—”

“—actually, it was pneumatic plague,” Jack corrected indignantly, “Keep your pandemics straight.”

“—shingles, and whatever he gave Annabeth! Oh, and Will’s blood.”

“Mono,” Jack said.[1]

“Annabeth is here--?” Kally started to ask, but put a hand to her mouth. “Is Will okay?”

“He was looking a little on the corpsy side after Jack finished his family bonding,” Pax used Jack’s head to gesticulate on family bonding. Someone needed to take Jack’s head from him… but Alabaster really didn’t want to touch it. “Then Nico went all shadows and poofballs to save him and Melinoe captured him to use him as a shadow bridge and now the others are coming for us,” he babbled in one breath.

“We need to wake up everyone, assuming that cracking noise didn’t wake them up,” Alabaster said. He could feel the shield around his property waning. “The barrier will only give us maybe—five more minutes at this rate. Ajax—”

Pax burst into a fit of giggles. He almost doubled over. Both Alabaster and Kally flinched.

“Get it?! Get it?! Jack’s the head of Orpheus Metal. The prophecy! Orpheus’ head won by heart’s loss. I’m at the loss! Why are the Fates so much more creative than me today!” Pax continued to giggle between sobs and gasps. “You win, Fates! You win this round!”

Many stories said Orpheus’ head sang after it was cut off, though Alabaster didn’t know why they would need a singing head. What they needed to do was get inside and ready for a fight.
If Annabeth and Nico were here, he had a guess as to which demigod would be leading the charge. The thought of fighting Percy Jackson excited Alabaster, but not in his pajama pants.

Alabaster went to command them inside when Pax hugged himself, not seeming to care that Jack’s head bopped against his hip. He choked and coughed.

“Aw, kiddo, it’s okay—” Jack started.

Kally removed one of her socks and jammed it into Jack’s mouth. She shivered, examining Pax. After opening and closing her mouth once, she pulled Pax into a hug.

Normally, Alabaster might warn that she was falling for one of Pax’s ruses. But Pax could barely breathe. And Jack was definitely dead in Pax’s hand. A shudder of horror rumbled through Alabaster when he realized Death really couldn’t keep Jack away.

And part of him broke, knowing Pax really needed him right now.

Kally reached back, grabbed Alabaster’s sweater, and dragged him into the hug.

He counted out five seconds, trying not to think about how freaked out Pax was. Or Kally. Alabaster had seen plenty of severed heads. He guessed this was her first.

“We need to get inside,” Alabaster said. Later. They could help Pax later. And… do whatever you were supposed to do for decapitated heads to Jack. “Let’s get inside and get Axel.”

As Alabaster had hoped, the others were readying themselves. They must have heard the crack. Axel was decorated with a myriad of weapons strapped on with various holsters: hoplite swords, daggers, knives, and others, both celestial and human-made. He had donned his Nemean Lion pelt. With that, his bracers, and his old leather pteruges[2], Axel looked more like the honored lieutenant Alabaster had proudly looked up to.

The child of Eros had his bow ready, peering out the front window like a sniper. Euna had Backbiter drawn, standing beside him. Merry sat on the stairs, pale, jutting her jaw to one side.

The weasels practiced a war dance all around the living room.

Needing no instruction, Axel handed Alabaster his playing cards as he, Kally, Pax, and… Jack entered.

“What in Hades is going on?” Calex demanded from his lookout by the window. “We heard—Holy Hygieia! Pax, why do you have that mental bloke’s head?!”

Jack finally managed to dislodge and spit out Kally’s sock. “I believe the full term is ‘mentally handicapped’ for the political activists. Don’t want to upset Axel,” he teased.

“Oh gods, it talks,” Calex hissed, touching his temple with one hand.

“Jack’s dead,” Pax greeted his brother.

“Again,” Axel acknowledged as he handed Pax the Silver Tongued Snake helm, his bronze chest plate, some clothing, and Pax’s utility belt and attached daggers. His eyes glazed over
Jack the same way Alabaster had seen Axel register other dead in the field of battle: a current logistic, grief best left until grief had time. Though Axel did puff up his cheeks and pop them.

Alabaster flicked his Mist cards through his fingers. Claymore’s was on top, but now wouldn’t be the time to awaken him. As much as he wanted Claymore’s guidance, another body cluttering the room wasn’t what they needed. He flipped to the next set of cards, summoning his bulletproof vest. He hesitated on the imperial gold sword. No… for this, he wanted his old weapons.

Axel handed Alabaster his Cloven Witch Boy helm, the goat skull enlaced with Stygian iron. The Triple A Chimera helped each other suit up like no time had passed since their last mission.

There was a card towards the bottom of Alabaster’s deck that he’d almost thrown away on multiple occasions. He withdrew it, summoned the contents, and handed a thin vial off to Pax. “This is the remnants of some knock out serum. You get one shot. Don’t waste it.”

Jack hummed the whole time and Merry and Calex looked like they might throw up.

“Pax Bae, sweetie, you and I need to have some real talk time about you bringing body parts and dead things home,” Merry whispered.

“They sent a diplomacy party—” Pax explained while Axel strapped down Pax’s bronze breastplate.

“Amicablicious!” Merry cheered. “So why—”

“—that Jack attacked. And now it looks like I played whack-a-mole with Will Solace’s face and poofed Nico Di Angelo into hipsters and Hot Topic.”

“Did you?” Calex asked, his eyes narrowing.

Axel and Kally shot Calex a look. Kally’s was of bewilderment. Axel’s was anger. His message was clear, don’t question my brother.

Pax’s jaw dropped and began to tremble again. “How could you ask that? You know I ship Solangelo.”

“Maybe we can still use some sweet talk. Pax, what exac—?” Merry started to ask.

“AJAX PAX!”

A rumble shook the house and something roared along the shutters. The window glass exploded inward.

Calex and Euna shouted and dove onto the floor.

Everyone crouched and ducked.

“Let’s talk and flee, shall we?” Pax shouted over the boom of wind as it knocked over lampshades, tore loose papers out of the bookshelf, and knocked Alabaster’s favorite teacup off the coffee table. It shattered on impact with the rug.

“What is that?!” Kally asked.

“If I had to guess? Jason expressing his feelings. He’s a very sensitive kind of guy!” Pax
shouted back.

Something smashed into the front door. A piece of the wood fractured. Alabaster wanted to curse. Though weakened, his rune barrier hadn’t collapsed yet. No living thing—human or monster—should have been able—

The wooden frame cracked, and something silvery thundered into the living room.

Alabaster summoned one of his best Mist cards: his two pronged, Stygian iron staff. Whichever magic user they were facing must have been powerful to sneak in a—

A silver worktable.

With the wind dying down, Alabaster could swear there was a faint, “Felix! Come back! I wasn’t supposed to program you with door ramming abilities until next week!”

Maybe they would have shared a collective sigh of relief, had the sentient table not bound across the room. Before any of them could get in the way, the worktable slammed into Kally, knocking her flat.

The table lifted a leg above Kally’s head.

She yelped and twisted out of the way of a blow that would have crushed her skull. Instead, the table leg pinned her sweatshirt hoodie, preventing her from rolling away. Kally scrambled to squirm out of the article of clothing.

Alabaster slammed his staff into the leg, jolting her free.

“Hunnie!” Pax shouted.

The weasel scurried out from under the couch. Her approach became much more intimidating when Hunnie expanded to the size of the couch. She slammed into the worktable, rocketing the table back through the front door.

“Out the back!” Axel commanded.

“But—the van and Vinyl—” Calex started.

“Now!”

Alabaster had abandoned so many houses over the last year, all he could do was internally sigh at the thought of going back on the market. At least it was easier with Claymore around.

But, he wanted to take a stand and fight. He’d run from Lamia and the Romans for months. And now, he could possibly have the chance to fight Percy Jackson and Jason Grace and show the pawns of the Olympic mafia what they’d taken from him?

While he hesitated, Pax grabbed the hand he had on his helmet and Kally grabbed the one on his staff. They dragged him back through the backdoor they’d entered moments ago.

From a glance behind, Alabaster could see Euna dragging Calex and Merry in a similar way. Axel followed out last, assuring the group was together.

As they raced down the porch, the rune on Alabaster’s pant leg shattered. A jolt of pain and weakness spread from the break, darkening his senses momentarily. The rune barrier
collapsed. The house was now exposed.

They couldn’t make a stealthy retreat, not with Jack mumbling the whole time and the clank of their armor.

The three weasels swarmed around their feet. Hunnie was back to her tiny size, having either won or given up on the fight against the work table. For the sake of defending Hecate’s craftsmanship, he hoped the former.

“Alabaster! Best retreat?” Axel demanded.

“The forest,” Alabaster snapped. Despite Lamia’s recent absence, Alabaster had gotten into the habit of planning escapes. Reflexively, he’d directed Pax and Kally towards the woods, taking the lead.

“Merry—I know it’s a lot—you gotta keep going!” Kally gasped over her shoulder.

“C—can’t—” the daughter of Dionysus panted. From their stories earlier, Merry had completely depleted herself of energy. A couple hours rest wouldn’t recharge the strongest of demigods after causing a Dionysus level dance off.

“I have you,” Calex said.

Alabaster glanced back. Calex had picked Merry up, but they were already so far behind. And carrying her would only slow the Brit down.

They needed something to cover their retreat, but Alabaster wasn’t sure his concealment spells could hide all seven of them—eight if you included Jack’s grumbling head.

Beyond them, Alabaster could see five figures approaching from the side of the house.

The barometric pressure dropped.

“STOP!” Pax shrieked.

For an instant, Alabaster thought Pax or Axel had used their Mayan magic. That’s how it always felt before they did.

Instead, a flash of light blinded Alabaster ahead.

Something popped.

For an instant, Alabaster couldn’t see or hear anything. The earth rumbled under his feet—something was shifting. He, Pax, and Kally fell on the grass.

When he managed to blink the floating spheres out of his vision, he could see something had shifted the earth ahead of them. There was now a deep trench, in a semicircle, around the back of the house. Like someone had collapsed a tunnel underneath.

They were trapped.
Footnotes:

[1] Mel Beta Note: “I’m not sure what’s stronger right now: my sense of humor or my sense of morals. I’m so emotionally confused!” However, Mel had the disclaimer that Jack exposure may cause confusion. Like a Psyduck.

[2] This is the proper name for those fancy leather skirts the Romans wore. “Skirts” just didn’t fit the right mood of the scene, though I assure you Pax was thinking of them as skirts.
Axel: I Mean It Guys, No Killing or Maiming (or: I Make Alabaster’s Day)

Twenty-Seven: Axel

I Mean It Guys, No Killing or Maiming

(or: I Make Alabaster’s Day)

Axel had seconds to assess the situation. From the glance behind him, he’d seen Percy, Jason, Hazel, Frank, and Leo on the side of the house. Jason raised a hand moments before the world went white and the sounds of the night hollowed.

Hazel must have collapsed something under them to form a trench.

So, no forest retreat. Momentary disorientation.

For that instant, Axel thought about how Reyna’s hair felt on his arm when they watched the sunset in New Rome. He wondered what she was doing right now, since there was no way she’d sit still when she wanted to be here—kicking the crap out of him.

When his vision cleared, he could see the dust settling from the trench.

Axel stood up and clenched his jaw. He reached down to grab Pax’s shoulder strap, dragging his little brother to his feet. “Do you have an ace up your sleeve?” he asked.

Pax knew exactly what Axel meant. He swallowed. “Leo, but I don’t wanna use my powers on him. He’s all cute and squishy and infatuated with a witch.”

“Ajax,” Axel said. His voice started stern, but softened. This felt too much like the Battle of Mount Othrys. Pax crying about Jack and Flynn’s deaths. Them on the retreat when they had nowhere to go. But there really wasn’t anywhere to go. Last time, he’d used the labyrinth entrance. Axel didn’t see any. “I’m sorry,” he finished, “but you have to when we start to lose.”

“You’re gonna have a go at them? Have you gone nuts, Axel?!” Calex demanded. He dragged himself up. “They’re the Heroes of Olympus—no one has ever—”

Merry staggered to her feet beside him. “No—no—no—sweetie—I know you’re panicked, but this isn’t the—”

“No killing,” Axel snapped as Alabaster stood between him and Pax. “Just disarming. We’re the ones that Frank and Hazel will want to arrest. Let’s give the others time to sneak around the side of the house. Calex, Euna, and Kally, get Merry to safety and tell Camp Half-Blood what’s actually going on. If Eris wants a fight, she won’t stop until she sees one.”

“Has anyone defeated these guys?” Euna asked, her eyes focusing on the approaching five with the same calm analysis Axel had seen her use during training.

“They never fought the Triple A Chimera,” Axel said, and hefted up his Leonis Caput helm. “Let’s show them how we earned the title Demigod Slayers.”

“By being a stealth team that avoids fair fights at all costs?” Pax squeaked. He puffed up his cheeks and popped them. As he exhaled the air, he lifted up the Silver Tongued Snake helmet
and Axel could see the magic from the helmet already take effect when the master intended to wear it: Pax stopped shaking. One of his fists tightened. “I call Jason,” he said, his voice already taking on a hissing quality.

The Leonis Caput gargled a laugh in the back of Axel’s head. For once, Axel didn’t try to drown it out.

“I’ll try to take out Percy first,” Axel said. “Alabaster, can you stop the witch who broke your barrier?”

Alabaster nodded and withdrew three small spheres from a pouch at his waist. Despite everything, Alabaster gave Axel a bitter grin.

“Leo is Ajax’s trump card,” Axel said.

When he glanced up, Axel could see the children of Poseidon, Pluto, Jupiter, and Mars rapidly approaching. “Chimera, helms on,” he and the Leonis Caput said in unison. They lifted his helmet.
To say Percy was having a bad day would be a grievous understatement. He’d had worse days: he wasn’t in Tartarus right now, nor was he in that awful demigod prep course that Annabeth and his mom had signed him up for to do New Rome’s entrance exams.

But, his girlfriend had broken up with him today for a weasel she couldn’t catch. And this was the third counselor of Cabin Seven that Percy would see moments before his death—though maybe not. Maybe Will was okay. Percy tried not to focus on Will, or Nico’s disappearance, or the headless corpse.

When he first ran up to the scene, Percy feared the worst on the body’s identity, except that Nico hadn’t been wearing such a fashionable pink pajama set. Percy was pretty sure, if someone tried to redress Nico in that post-mortem, even Hades would break the rules of the dead and allow Nico ten seconds of undeadly massacring to destroy such a sleepwear atrocity.

However, when Percy saw Annabeth and Piper lying on the ground and that crimson-and-black unicorn-jerk keeping vigilance over them, everything else vanished. He sprinted to her side, dropped to his knees, and cradled her.

With the way the unicorn had its gold and silver, broken horn to Piper’s neck, Percy may have feared some Diomedes’ level of flesh-eating-horse, except he could hear the unicorn grumbling about healing her.

But nothing about healing Annabeth.

When Percy pulled Annabeth into his lap, he was relieved to hear her soft breath. She was okay, but looked exhausted. There were dark circles under her eyes, like she hadn’t slept in days. He knew that look well during her exam times.

“Wise Girl…” he whispered and kissed her forehead. Despite the cold, her forehead was coated with sweat.

“What happened? He demanded mentally.

The unicorn huffed, its black mouth puttering. He raised his horn from Piper to scowl one eye at Percy. At the sight of Piper’s neck, Percy winced. Pus and blood stained Piper’s camo jacket from some sore the unicorn was fixing. She was also breathing, though each breath rattled.

Eat bit, mate, the unicorn snapped. Other than Arion, Percy was so used to unquestioned respect from equestrians, the unicorn’s tone startled him. I just got back from fightin’ your little
bird, went for a bit of grass, heard a crack, and came to check on my pet—

Jason and Leo appeared on either side of Piper.

When Leo knelt down, he landed in something squishy.

“How’s our Beauty Queen?” he asked, his voice cracking. Leo looked pale and he kept glancing back to Will.

Frank knelt beside Will. The big Canadian took off his praetorian cloak and gently laid it over Will in a way Percy really didn’t like. The movement was too final, too telling, especially how Frank covered Will’s smashed face, like that was all that was left to do.

Beside Frank, Hazel stood with her spatha drawn. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Her empty fist was clenched and shaking.

Calypso sank down beside the decapitated body, looking stunned.

When Percy returned his gaze, his eyes locked with Jason. A moment of understanding passed between them, and Percy knew he had seen the final moments of another deceased Cabin Seven counselor. He wondered how many friends Jason had seen die in battle.

Anger wretched at his gut. This was supposed to be a peace party.

These other demigods weren’t great at the whole “peace party” thing. They’d need to be taught a thing or two about peace.

Er, well, about keeping the peace. Or—whatever. They needed to be taught a lesson.

“Guys? Earth to Percy, what did Sergeant Horn say about Pipes?” Leo asked.

Judging from his expression, Leo hadn’t realized what had happened to Will yet.

The unicorn snapped its teeth near Leo’s head. The name is Vinyl, Meat Sack.

“I wouldn’t call him that,” Percy said. He’d meant it for Leo, but realized it work for both parties.

“She should be okay,” Jason said, almost stubbornly. Percy watched Jason gently take Piper’s arm, two fingers pressed to her vitals. “Her heartbeat is strong though I think she’s running a slight fever.”

Behind them, Percy could see Hazel wipe away her tears. “We’re not letting them get away, not—not with what’s happened here. I’m going to bring down that barrier.”

Percy might have asked “What barrier?” but Hazel turned towards the woods, where they’d seen Pax dart off as they arrived.

As she raised her empty hand, a circle of green runes glowed around the forested lot.

Calypso stood up, away from the body. She rubbed her fingers on her work pants, then flipped her braid back over her shoulder. She stepped beside Hazel. “I can help you.”

Leo frowned and shifted. “Sunshine, I thought you didn’t have magic—wait—if you do, shouldn’t you be focusing on healing Will?”
Jason winced. “Leo—”

But Calypso beat him to it. While lifting her hands beside Hazel, Calypso hissed, “What good would that do?” Her voice was so much harsher than he remembered.

That did make Percy realize she could be healing Annabeth or Piper. Thinking about the curses and death wishes Calypso had given Annabeth in Tartarus, should he let her heal Annabeth?

The barrier’s circle emblazed with a more brilliant green. It expanded, like a bubble ready to pop.

Leo’s mouth dropped open. He glanced back over to Will and the decapitated body. “… oh… oh gods—does that mean the other body is Nic—”

“No, it’s Jack,” Calypso said. She gritted her teeth. Hazel made a soft grumble. Something small and sparkly sprang up by their feet—a diamond.

“Jack, your ex-boyfriend Jack? You can recognize him without a head?!”

“No the time, Leo,” Percy pointed out. Though he wasn’t sure it was ever the time to discuss headless body recognition. “Jason.” Percy locked eyes with the son of Jupiter. “Do you wanna find out if that barrier is wind resistant?”

“On it,” Jason said. He gently kissed Piper’s forehead, took off his jacket, and propped her head under it. Then he went to join Hazel and Calypso. When he raised his arms, a deafening whistle blasted into the air as wind thundered into the trees.

Leo fumbled with his tool belt. “Lemme alert Felix and Festus. Maybe we can smoke them out.”

Frank stepped over to them, looking sick. “My stick could be in there.”

“Right. Maybe Felix can annoy them out,” Leo corrected and walked off, calling on the metal friends they’d parked further down the street.

Annabeth murmured softly. Percy dropped his face close to hers, trying to tune out the others. She was so quiet; he was scared Jason’s wind would drown her out.

What she said made his skin crawl. “Eris… has… your sis… ter…”

Percy felt his jaw drop. “My sister? They took my sister?!”

She inhaled leisurely and her eyes fluttered. She seemed like she might pass out again, but managed, “Don’t… kill… Ajax… Not… Fault…”

None of that made sense. But Annabeth’s grey eyes rolled back into her head before Percy could ask her what any of it meant. Although she’d barely managed to move at all, what little she had done spent the last of her energy. Annabeth collapsed into a deep sleep.

Percy trembled as he mimicked what Jason had done for Piper. He took off his swim captain sweater to put under Annabeth’s head. He couldn’t tell if his shakes were more from fear or anger.

You could mess with him. You could mess with the gods. You could even mess with Camp Half-Blood.
But no one touched Annabeth.

And no one touched his little sister or the rest of his family.

“Your sister?! Gods, Percy, are—are you okay?” Frank’s voice brought him to the present.

Frank hovered nearby, looking like he felt dumb for asking the question. But Percy was glad for it. The question made him focus.

“You.” Percy pointed at the unicorn who had continued to heal Piper. “You keep an eye out on these two, else I’ll hunt you down and turn you into glue.”

The unicorn huffed at him. Yea, the unicorn had attacked them, but he figured—had Vinyl wanted to kill Annabeth and Piper—he would have been using them for horn goring practice instead of sprinkling them with fairy dust.

Percy got to his feet and drew Riptide. “Alright, Frank. No more horsing around. We gotta make a plan to catch these bastards.” Especially if his sister and Nico were on the line. Especially if they had to find out what bastard did this to Will.

Something exploded beside them.

Shards of what looked like glowing green glass puffed into the moonbeams before dissolving into dust. As Jason’s air swept the particles away, an entire townhouse came into view in place of the forest, with a full driveway, a van parked out front, and a confused looking metal donkey beside it.

The Pax brother’s van.

There was also a stumbling silver worktable on the lawn. Leo must have sent Felix in while Percy was attending to Annabeth. The table looked crippled, one leg bent to the point of nonfunctioning. Now, it might make a better piece of angry, modern art.

“Barrier is down!” Hazel announced.

From their position in the neighbor’s adjacent lawn, Percy could see the back porch, where seven demigods were making a run for the forest behind the house.

“They’re leaving out the back!” Percy shouted.

Jason was on it. As he stepped rapidly along the side of the house, he raised one hand. A lightning bolt blasted into the tree line ahead of the retreating demigods.

Everything went white.

Percy’s ears rang with the pop.

Despite temporary deaf and blindness, Percy and Frank rushed over to join where Jason and Hazel were converging.

When Percy blinked the white dots out of his vision, he could see their attempted escapees were still trying to get to their feet. Before the Pax brothers and their allies could regroup, Hazel lifted her hands and shoved them down, hard, like she was about to hop over an invisible fence.

The ground by the tree line collapsed in a semicircle trench, cutting off any escape to the woods, unless one of them had a grappling hook or were an Olympic level pole vaulter. They’d
have to get through the five of them instead. Percy hoped they’d try to get through them.

“Nice,” Frank complimented Hazel.

“Thanks,” Hazel said, but her eyes were narrowed at their opponents. Percy understood. He could feel their collective rage. While Percy didn’t know the full story, these jerks had messed with him, his friends, and his family too much. They were going to find out who did this to Annabeth, Piper, and Will, where Nico was, and what they’d done with Percy’s little sister.

“Annabeth said not to kill them,” Percy growled.

Jason cracked his knuckles. “Did she say anything about beating them senseless?”

“Nope. She left that out.”

“Good,” Hazel said, clutching her spatha.

A rush of air puffed out behind them as something thumped onto the ground. Leo laughed crazily beside what Percy assumed was Festus. “Ha—ha! Dragon cavalry has arrived! Let’s show them that our back up is cooler than theirs!”

“No fire,” Hazel called over her shoulder.

Frank gave her an appreciative smile.

“Right! No fire!” Leo assured.

Festus creaked in confirmation.

“Hey, Sunshine, see if you can heal the girls while we take care of this.”

Percy was thinking how to politely inform Leo that his girlfriend might want to kill Annabeth when a cry went up from Hazel’s makeshift trench.

By now, Percy and his friends were walking past the back porch. He could see where Axel, Pax, Euna, and another boy that Percy didn’t recognize were standing

The tall, gangly brunette stranger tossed something onto the ground.

Smoke exploded into the moonlight, twisting out in three different colors: black in the center, and gold and green on either side. The screen completely coated their opponents, the back yard, and the trench. Then, it snaked upward into three separate shapes. The gold warped into a lion; the green, a serpentine head; the black, one of a goat.

As though in sync with the swirling smoke, a hiss and a snarl thundered from within.

Although Percy desperately hoped the goat would go baaaa, instead, a column of fire spat out of the smoke goat’s mouth. Not nearly as funny as the baaah, would have been.

Percy immediately recognized the shape as something he’d fought as a child. Some part of him felt small again.

Frank put it to words. “That is the Triple A Chimera,” he warned.

“AAA? Do they sell insurance?” Percy asked, trying to sound confident. Why was his voice shaking still? He was trying not to think about his sister, or Annabeth, or what could have
happened to either of them. He was trying to focus on the battle, but his mind kept twisting to panic, like his battle mode ADHD had gone haywire.

Someone chanted in a language Percy didn’t understand. The barometric pressure dropped, like it had when Jason summoned lightning. A flash of turquoise flames fluttered to life within the golden smoke, tinting it a sickly green.

Another chill went down Percy’s spine. Some part deep inside of him said he should *nope* right out of this. But he and his friends had defeated the giants together and other *way* scarier things. Some renegade demigods? No problem, right?

“Reyna said they use fear magic—at least the Leonis Caput does. Ares said he already killed two praetors.”

“Right. Fear magic. That’s what it is,” Leo said behind them.

Jason put a hand out to stop any of them from approaching the smoke. “Frank, you didn’t say Axel was the Leonis Caput!”

“You know them?” Hazel asked. The fear magic must have been getting to her too. She looked queasy.

“I fought him and the Silver-Tongued Snake during the Battle of Mount Othrys. *That’s* the bastard playing with Reyna’s emotions?”

The way Jason said it made Percy think Annabeth’s wishes about no-killing wouldn’t be honored.

“They have nicknames?” Percy asked, trying to stop shaking. “It’s like a boy band.”

“I assure you, they’re nothing like a boy band.”

As though to confirm, through the smoke, a figure stepped out. Percy wondered if the bronze dragon behind them might discourage an attack and encourage making a sign that said *We surrender. Sorry for being jerks.*

Instead, the creature he saw didn’t look human, but also didn’t appear to be anything he knew from Greek mythology.

It had a ram’s skull for a head, with horns jutting several feet out to the sides. Green mist poured from its empty eye sockets. Pouches with glowing runes dangled from its wrists, its exposed spinal column, and its two-pronged black staff. Its limbs looked built out of tree twigs. Although humanoid, its gait was off, like each cloven step forward required it to rip roots out of the earth.

From the golden smoke beside it, another stalked forward. This one had golden skin that sagged into folds. Where the skin was torn, Percy could see a rotting skeleton. The face was feline, with a bloodied, crimson mane encasing the neck. Its jaws were permanently stretched into a snarl, too far for a living creature. Inside the blackness of the throat, Percy could see the reflection of two predatory golden eyes, like this thing had swallowed someone that wanted out.

The way it moved reminded Percy of how Leo’s flames flickered—too abrupt and jerky to look real.

Lastly, something rolled from the green smoke. It hissed out a laugh and crept closer, keeping low to the ground, though Percy could have sworn he saw the reptilian flicker of a tail.
Percy was not digging this fear magic. He was shivering like the first time he’d seen Polybotes.

“I’ve seen the real thing… They’re more like a… discount Chimera,” Percy said, swallowing.

The others looked as stunned.

“Jason.” Frank seemed to come to first. “Can you blow their cover?”

Jason shook his head, like he was warding off a bad memory. “Gladly.”

As Jason raised his arms to blast away the smoke, the serpentine figure and the feline crouched low, like an Olympic sprinter about to dash at them. Mr. Ramhead in the center slammed his staff down.

“Incanteare: Gelu Semati!” he snarled.

The serpent and the feline disappeared. Something else swirled out from the smoke: a blast of wintery hail. Tiny ice bullets pelted into Percy’s skin, making him wince and raise a hand to block his face.

Although the smoke dissipated under Jason’s wind, the hail blew into the wind, unlike anything Percy had ever seen. Percy couldn’t sense the water in that ice. He never thought there would be a storm he and Jason couldn’t stop, but this hail didn’t seem to care about the powers of the children of the sky and storm.

“So you wanna play with magic? You should know what you’re falling for,” the voice echoed from where Mr. Ramhead had been standing. The hailstorm increased; Percy could no longer see him. He could barely even see Frank, only a few feet away from him.

But he could sense something coming, something bad.

“I can’t control any of this!” Jason said, “Hazel?”

“It’s an illusion—but I can conjure Mist, not see through it,” Hazel said, “Listen for them!”

Percy desperately wished Rachel was here. Or Annabeth and Piper were conscious. Rachel could have seen through. Annabeth might have thought of a plan around it, and Piper could have talked Mr. Ramshead down.

“Jason and I will take to the air, see if we can get a better idea of what’s going on or where this ends,” Frank said, getting a hold of himself. “Hazel, see if you can trip up our opponents and make it hard to sneak around. Percy, Leo, Festus, make sure no one gets past you.”

“Will do, Praetor Man. Time for the Leomeister and Festus to—”

Something scurried past Percy’s leg. He pivoted to follow the movement, but the small creatures weren’t after him. The storm was less intense behind him, allowing Percy to catch a glimpse of what happened.

Leo stood a few feet back. Festus crouched behind him, making the townhouse look like a toy model. Both were ready to fight.

Then a weasel the size of a tractor slammed into the side of Festus. It seemed to come out
of nowhere. Two smaller creatures hopped off the first, scampering up onto Festus’s wings.

While Festus tried to gain his footing, the monster-sized weasel twisted to chomp down on Festus’s neck. Percy hoped it would wretch back in pain from a toothache, but the black teeth sank right into the bronze.

The dragon creaked in alarm. The weasel was smaller than him, but those teeth must have hurt.

“Festus!” Leo shouted.

Festus stumbled, smashing into the side of the house. Percy took a step towards them in horror—Festus was close to Annabeth, Percy, Calypso, and Vinyl. The structure groaned, siding ripping off and onto his wings. The weasel disengaged, darted to the side, and dashed at him again. That thing was fast.[2]

“No fire!” Leo shouted when Festus’s mouth began to glow, withdrawing a sledgehammer from his tool belt.

It creaked again in anger. Then went to unfurl its wings, when one made an uncomfortable cracking sound.

One of the other tiny weasels phased out of Festus’s half-folded wing, a strip of wires dangling from its mouth.

Something exploded on Festus’s other wing.

They couldn’t use fire, but no one had said anything about water. Percy was about to give that giant rodent a hose down and get Festus clear of the girls, when he realized something horrible.

The weasels had been a distraction.

“Eyes forward!” Frank shouted.

Percy’s gut tugged when he felt for the water in the plumps under the house. He pulled, forcing the pipes to burst, flooding the water towards the surface.

As the water surged up, Jason shouted in alarm. The air and hail whirled around Jason as he went to take off, and follow Frank’s orders. Something anchored his ascent.

Vines erupted from the ground, wrapping tightly around the son of Jupiter’s ankles. The vines shooting from the earth became thicker—tree roots—and dragged Jason back down. Jason slashed furiously at the plants, but a new one would snag out of the ground each time he cut one down. Soon, the tree roots had crawled up his leg and sank him back to the grass.

A hissing laugh cackled out of the hail beside Jason. “I’ve seen enough hentai to know where this is going.”

When the vines snatched at Frank, he dispersed into a swarm of wasps—or something like that, since Percy just saw the large Canadian disappear into the hail.

Before Hazel could help him or Festus or before Percy could blast them with water, something rolled from the same direction of that taunting hiss.
Percy expected to have to destroy the soccer ball-like object, but felt his stomach pitch when the head started talking in an announcer voice.

“Oh! Our eagle boy is out for the count! Can the gracious Jason Grace manage to fight Euna Song’s godly grip! Stay tuned to find out folks—”

“Is that a talking head?!” Hazel demanded, being closest to the… thing.

No one could answer.

The Triple A Chimera reappeared.

Percy didn’t see the other two members, but something flickered out of the hail, directly beside him. One moment, Percy was concentrating on the up flow of sewer water and hoping Hazel and Frank could help Jason, when a skeletal humanoid appeared out of the hail and rolled into the splits beside Percy.

He hadn’t expected it to be so close, or so low to the ground. The movement completely exposed the Leonis Caput’s golden fur back and red maned head. It had no weapons drawn, and—for that instant—Percy could see it give him a ghastly grin.

A second set of golden, glistening eyes winked at Percy from inside the creature’s massive jaws.

As Percy pivoted to redirect Riptide, the monster slammed its palm into the side of Percy’s knee.

Percy felt air escape his mouth in the form of a scream.

Something snapped in his knee. The joint bent inward, towards his other leg.

Percy focused to keep his concentration on the scene around him: the hail, the gleam of the monster’s fur, the sewage water, his friends’ shouts, the talking head announcing his fall. He refused to let the world white out, like his body wanted it to.

In the same instance, Percy slammed Riptide’s blade into the Leonis Caput’s shoulder.

The blade deflected off the monster’s hide.

_The Nemean Lion fur_, he realized. He should have recognized it. This person—Axel?—must have killed it after him. If it was the same, no weapon could pierce that hide.

There was nothing Percy could do to regain his footing. His knee wouldn’t respond when he tried to stumble. He was going to fall.

But his little sister and Nico were on the line. He wasn’t about to let this monster win. After all, he was Percy Jackson.

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Footnotes:

[1] Pax would like to clarify, that as he and Axel are circus performers, _they_ probably could have
made it. But they didn’t want to leave the others behind. You’re welcome, Pax.

[2] Look up videos of weasels vs. snakes. Weasels are AWESOME!
If there was one thing Hazel regretted over the last few months, it was not practicing incantations and counter-incantations with Lou Ellen, head of the Hecate cabin. Lou Ellen had offered, though usually the offers were followed up by Lou Ellen removing one of Hazel’s facial orifices, something Hazel found far less charming than Lou Ellen seemed to think.

When Hazel fought the sorceress, Pasiphae, and the giant, Clytius, she’d been underground, in her element, and had Hecate at her side, or as by-her-side as a mysterious, ambiguous Mist and magic goddess could be.

Here, they were exposed, distraught, and had a talking head shouting commentary at them.[1]

Hazel really hoped the last part was some sick trick of the Mist, but her Plutonian powers told her that was definitely part of an undead corpse.

That wasn’t what was making Hazel queasy though: she couldn’t shake the feeling that Hecate had abandoned her for this fight.

That, and she couldn’t see through this ice storm.

None of that mattered though. These people killed Will. They kidnapped her brother. They hurt her friends. They were not about to get away with this. Any fear she’d felt at the foreign chanting and turquoise fire solidified into rage.

When Hazel heard Festus slam into the house under an onslaught of weasels, she focused on her unconscious friends that were in danger of being crushed. From what she could see, Calypso was trying to drag Piper further back, but she’d left Annabeth---Hazel assumed since she couldn’t carry both at once.

Hazel concentrated. She imagined Annabeth on the other side of the house, safe, away from several tons of stumbling bronze and Mist.

White Mist encased the dim figure of her friend on the ground.

Annabeth vanished, like she had at the House of Hades.

And appeared on the other side of the house, out of harm’s way.

One friend safe.

The hail thickened right when Frank shouted to keep their eyes forward and as Jason called out in alarm. Percy seemed to be swallowed by the storm with a scream of pain. Then came some comment about hentai—she’d have to ask Frank what modern invention that was later. And that was when the talking head rolled into the picture.

Next: Hazel wanted that head quiet. Something about its retching voice felt destructive and disruptive.

“It must be hard to talk through that gag,” she shouted over the hail pelts at the disembodied head. Although she knew nothing about its wants and needs, she guessed its only goal was to be listened
“Oh, Percy Jackson—our worst villain—won’t be winning any capture the flag wi—MMPH!” the head mumbled angrily into a cloth that appeared around its mouth.

One villain down. Head of a villain? She wasn’t sure if that should count as a quarter a person.

The hail was so thick now, she almost couldn’t see Jason struggling against the tree roots creeping up to encase him. How was Euna Song doing that? From what she’d seen of other children of Demeter and Ceres, they excelled at keeping the parasites out of a garden, not turning people into wood art.

Before she could rush to Jason’s help, Frank shouted, “Hazel! Look out!”

He vanished into a cloud of wasps before solidifying into a human in front of her.

Something that had been rolling towards her bumped into his foot. Not the most epic of rescues, but she appreciated Frank’s thoughtfulness.

For a second, she thought—in disgust—that the Triple A Chimera had rolled the head forward. Instead, a small red ball had tapped into Frank.

They paused and exchanged a glance. For that instance, she was happy he was so close, the only clear person in the middle of the storm. The warmth of his breath calmed her. He’d been acting weird since the rogue demigods had come to camp, so it was a nice change.

He looked a little sheepish for getting so freaked out over a children’s ball.

Then the ball puffed out into green smoke.

Frank poofed as well.

And a small piglet stood, confused, at her feet, in a pile of praetorian armor. It squeaked in alarm, wriggling out of the breastplate.

That was something else Lou Ellen liked to do that annoyed Hazel—turn people into piglets. Though Frank the piglet was adorable.

Someone cursed in Latin nearby.

“You hit the shapeshifter—” another hissed.

“Shut up; I know,” said the first voice.

The piglet squealed in distress, shaking its head from side to side and trembling. The hail pellets must have looked the size of boulders to him. Hazel went to snatch the piglet up when Frank morphed back into a person, looking horrified. He trembled in the cold.

Hazel should have been focusing on the battle. She should have been making sure Jason and Percy were okay, and that Festus had taken out those weasels, but—for an instant—she lost control and fanned herself.

“Wooh. That was weird. I’ve never been forced to turn into an animal. I thought I wouldn’t be able to change ba—” Frank started to say, before realizing his praetorian armor was at his feet. “Oh gods!” he squeaked, very similar to his piglet noise. “That—that never normally happens!”
“HA!” someone hissed through the Mist in triumph. “YOU DO CHANGE BACK NAKED WHEN YOU’VE BEEN PIGBALLED! TAKE THAT MAGICAL PHYSICS!”

“Silver-Tongued, eyes on your mark,” the huskier voice growled.

They were close by. With the thickness of the hail, Hazel assumed the storm must center around the Cloven Terror. When she first joined the Legion, she’d heard ghost stories from Nico and the others about a coldhearted child of Hecate that experimented mixing monster and demigod.[2] She never thought she’d meet him.

Something cracked and exploded beside them.

Burnt plant matter splattered all over her and Frank.

The hail decreased in that direction and Hazel could see Jason stumble out of a roasted tree root cocoon. He flicked the extra green mush off his face. When Jason made eye contact with Frank and Hazel, he gave Frank a bewildered glance.

Frank flushed.

At least the hail kept Leo from seeing Frank like this. She could only imagine what Leo would say.

“I spy, with my little eye…” the hissing voice seemed to slither from the ice pellets near Jason. “Someone who is too tired to shoot another lightning bolt.”

The reptilian monster descended on Jason from behind. Although the Mist kept shifting what she was seeing between an armored demigod and a scaled fiend, she could definitely tell it dug some kind of claws into Jason’s shoulders and—

--and repeatedly kicked him between the legs.

Jason grunted and collapsed forward.


In a desperate motion, Jason sent an air blast backwards. The reptilian creature dislodged from his back and did a flip into the air, where Frank’s talons snatched him up.

Hazel took a step towards them, to help Jason up, when she heard some ice crunch beside her. Instinctively, she raised her spatha.

It collided with a Stygian Iron pronged staff.

Then, she was face-to-face with the Cloven Terror. Those steaming green eyes felt like they could bore straight into her brain and extract all of her fears. The black, twisted horns loomed at least a foot and a half taller than her. Something about it reminded her of Pluto and, for an instant, she thought she could see her father leaning over: this rich, white man, giving her an art set like it could make up for years of absence.

But this wasn’t her father.

“What are you seeing, little Hazel Levesque?” the beast breathed like each word took effort.

Hazel wanted to run away. As she took a step backwards, all of her senses seemed to fail her. The ground felt more like the rocky hull of the rickety Pax ship that she, Frank, and Percy had taken to
Alaska.

She felt seasick. She wondered how the Cloven Terror would react if she threw up on him. Maybe it would prove a shockingly good tactic.

When she tricked other villains with the Mist, she’d shown them what they wanted. But she didn’t know what this monster wanted. She needed to get him talking.

“What are you going to do with my brother?” she demanded. Hazel disengaged her spatha and went on the attack while she could still see him.

He stepped backwards into the hail, disappearing. “Oh, we didn’t take him.” The voice rasped by her.

Hazel gritted her teeth. What did they mean they didn’t take him?

She extended her senses. Excitement hit her when she figured out how to find the Cloven Terror and all the others.

They were wearing and holding precious metals.

Hazel stepped towards him. She willed the Mist to keep her looking confused and lost—something he would definitely want, regardless of his overall goal. Although she couldn’t see the monster, she could sense his weapons, the pieces of gemstones in the satchels hanging off his arm, the Stygian Iron enlaced in his helm.

None of it moved away from her when she went to close in. Her Mist trick was working; he didn’t know she was coming.

Hazel slashed her spatha a foot below the helm.

And she made contact.

The monster snarled in pain.

A rune on its leg glowed green, a leg she could now see.

The hailstorm died down.

The Cloven Terror stood in front of her, clutching its arm.

About three yards to her right, Jason lay motionless in the grass. She didn’t see Frank or the Silver-Tongued Snake. To her other side, she could catch a glimpse of movement where Percy should be. She didn’t have the time to check on Annabeth, Piper, Leo, or Festus.

Because something moved behind her.

Vines wrapped around her feet.

Hazel yelped.

The vines would have dragged her flat onto her face had she not phased into shadow.

Hazel hadn’t done this without Nico’s strict instruction before. But she felt the vines shift through her legs like her legs didn’t exist. Something else caught her though. A sword slashed into the chinks in her centurion armor, slicing her arm, almost exactly where she’d cut the Cloven Terror.
As the blade slipped away, Hazel felt like a part of her soul was ripped out of her too. Her entire arm felt cold.

What sword could catch her mid-shadow travel?

From under the Cloven Terror’s Ram helm, she could see a human face smile.

The Cloven Terror charged her from the front. Hazel side stepped, catching sight of an Asian girl darting at her from behind.

More vines snagged up around her legs.

This time, when Hazel shadow traveled, she reappeared a few feet away. She held her spatha ready, trying not to think about the injury to her nondominate arm. With the shadow traveling, Mist contortion, and wound, her energy was rapidly draining. She wasn’t sure how much longer she could keep this up. But she had to. Now it was more than finding Nico or Will’s killer. Now she had to protect Jason and her other friends.

But, Euna and the Cloven Terror were already charging her.

Footnotes:

[1] Mel’s commentary: “Okay even if it’s Jack, that would be a bit off putting.” My question: “’Even if???’ Does it being Jack make this any less off putting? Should I be concerned how a decapitated head’s creep factor is lessened by the head’s identity, when the identity is that of Jack?!?” What I assume Mel’s response will be: “Go home, Jack. You’re drunk.”

[2] Mel’s commentary: “My mental image is of a creepy shadow in a laboratory laughing manically… when the reality is a thin, pale kid getting pissy about everything XDDD”

[3] Mel beta commentary: “Pax is short. There’s no distance he won’t stoop; he can reach.”
When the hail cleared, Kally peeked over her hiding spot by the trench and saw Pax needed help. Euna had immediately gone into battle, but now Kally had to make a decision: help Calex keep Merry from hyperventilating, or save Pax.

A giant eagle—that Kally could only assume was Frank or a close personal friend of Frank’s—snatched the Silver-Tongued Snake off the lawn, lifted him into the air, then dropped into a free fall with him. During this freefall, the eagle morphed into a black bear to bat the reptilian monster around. Right before they hit the ground, Frank morphed back into an eagle and snatched him back into the air.

Kally had a strange feeling Frank knew about the whole Pax-making-out-with-him-as-Hazel thing.[1]

She had to wonder how betrayed and violated Frank felt to have Pax pretend to be someone he liked to make out with him and steal something important.

Kally growled. Thinking about Nico Di Angelo and her Oath to the River Styx, she didn’t need to imagine it. For a split second, Kally sincerely considered letting Frank continue to pulverize him. 

There must have been a demigod or godly help group for that right? I’m sorry, I turned into _____’s husband/wife again. I have gotta stop doing that. If not, she was going to make Pax start it.[2]

Despite her frustration, Kally rose to her feet. She fingered her Argonaut statue as she stepped closer. This would have to be a careful shot, considering she needed the discus to hit her target but not do permanent damage.

As she approached, she could see Pax’s desperation.

Initially, the eagle’s prey looked like a human and a drakon had a baby, and that serpentine baby was writhing and thrashing. The more Kally watched them soar higher, the more her friend came into focus. Kally could see Pax scramble to use his acrobatics—to kick Frank, or flip up to attack the talons digging into his pauldrons.

But nothing worked. Pax couldn’t get enough leverage to dislodge the Frank’s claws.
And they were dropping into another dive.

Kally had to time this perfectly.

When they were almost at the end of the descent, Pax doing what little he could to block the bear’s attacks, Kally took her steps to wind up. Like when fighting the Silver Festus, or Python, she let instinct take over. Energy pulsed through her body, following her twist and releasing through her finger tips.

Just as Frank shifted back into an eagle, latching his talons back into Pax’s shoulders and pumping his wings once to stop their descent, Kally’s discus nailed him.

Frank and Pax collapsed onto the grass with a thud. Fortunately, the drop shouldn’t have been too bad, since Kally timed it right when Frank started to ascend. That physics should work out, right? To not equal murdering the praetor and her friend?

The giant eagle flopped onto the Silver-Tongued Snake and morphed back into Frank.

Naked Frank.

Kally already felt bad knocking Camp Jupiter’s heroic bear out of the sky, considering he was normally more of a teddy bear and less a dangerous one. Now she was mortified. Through all the Mist and hail earlier, she had no idea the praetor would be naked or why he’d be naked.

Pax crawled out from under Frank. “Thanks, Kally!” he called, “That was super hot—er—the you-having-amazing-aim—not the Frank-falling-on-me-naked—”

“Shut up and go help your brother!” she snapped, feeling her cheeks heat up.

Trying not to look at Pax—had he been taller?—or anything else on the battlefield, Kally turned back to Calex and Merry. Calex had one hand pressed between Merry’s collarbones, gently lifting and pressing while saying, “It’s okay. Breathe in. Breathe out,” rhythmically.

Tears streaked down Merry’s cheeks as she shook her head, gasping for air. In all the years Kally had known Merry, she’d never seen her like this. Even after fights with her father where, Kally now knew, Merry’s father had been beating her and her little brother, Merry could always put on a mask and make a joke.

Here, Merry was panicking. “N-no! These aren’t baddies… these are… our friends. Gotta… make ‘em… stop…” she rasped between gasps, “What if… someone else… dies?”

The “what if” was shockingly comforting. If this was Merry’s nightmare-prophecy, at least there wasn’t a definitive, additional death forecasted. Just a what if.

Kally felt like she was reaching a new low when “if someone dies” was a positive.

Kally clasped Merry’s arm, trying to ignore the shouts and yelps behind them. “Merry, I’m going to drag Frank and Jason out of the battlefield and heal them up as best I can. I’m going to try to get Vinyl Scratch over here, so you guys can make it back to camp to warn Chiron about Eris,” Kally’s voice broke, “I need you to be able to do that, Merry.”

Calex nodded when Kally faltered, his grey eyes ablaze. Kally could almost see the calculations happening in his head. In the past, Kally remembered Calex fearing he was a coward. He didn’t look like a coward now. He looked scared, but in control, calm, and aware of every consequence, like he’d been studying Axel. This was the boy who had protected his mother from drugged up ex-
soldiers in Kakata before Thanatos broke his confidence.

“That’s the source of all of this rubbish. Merry, we can save a lot of campers from violence if we get to them before Eris. Are you ready to help us get this sorted?” he asked.

Merry trembled. She reached up, and took the hand Kally had on her arm and the one Calex had on her collarbone. The sight almost made Kally give a hysterical laugh, seeing how pale and small Merry’s hands looked in Calex’s and how tan and strong Merry’s fingers looked in Kally’s.

Merry’s breathing became more regular as she nodded her head. “You guys,” she managed.

After all this was over, Kally would need to remember to tease Merry about Calex the same way Merry always teased her about Pax. If Kally could ever work up the courage, considering Merry could tear apart anyone outside of physical battle and considering Merry would immediately do so after.

With that, Kally raced away from the trench into the yard. Fortunately, she didn’t need to dodge much other than charred tree roots and weird stones to get to Frank. She hoped Alabaster didn’t recast that hail spell while she was out here, since she wouldn’t know which way would be back to safety.

Kally tried to keep her focus on Frank for now, before she could let herself think about the others.

Regardless of her concentration, she felt her eyes wander. Watching Alabaster, Euna, and Hazel’s fight was difficult. Not because she liked all three of those people—though that didn’t help either—but Hazel and Alabaster seemed to keep disappearing. Hazel kept shifting in and out of shadows to dodge the vines twisting and snaking around her feet and her opponent’s attacks. Euna kept pivoting to follow Hazel’s movement. She’d extended Kronos’s xiphos into a full scythe again, something that made Kally shiver to see against a good person like Hazel.

Mist kept warping and changing Alabaster’s form. Green runes would glow on his black armor as he trailed Hazel. He and Euna clearly didn’t know how to function as a team yet, which was fortunate for the Roman. Their staff and scythe combo outdistanced Hazel’s spatha, but the Roman seemed to know this, driving in close when she could.

Maybe fifteen feet away from them, Percy was on his feet, facing off the Pax brothers. Well, sort of on his feet. Instead of balancing Percy’s weight on what must have been a torn ligament, Kally could make out a watery bubble encasing Percy’s injured limb; he’d made himself a liquid leg cast.

Practical. Will would applaud if…

Kally tried not to tear up. True, she’d only known her half-brother for a few months, but…

She skidded to a stop when she reached Frank. Somehow, she’d forgotten he was naked. Keeping her eyes above waist level—or at least trying—she fumbled to withdraw an ambrosia square from her messenger bag. When Kally knelt down and tilted his head back to give it to him, she could feel the knot forming on his skull.

He would have a nasty concussion. There were cuts all over him from Pax’s daggers and bruises from the fall. He shivered in the cold.

Maybe she could sing while dragging Frank to the side of the house. She thought she’d seen Annabeth, Calypso, and Piper there. It would be safer than leaving him out here, within ten feet of the fight.
But, carrying the large Chinese Canadian—

Kally almost yelped when Calex appeared at her side. The son of Eros had taken the time to sling Merry across his back. Unlike his usual bridal sweep, he’d picked her up fireman style, with Merry’s stomach and face down across his shoulders, one of his arms laced through her legs and the other lacing through one arm. Much less graceful, but more mobile.

Although Kally couldn’t imagine how, he let go of Merry’s arm to lean down and take Frank’s just below the elbow. “You got the other arm, Kal?” he asked.

Kally nodded, grabbing Frank’s other arm at the same spot.

As smoothly as possible, they dragged Frank towards the side of the house. Kally breathed out the words to any song about sunshine she could think of, knowing she had to keep Frank from any more brain damage. Kally wished they had a towel or something they could wrap him in. When she glanced ahead—

Kally dropped Frank.

“Kallybae, I know Calex is a big teddybear but he can’t—”

She ignored Merry’s mumbles and sprinted ahead.

Where she could see her namesake smothering Annabeth with Percy’s hoodie.

No one but them would have been able to see her. Calypso, Annabeth, and Piper were further towards the front of the yard, where Calypso or someone must have dragged them away to keep them safe from Festus, Leo, and the weasels.

Instinct completely took over as Kally closed in.

Calypso teared up while shoving the material into the unconscious girl’s face. She didn’t hear Kally or notice her until Kally nailed her foot into Calypso’s chest, the same way she might kick a soccer ball for a final goal.

Calypso flopped backwards with a gasp of air. Kally could envision Pax shouting, “GOAL!” while running in circles, if he wasn’t off helping his brother.

Once done, Kally tore the hoodie from Annabeth’s face. She exhaled in relief to find the daughter of Athena still breathing without assistance. Annabeth’s face was just flushed.

Calypso gasped on the ground. Kally had to wonder if she’d broken a few of the girl’s ribs. She didn’t look mad, just startled. “I—I was supposed… supposed to be healing…” she gaped.

“Thought about… being alone on the island…. Another hundred years… and…”

Calypso released another sob.

Kally couldn’t tell if this was an act or not. She didn’t know what to do. Fortunately, Calex stepped up beside them. He’d set Merry down near Annabeth, so he could pick up Calypso.

She squirmed and struggled. “No!” she tried to shout, though she was still winded. “Put me down! Leo! Help!”

With a quiet rage, Calex carried her to the edge of the trench. One stretch of the ditch ended by the border of the property. He knelt down and said, softly, “If you ever try something like that again,
or if Annabeth ever gets hurt, and I think it might have been your doing, so help me God, I’ll assure no one ever loves you again.”

Calypso stopped struggling. Her almond eyes went wide. The tangles of her cinnamon hair looked dramatic fluttering in the wind with Calex’s black scarf.

“Trust me. I’m a son of Eros. I can do that,” he stated.

Then Calex dropped her into the trench.

Calypso let out a breathy scream before a subtle thump hit somewhere ten feet down.

Calex rose, flipped his scarf back over one shoulder, adjusted his black-and-red Arsenal beanie, and walked back towards them.

Merry spoke for both of them when saying, “Boy, you can be a much scarier teddy when your fan crush is on the line.”

“That’s sorted,” he said as a we’re not talking about this response. “How about it, Captain? What’s next?”

Kally almost gawked to realize he was talking to her. Instead, she felt her mouth moving of her own accord, like he hadn’t just signed over their metaphorical sailing ship to get hit by a train by some slip of cruel and unlikely fate. “You and Merry should still take Vinyl—”

He put two fingers into his mouth and let out a piercing whistle.

—get to Camp Half-Blood—

Galloping erupted from the other side of the house. A blast of sparks appeared beside her, and she was startled to see a black and crimson stallion huffing there with an unconscious weasel in its teeth.

She reached out and gently took the weasel from Vinyl, who huffed again, probably to say, Take it before I eat it for a midnight snack. The California Long-Tailed Weasel had a patch of black spots—Hunnie. She tried not to tear up at how singed the weasel was.

—and still warn them. Chiron and Dionysus trust you. I’ll stay here and try to heal who I can. They—they don’t have a healer anymore—s-so…”

Kally had to stop or else she knew she’d cry. This situation had gotten so chaotic. She wanted to say she’d stop the fighting, but she didn’t know how to do that. And she wanted to say that she would heal everyone as best she could, but Will had been a far better and more experienced healer than she was, and he was dead.

As Calex picked up Merry to lift her onto Vinyl Scratch’s back, she gave Kally a warm grin. “You got this, Kallybae. Look at how much you can do when you’re not being a doormat.”

That sapped the tears right out of Kally. She scowled at Merry while Calex saddled up behind her. “Shut up and get back to camp,” Kally snapped, the words coming out as easy as if she were scolding Pax.

“Oh! Fiesty. The new Kallydear has no end to her sass,” Merry continued.

Kally could tell she was trying to cheer her up. It just hit her that Merry was probably as scared of...
leaving Kally as Kally was of staying. Merry should be okay with Calex and Vinyl though, right?

“Kal,” Calex said, putting a hand to Vinyl’s mane, “I trust Axel, and—Hades, I can’t believe I’m saying this about that dodgy perv—but I trust Pax enough not to be a complete idiot. I don’t trust that Alabaster bloke. I know you think he’s fit, but he’s wrong in the head. Broken and angry. Be careful around him.”

Kally felt like she should have been offended or confused by Calex’s assertion, but he was a son of Eros. And, she knew what he meant.

Merry managed to give her a brief thumbs up before they heard someone say, “Are you three trying to escape from Commander Toolbelt? Because I have some pretty strict orders from an unconscious eagle, and I’ve still got a bone to pick with you for the Leo and Calypso House Party Incident of October uh—whatever year this is!”

Kally turned to see Leo Valdez standing beside the house. His impish features were contorted into a scowl that seemed unfamiliar to his face. He scanned the area, like he was looking for their big red self-destruct buttons or whatever machinists did. Kally swallowed when she realized he was looking for Calypso and checking to assure they hadn’t killed anymore of his downed friends. A small makeshift cage containing a white weasel dangled from his belt and banged against his thigh.

“Where’s Calypso? And what did you—scratch that. I don’t want to know what’s going on with Frank’s clothing.”

Leo shoved a hand to the side.

Fire extended in a wall, meeting up with the end of Hazel’s trench. Either they needed to run through that or turn back towards the battle.

Calex huffed, raising his chin. “She’s gone mental, mate.” He turned back to Kally. “You still got this, Kal?”

Kally nodded her head, uncomfortable with how much confidence he had in her to “still have this.” Whatever that meant when facing someone that could make this yard look like the Fourth of July with the snap of his fingers.

“Go,” she said.

“Leo!” Calypso’s voice came from over the edge of the trench.

Leo flinched and searched for the source of her voice.

“Vinyl,” Calex called.

Instead of rushing towards the fire, or back towards the battle, the unicorn took off towards the trench in a rainbow blur. Although Kally couldn’t see well enough to tell, the blur didn’t seem to break stride while hopping over the gap.

Leo’s fire sizzled to smoke at their escape. “Hey! No rainbows or unicorns allowed!” he shouted.

Kally fumbled inside her messenger pack, shoving Hunnie inside for now. She should have picked up her discus when she was dragging Frank. There was an imperial gold knife in her bag, but she didn’t want to go flaming-sledgehammer to knife. Leo already had a slight one-up on her in being flame resistant and the whole human torch thing. And, for some weird reason, the knife kept pressing into the side of the bag, like it wanted to fly towards the battle. She should really keep that
blade away from Hunnie.

Leo turned to face her dead on, a crazed smile coming to his face as he shifted his steam-punk goggles down over his eyes. She’d once heard Will describe him as a rogue Santa’s helper that was high on sugar. That summed it up.

This fight hadn’t even started and Kally knew who would win.

Then a gigantic snake rose from the grass beside her—or what Kally thought was a snake initially. Both Leo and she flinched before recognizing the serpentine helm of the Silver-Tongued Snake as the humanoid figure stood to its full height.

“This is Alabaster’s property, and, I assure you, he welcomes both unicorns and rainbows. You speciest and colorist,” the monster hissed.[4]

For an instant, Kally forgot it wasn’t a monster. The bronze scales of his breastplate seemed to blend in as skin in the Mist. A tail flickered in and out of her line of sight, twisting about the grass and shadows. This couldn’t have been Pax. This monster was… was…

“Dude, weren’t you like way shorter before?” Leo demanded. He’d taken a step back in alarm, mirroring Kally.

“Pax?” she squeaked to second Leo’s confusion.

Pax loomed several feet above both Kally and Leo.

A hissing laugh slithered from his helm. “Oh, I only grow more powerful and influential in the midst and heat of chaos and war. Ha—ha! Heat. It’s funny because Leo’s hands were on fire.”

“Over explaining it, hombre,” Leo said, “To think I thought you were fun at the party. AUGH, two out of ten for a lazy joke, and that two is just out of pity.”

He fidgeted his fingers along the sledgehammer. His eyes flicked to the side of the house, where the others must have still been battling. Judging by the way the wind whipped a blast of salty rain into them, Kally had a feeling Percy hadn’t been taken out yet.

She frowned and shoved some of the golden hair out of her eyes. “Pax, Axel needs you to help fight Percy. You don’t need to—”

“That’s why I’m here. We’re losing but it’s not a party without Leo there. He’s our backup plan,” the way Pax said it disheartened Kally. He sounded tired and… sad.

“You and I are a lot alike,” Pax said to Leo. The words were more… personal and light-hearted than his prior comment. Pax stepped forward and angled his body to shut Kally out of the conversation, like he wanted Leo to forget she was there. Between his tone and body language, Kally felt like an intruder.

“I think the comparisons stop at the bat belt and hot accents,” Leo disagreed, fingering his tool belt with one hand. Absently, he’d withdrawn some wires and began to fiddle with them.

Pax shrugged, holding his hands up helplessly. No weapons drawn. “And an appreciation for beautiful women named Calypso. Both C and K respectively.”

“I don’t know what you’re up to,” Kally said, “but keep me out of it.” She suddenly hoped he’d go back to ignoring her. The way he was moving and talking, Kally wasn’t sure what Pax wanted her
to do: if he had this fight and she could go back to get Frank, or was intentionally making a
distraction so Kally could retrieve her discus for a double heroicide.

“And we also both want to switch out all the Diet Pepsi for Diet Coke in the camp and film Mr.
D’s reaction to get the best soft drink trailer that Mount Olympus has ever seen,” Pax said.

“You know we’re fighting right? Not just listing off things that definitely are going to happen at
camp in the near future?” Leo asked. The wires in Leo’s hand were suspiciously forming some
kind of trap-like object. Kally wanted to warn Pax, but he seemed to know.

Kally took a step backwards. If nothing else, she’d need her discus, and maybe Calex and she had
dropped Frank far enough away from the battle to heal him.

Pax laughed. The hysteria in his voice made her pause.

“A machinist and an information broker. When you and I are panicking during a fight, it means we
haven’t done our jobs right at the beginning. We can’t heal people. We can’t make people do what
we want with our voices. We can’t really seem to help without blowing something up…
literally…” Pax gestured towards Leo. “Emotionally.” He gestured towards himself.

“Hades, your dragon is in pieces on the other side of this house, and my weasel is missing. Here we
both are, scrambling to pick up the pieces, because we fucked up. You knew about the Leonis
Caput, since he attacked you, but you were too worried about Calypso and Percy to take the proper
anti-kitty precautions. I wanted a hug so bad that I wouldn’t go inside. We could have prevented
this.”

The trap-mechanism looked complete in Leo’s hands, almost like a hybrid between a leg cage and
a bear trap. But his fingers were slowing down as Leo’s expression soured.

“Um, are you surrendering or something? Because, while I applaud your creativity, a traditional
white flag will do over this inspiring speech.”

Kally understood Leo’s hesitation. There was a desperation in Pax’s voice, like it was about to
pinpoint the single incident in Leo’s life that—if he’d made a different choice—would have left the
world perfect. She felt like she couldn’t move until the Silver-Tongued Snake finished talking.

“You see, we’re the people who… when those that we love start to die, can’t do anything but make
jokes… fake a smile, and pretend to be okay. Because what better way to mourn someone than to
force a smile?”

Leo’s lip twitched.

Kally felt sick to her stomach. She remembered Howe’s Cavern, when she thought Python was
going to kill her and Will, and a rage inside her set off a weird sun blast. Pax triggered it. He had
spoken like he knew what happened to her mother, like he’d peeled her fears from the corner edges
of her brain and forced her to confront them.

As though reading her thoughts now, the serpentine monster hissed, “Kally, go heal Frank. I don’t
want you to see me do this again.”
Footnotes:

[1] Mel’s beta notes: “And a whole list of other shit Pax has done to him personally!”

[2] But that means Pax would need to spend time around Zeus, and that has bad idea written ALL over it.

[3] If you’ve read my first two stories, you’ve probably heard me say this before, but I wince when head injuries are used as knock outs for shows, movies, and books. I had to rewrite this line three times because I kept writing “nauseous” instead of “massive” concussion. Stupid Freudian slips!

[4] A colorist is actually an artist who uses colors in a special way, like a hairdresser that works with dyes. I’m not sure Pax has ever seen a hairdresser, of—if he has—the hairdresser could live through the shock of dealing with his hair, so excuse his misuse of the word.
Ajax: I Bully a Teenager on Fire

Pax felt like a cheesy villain. If he had a mustache to twirl, now would have been appropriate mustache swirling time. Pax couldn’t grow one, but he heard construction paper and some tape could get the job done. [1]

Atë had been right: children of Eris were designed to be bad guys. “You and I are a lot alike…” he repeated to Leo. Pax removed his helmet, to remind Leo he was talking to another demigod instead of a monster, though the definition might have been blurring beyond a Mist trick and was questionable on the distinction.

A tugging sensation hit Pax’s gut as he said, “I know exactly how much this is going to hurt. So, sorry. I’ll give you an IOU on a burger or something.”

Leo tightened his grip on the sledgehammer and makeshift cage. Contrary to what Kally might have thought, Pax wanted Leo as armed as possible, and not because it would make things good for a photo op.

“You’re not the one who’ll be apologizing!” Leo declared before frowning. “Not that I’ll apologize. Because you’re a jerk. Dude, you have gotta stop twisting words around.” Leo’s hands rekindled.

That was the only thing Pax didn’t want.

Pax put up his empty hand. “Leo, we all know you’re hot enough without the flames. Besides, I’m the one who took Frank’s stick and pretended to be Hazel to make out with him. Do you really wanna flame up around me?”

Leo made a face at the words make out.

Pax didn’t want to do this. But he and his friends were about to start losing. He could still hear the command in his brother’s tone when he hissed—in Mayan—to get ready. As an information broker, Pax wanted Leo as armed as possible, and not because it would make things good for a photo op.

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Pax didn’t want to do this. But he and his friends were about to start losing. He could still hear the command in his brother’s tone when he hissed—in Mayan—to get ready. As an information broker, Pax wanted Leo to scream. You don’t mess with the Big Three on equal footing. That’s how you get weapon hurricanes, forecasted only for people who screwed up fighting a child of Poseidon or Hades.

The wind had picked up and spiraled towards Mr. Tempest Tantrum.

By now, Pax couldn’t see or sense Kally in his immediate surroundings. But he could hear the other Calypso muttering something from the trench. He gestured vaguely to her. “I guess she’s been lying to you. About the magic. And the boys. I wonder how much she’s lied to you about Mr. Seaweed Brain. You did just leave her to kill the one person in her way of getting Percy back. The one who took her dream boy from her.”

Pax remembered all the times he wished he’d been born a child of Apollo, or Athena, or even Dionysus, with the ability to heal, to do underwater basket weaving, or to make people uncontrollably disco. He remembered how sad he was the first time he found out what he could do.

A tugging in his gut told him his powers were taking effect. He had hated using it on Kally, to make her anguished enough for a solar blast. He hated it here.

When Pax had done this to Kally, to make her angry about her mother’s presumed rape, he focused on the past horror he felt when realizing what his father must have done to Aunt Nilley for Axel to be born or Ms. Iwakura for Hiro. There had been no love there.

For Leo, this was much easier. He could feel their shared insecurities, honing in on the jealousy, the self-hate, the rage, the inadequacies, and the guilt. All Pax had to do was think about what would happen after this: how Alabaster would join their group, how Alabaster and Kally would start a painfully awkward romance worthy of their own nerd sitcom, since Alabaster was a hot dork and Kally wouldn’t tease him for being a witch, how Kally would try not to third wheel Pax, and Alabaster wouldn’t care because Pax hurt him too much. How Pax would become more and more alone until his brother murdered him in an act of rage.

Okay, maybe Leo wouldn’t empathize with that last part.

“I wonder if she’s been altering your memories, to avoid having to see him again. Have you had weird gaps or time lapses?” Pax asked. With the whistle of the wind, and the dash of rain, he had to raise his voice. “That’s like lollipop-stealing for a sorceress of her level, even if she’s out of her zone.”

Leo’s mouth twitched. His fire extinguished again.

“Do you think she’ll leave you for Percy whenever Annabeth and Percy break up? I mean, they will eventually break up. They’re a high school couple, and—even with the trauma—statistics aren’t in their favor for a healthy adult relationship. And that whole saved-her-from-forever-alone will eventually wear off of Calypso.”

“Wow. Dude. Ladies dig Commander Leo.” Although the words seemed confident, Pax could feel the anxiety unsettling Leo’s mind. The pull in Pax’s gut deepened, like a howler monkey decided to use his intestines as a getaway rope. “Calypso wouldn’t—”

“It’s okay,” Pax said, “It hurts to know you’re Ogygia’s—ha ha—washed up second. Or, in Calypso’s case, washed up twenty-third.”

“Not cool,” Leo snapped. He had gone pale. His fingers mindlessly fiddled with the leg trap. Before, Leo had been glancing back at his friends, to where the wind had picked up and the explosions were occurring. Now, all his attention was focused on Pax.

Although Percy’s gusts were howling and tiny water droplets dashed into Pax’s cheek with the ferocity of kamikaze mosquitoes, Pax braced into the storm with a sense of belonging. Feeling the watery daggers cut into his skin calmed him. Considering everything that had happened, this is how the world should look.

They were running out of time. Axel wouldn’t be able to stand against this for long.

“It’s hard, when you’re up against someone that you could never beat,” Pax said, feeling the bitterness slip into his voice. “Someone with a full, living family that loves them. A constant place to call home. Someone always accepted to the fanciest schools no matter how much he screwed up in the past. Someone whose ADHD and dyslexia only affects him when it’s convenient for the plot. Someone that all the boys and girls fall for without him even trying. Someone with a future. How long do you think it’ll be before he steals your golden apple?”
Pax shrugged. The words made him feel numb. Not like a cute panda. “Again, you saved her from Ogygia, but that little party won’t last forever. How long do you think you’ll matter with him here?”

Leo opened and closed his mouth like he wanted to respond, but either nothing came out or the hurricane drowned the noise.

Pax clenched his fist. Leo replicated the movement. And Pax could tell, without any satisfaction or happiness, that he’d won and—in a horrifically evil way—he’d be able to save the day.

Thanks for reading! :D I hope everyone had a wonderful Halloween!

Footnotes:

[1] Random soundtrack update! This scene was almost entirely written to the Kitchen Cover of Believer. (Admitted, with the AMV for Kakegurui).

[2] Sorry, I had to. :D
As Axel twisted, rolled, and hopped around the crisscrossed wire trap that Leo had thoughtfully left before checking on Calypso, Axel cursed the oversight of two major faults in his plan.

One: every time he tried to strike his lighter to cast magic, Percy’s storm would huff out or spray out the flame. Each time Axel successfully struck Percy, the winds and rain only got worse. He couldn’t make any further offerings or incantations.

His old, close friend and mentor, Prometheus, would have chastised him for such a lack of foresight over fire.

The second oversight made the fight far more complicated.

*Cut his head off and sacrifice his blood over the fire of his flaming friend*, the Leonis Caput ordered.

No, Axel internally hissed, feeling the Leonis Caput wrestling for control like the monster’s claws could clench the edges of his skull to rip it out of his head. At times, Axel had let it win. The Leonis Caput was stronger and faster than he was, but a bit extreme on homicidal tendencies.

Initially, Axel wanted to play it easy, since he didn’t want to hurt Percy or the others. But, when Axel saw Percy heal himself with the water he’d summoned to encase his leg. Axel wished he’d treated this like a proper battle and followed the Leonis Caput’s orders for total maiming.

He knew Alabaster would have been a better match to fight Percy, and, with Axel’s true sight and fear magic, he should have fought Hazel. But the Cloven Terror would have murdered Percy at the first opportunity to do so.

That was why Axel needed to keep Alabaster from thinking this fight was going poorly. Axel couldn’t spare a glance to see how Alabaster and Euna were handling Hazel, but he hoped she’d be distracted until Pax succeeded in his mission.

His brother needed to hurry. They needed a diversion to escape. Sure, they’d taken out two powerhouses early. Axel had seen Kally knock out Frank through the Mist, after Pax finished off Jason in a split second impersonation of Piper when—ehem—Jason was disoriented and… in a lot of pain that was embarrassing for any man.

But they wouldn’t keep it up for long. Percy was about to make the next massive natural disaster in New York.

With any luck, this fight would distract Eris with giddiness about a needless battle, hopefully enough to overlook Merry and Calex’s escape. A stupid plan, but hopefully an effective one. If Eris was anything like an evil version of her son—Axel knew Pax could be distracted with trying to
touch his tongue to his nose for hours. This would be her sole focus.

When going in for his next attack, Axel tried to balance instinct with awareness: altering the strength of his lunge to account for the increasing wind resistance. Twisting to dodge the firehose-style spray of water from Percy. Glancing down to assure he didn’t do a handspring into one of Leo’s wire traps. Maintaining forward momentum. Internally wrestling the Leonis Caput into silence.

He tore his claws into the ground, forcing his way into what would soon be the eye of the storm. Percy was ready for him.

No matter how much Axel tried to contort the Mist, Percy now seemed to know where he was. Axel speculated that Percy could use the sheen of sweat and storm water coating Axel’s skin to detect him.

When Axel rolled in with a low jab at Percy’s thigh, Riptide clashed against his hoplite sword. Axel’s blade shattered on impact.

He reflexively dropped the hilt, already withdrawing one of the ornate gladii Hephaestus fixed up for him in his left hand.

“Dude, you’ve gotta skip out on the discount blacksmiths,” Percy said through gritted teeth.

Axel withheld scoffing at the irony. He twisted towards Percy—having learned he always had to keep on the move to stay out of the water—and parried Riptide away from his legs.

Unfortunately, Percy had worn the Nemean Lion pelt before, and knew Axel’s lower half was vulnerable. Each time Axel risked rising from a crouch, he knew where Percy would be aiming.

In a moment of sheer luck, the gladius didn’t break.

Which meant Riptide would be occupied for the split second Axel needed to follow through with his empty hand.

Axel twisted the gladius, forcing Percy’s sword into an arch away from him. One of Luke’s favorite disarming moves—though Axel never used it for disarming. He thought every warrior should die with their weapon in hand.

As Axel suspected, Percy knew the counter to the move, but Axel gained a half second for a dangerous gamble.

While their blades were locked, Axel lunged in with his empty hand, reaching for Percy’s sword hand. Although it was risky and went against his standard motto, if he could break Percy’s dominate wrist—

Percy saw the movement and twisted to intercept Axel’s fist with his freehand. Their opposing hands locked, mimicking the stalemate of their swords, like he and Percy were about to begin a wrestling match.

Percy scowled. “I’m tired of batting around, Lion Breath. You’re going to tell me where my sister is, or I’m going to remind you why cats don’t like bathes.”

Axel grinned. Percy had forgotten an important weapon that Axel had.
He latched his claws into Percy’s skin—Percy screamed in pain—and started to turn the limb in a basic arm bar, hoping to bend Percy’s arm behind his back and take him to his knees… before he realized that Percy’s maneuver was bait.

Axel had stayed in one place for too long.

A blast of water flooded out of Percy’s hands.

Axel expected to be shot backwards.

Instead, he felt the abrupt impact with the ground, the water hosing him with enough pressure to keep him pinned.

For an instance, Axel couldn’t hear, taste, see, or smell anything except salt water and a roaring sound. His sense of touch was acute, however, indicative by the battery against the Nemean Lion skin. If he hadn’t been wearing it, Percy might have ripped his skin off and broken his bones.

Despite that, if Percy kept increased the pressure anymore, Axel’s back might break. Axel dug his claws into the ground, trying to drag himself forward, but he couldn’t lift an arm under the hosing.

And he wasn’t sure how long it would be before the water encased him. In past battles, Percy was most likely to kill people when he went on a hurricane spree, whether he realized enemy soldiers were drowning around him or not. Indiscriminate and blind, like the real storm.

The roar of water and the pressure on his back disappeared, replaced by two coinciding noises. One was Hazel’s voice, screaming something about Percy in a panic.

The other sound was a set of gunshots, three in rapid succession, with such a pattern that Axel could almost hum to one in the head, two in center mass.

Axel grunted as he twisted to see what happened, something his body didn’t want to cooperate with after the battery.

The storm hiccupped for a moment, like the winds themselves were holding their breath.

Percy glanced over to check why Hazel had shouted.

She stood with her free hand outstretched towards Percy. Her brow was furrowed with concentration and sweat soaked her skin. Her golden eyes were wide with terror.

The son of Poseidon had the same delayed reaction Axel did upon noticing three golden bullets suspended inches from impacting him: two by his chest, one by his cheek.

Everyone froze. Percy’s reaction summed up everyone’s perfectly.

“Oh shit,” he said.

Alabaster stared at Percy, maybe six feet away, stunned. His green eyes glimmered with desperation under the Cloven Terror helm. If Axel had to guess, Alabaster had the same worry about Percy killing Axel that Axel had.

The pistol was in Alabaster’s nondominate hand, still aimed at Percy’s head. His spell book was in his other hand, likely to figure out an incantation to stop Hazel.

Euna stood adjacent to Hazel. She glanced from the suspended bullets, to Hazel’s vulnerable side,
shrugged, and went in to stab the girl.

Axel could at least be proud of Euna for one thing: he no longer needed to talk to her about situational awareness. Maybe tact, but not situational awareness.

Before Euna could make contact, Hazel’s eyes narrowed and she twisted her spatha in a parry. Hazel’s other hand followed the movement.

So did the bullets.

They reversed course, back towards Alabaster and Euna. Something thin and sharp slashed into Axel’s calf right before he saw the shards of his broken celestial bronze and imperial gold swords, daggers, and knives hover into the air, like balloon mines. They sparkled in the sparse moonlight that trickled through Percy’s storm clouds, creating surreal constellations all around them.

To Axel’s alarm, he felt his harnesses and straps tug him off his feet and into the air with the other metals.

Frantic, Axel fumbled to claw off all his scabbards and sheathes that were dangling him like a carnival target at a water gun range. If Percy decided to start shooting, there’d be nothing he could do. Plus, Axel wasn’t in the mood to take any trips by precious metal flight.

Not all of his metal seemed effected. His helm and obsidian blades weren’t tearing him into the air: items blessed by other gods. Axel guessed the Cloven Terror helm, Alabaster’s staff, and Backbiter wouldn’t be going for a joyride either.

Axel collapsed back to the ground with the snap of his last harness. He did a break fall, rolling away from Percy and from Leo’s wire traps, towards his friends, to see if Alabaster or Euna had been struck by those bullets.

All the shards of jagged metal, imperial gold daggers, celestial bronze xiphoses[3] flew towards Alabaster and Euna in a spinning, shimmery storm. Percy’s wind suddenly redoubled, adding to the apocalyptic feel as droplets of water cut into Axel’s skin, making it difficult to see.

For an instant, Axel though Hazel was about to tear them to pieces with the world’s most impromptu and largest shredder.

Alabaster mouthed a spell while a wall of vines shot out of the earth.

But the combined metal storm dashed right through the vines, and didn’t seem bothered by Alabaster’s incantation. Instead of shredding them, they rapidly clustered into blocks around Alabaster and Euna’s hands and feet.

Within a second, they were strung up, hands and feet encased in solid, gleaming blocks. Hazel flicked her finger, and the blocks around their hands rose several feet, dangling Euna and Alabaster like dolls. Both cried out in pain from the stretch.

Axel clenched his jaw. He had one stainless steel sword left, his obsidian blades, his claws and teeth, and seconds before Hazel or Percy turned the sword storm on him.

If there was ever a time Axel wanted to curse Ares back for that curse, now was it.

Percy wasn’t close enough to him for an immediate sword attack. Axel could probably dodge a water blast on the way to Hazel. He’d have to prioritize freeing Alabaster and Euna, since he couldn’t handle Percy and Hazel alone, regardless of how exhausted the two must be.
Axel wished the rain would stop, and he could caste enhancement magic. He braced to lunge forward.

Axel didn’t realize how hard he’d been panting until he suddenly couldn’t.

Salt water clogged into his throat. Axel tried to spit it out, knowing he’d been breathing in the rain all along. This time, though, he felt the liquid recoil back into his mouth with a willful fury. He choked and tried to cough. Instead of helping, more of the rain seeped towards his nostrils and lips.

Axel had always been an excellent swimmer and never feared the water, but now he found himself drowning on land.

Percy stepped closer to him, scowling. The wind picked up, almost tearing Axel off his feet again, before dying back down in the center of the storm. Everything went strangely quiet. The blasting winds turned to water sprinkles. The vortex created a surreal muffle against Alabaster and Euna’s shouts.

“Uh-uh, Mr. Whiskers. I told you that I’m done playing around. You’re going to tell me where my sister is.”

Axel wanted to point out that he couldn’t answer while Percy was asphyxiating him, but that brought him back to how he couldn’t talk.

He didn’t have much time. Axel would need to do something to disable Percy—and fast.

He’d have a window—somewhere between ninety seconds to two minutes—before he’d start to lose consciousness. Axel fought viciously not to cough, knowing that struggling would make it worse.

Then green light flashed through the watery screen beside them.

Hazel had forgotten to cover Alabaster’s most important weapon: his mouth.

“Incantara: Umbra Captionem,” echoed through the howl of wind.

Percy glanced up and away long enough for Axel to lunge at him.

Axel’s head spun from the lack of oxygen and disorientation. He’d only get one chance, and he wasn’t sure he could land it.

Before Axel could reach him, something exploded into the eye of the storm. Neither of them expected whatever it was to rip through the wind and debris.

Percy took a step back in surprise.

Axel tucked and rolled away from a blast of hissing steam. For the second time that night, he decided he needed to give the Nemean Lion fur a proper cleaning: had he not been wearing it, he would have been poached.

Water dribbled out of Axel’s mouth. Reflex took over. He coughed, spitting up bile and saltwater until he could breathe again.

At first, Axel thought the steam came from Alabaster, but the direction was wrong and, when he glanced over, he could see Alabaster and Euna’s hands and feet were still encased in metal blocks.
Hazel was nowhere to be seen. Both looked towards the steam’s origin, Euna with confusion, Alabaster with a sinister satisfaction.

Through a sizzling mirage of heat waves and mist, someone stepped forward with clenched fists and a sledgehammer in one grip. Leo Valdez scowled, his breath quick like he was in pain. In the moonlight, his dark eyes looked exhausted, but determined.

“Dude, Leo, watch the friendly fire—” Percy said.

Leo raised his empty hand and another spiral of flames blasted towards Percy.

The water around Percy surged into a sheet, forming a shield.

More steam exploded outward.

Axel rolled further away to avoid getting seared.

“LEO!” Percy shouted. “That was NOT friendly fire. Is this one of those eidolon possession thingies? Because—”

“Shut up!” Leo snapped.

His voice echoed another.

When Axel squinted through the fading steam, he could see Pax a few feet behind Leo. Pax was way taller than usual and more muscular: the same way he’d grown during their ambush of the Roman troops and their fight at the Battle of Mount Othrys. For a sickening second, with that dark expression on his face, Pax reminded Axel of Santiago.

When Pax opened his mouth to shout, Leo parroted the movement a second later. The tone sounded like the middle of an argument, not the start. “I’m tired of being the ethnically diverse comic relief that doesn’t get the girl or boy!”

A look of confusion came to Leo’s face after saying, “girl.” Apparently, Leo was straighter than Pax thought.

Pax stomped his foot, recovering with, “I mean, look at you Mr. I have a constant home to go back to with parents that love me.” Their voices synced again. “You even got a second Dad that cares about you. Two dads! That’s double what most of the campers could dream about—except a few kids in the Apollo cabin—but that’s not the point! The point is that you don’t even have to try for the Fates to send you little care packages!”

“What are you talking about—” Percy demanded. “Look, Leo, I’m glad you wanna talk—but now is not the—”

“—the time for you to screw something up again.”

The voice still sounded like Percy’s, but Axel could tell it came from behind Leo. Pax had morphed. For an instance, Axel felt like there was a mirror, reflecting the son of Poseidon to two locations.

The real Percy widened his eyes upon seeing a second version of him, and upon hearing his second self laugh darkly. “You should have stayed gone, Valdez. We don’t need you. No one needs a seventh wheel. What? Was your sole purpose in coming back to accidentally kill Frank with those flames? Since something like that has never happened before.”
Although Axel could clearly hear the words coming from the second Percy, Leo flinched away from the real one like the real Percy had physically struck Leo.

The original scowled and slashed a hand towards Pax.

A twister of water arched towards Axel’s brother.

Leo’s flames blasted it out of the sky in another spray of steam.

Axel could imagine—if he was Leo and didn’t know Pax was puppetting him—that would have looked like a poorly executed sneak attack.

This was their chance.

Axel made a low whistle to signal their retreat. He hoped Alabaster and Euna could hear it through the wind and flames.

Worry faded when someone grabbed his arm to drag him to his feet. Fortunate, since he found his legs too wobbly to stand without assistance and crawling would have been less than graceful.

He found himself leaning on someone much smaller and shorter than he’d been expecting.

“Kally?” he panted as she half-dragged him away from the battlefield and towards the side of the house.

Kally grunted under the strain of his weight, trembling all over.

“What is Pax doing?” she gasped.

Fire roared and steam hissed in explosions behind them.

Something slithered up beside them in the grass. For a breath, Axel hoped it was Pax, but then he saw the moonlight glinting off metal blocks. Vines tugged Euna and Alabaster across the yard, snapping and scratching at the bonds locking Euna’s hands and feet to no effect.

The four of them leveled at the side of the house, and paused. Euna appeared to be waiting for further orders, and Alabaster and Kally were watching the explosions behind them.

“How long has Ajax been able to do that? Or turning into multiple people in one day? Where is his apple?” Alabaster demanded from the ground, where he struggled against his metal binding. Axel wondered how long it would be before he’d regain enough energy to blast those off.

“Retreat now. Research later,” Axel said, though his own gaze followed that of the others.

The fake Percy had shifted, and Pax was now Calypso—or Axel assumed that wasn’t the real Calypso. The girl’s hands—Pax’s hands---were alternating between clutching Leo’s shoulder and slapping at his back. When Axel cocked his ears forward, he could hear her sobs.

In between each hiccup, Leo’s flames blasted towards Percy.

“They’re going to leave you because you’re a screw up! Because no one needs a third wheel—” Percy rolled to the side, out of the flame’s way and into one of the wire traps Leo had set for Axel.

“—because you’re not meant for anything good, and it would be easier for everyone if you could just disappear—”
While Percy scrambled to untangle from the wire trap, Leo lifted a cord-end by him. The twisted metal blazed with heat, rapidly extending through the whole mesh until the lines around Percy glowed with heat.

Percy yelled in pain while slicing the wires with Riptide.

“—instead of being stupid, and gullible at the first sight of a pretty girl that acts like she likes you and wants a hug—”

Axel could feel Kally’s shakes become violent under his arm. “I’ve never heard Ajax be that cruel before,” she whispered, “Wha—what’s wrong with him?”

Axel wondered how much she could discern with normal demigod ears. Likely enough to tell there was no sadism in Pax’s voice. Just pain.

*You ordered him to do this.*

And Axel knew Pax hated doing it.

“He’s yelling at himself…” Alabaster said distantly, “He’s barely aware Leo is there.”

“—been stronger, Will and Nico would still be around! If you could do something more than stand there like a *child*, your family might still be here too! You worthless—”

By now, Percy returned to his feet and charged towards the two Hispanic boys. “Leo, that Snake Jerk is controlling you——” he shouted.

The lieutenant in Axel realized they were wasting valuable time at Pax’s expense. If Pax wasn’t careful, he’d either break Leo’s psyche or exhaust himself with fueling that kind of rage and anguish for too long.

Axel puffed up and popped his cheeks, watching his brother alter between hysterical sobbing and furious screaming. And how Percy and Leo made contact, Riptide to sledgehammer. Percy knocked Leo backwards and into the fake Calypso, toppling them both to the floor.

Then Percy stepped forward into some weird contraption that looked like a mix between a bear trap and a leg cage. It snapped shut onto his bad leg, squishing right into the water caste around his previous injury.

Percy supplied a colorful array of curses that would make Ares proud.

“We need to get to the van,” Axel said.

“We can’t leave him like this,” Kally whispered.

For an instance, Axel feared she was right. What if Pax intentionally pushed himself too far? Or, what if he ran off afterwards? *It would be easier for everyone if you could just disappear.*

No, no it wouldn’t be. Axel needed Pax here. Everyone else had already disappeared. They may have found Alabaster, but that wasn’t enough. Axel just hoped Pax knew it.

With the flames and storm raging in the distance, with Leo’s mechanical traps going off, and Percy’s frustrated quips, Axel realized their decision might not just affect what Pax did, but whether or not Leo and Percy lived through the night.
Thanks for reading! I had to rewrite this section twice because of the struggle with everyone's OP powers T.T I think we all agree that Leo, Percy, and Pax need to hug this out afterwards.

Footnotes:

[1] I had a friend on the school soccer team that could do this. She was infuriating, claiming that everyone could do it: ”we just hadn’t tried for long enough.”

[2] Mel wanted to point out this is kind of creepy, since—according to this logic—Percy can always know where Annabeth is on campus if she’s sweating.

[3] Yea, I know that plural looks wrong and shakes every Anglican fiber as unnatural and unholy. But it’s fun to say out loud!
Joey was having a lovely dream about punching Apollo in the face when she heard his voice singing in her ear. Most of her dreams involved elaborate dance numbers, but the musical twist was new. She didn’t even know the dead did dream.

When she willed herself to get up, her legs and arms felt heavy, like someone had dumped a Mrs. O’Leary on each limb. In the distance, behind the lovely voice, she could hear a continuous chatter that made her shiver. If this was a musical, Joey would need to recommend a better chorus than wind-up teeth.

She tried to think of why Apollo would be here. She remembered tricking her way through the EZ line for deaths and skirted around a three-headed dog. Unless her death had been a nightmare… which was unlikely, since her brain would have thought of a way less lame death.

Someone’s hand—Apollo’s she presumed—graced her calf. The gesture felt distant. Regardless of the distance, what Charon had said about godly-demigod or mortal relationships still made her want to smack him over the head with a harp, and maybe a piano.

Joey went to kick him.

Nothing happened.

Her throat constricted with fear when her legs wouldn’t respond.

She tried to sit up.

Relief flooded her system when she could twist enough to hit Apollo with a good right hook.

She was never going to tease Euna for struggling to wake up again. That struggle was real.

The boy kneeling beside her clutched his face where she’d made contact. Something about it seemed… wrong.

From what she could see, that wasn’t Apollo. And, either this person was made out of marshmallows, or she’d gained ghostly super strength. Over the tips of his fingers, it looked like she’d struck him with a truck, not her fist.

What mostly stumped Joey was how she was able to touch him.

Joey fumbled in her pocket for the rosewood box, the only other thing she’d been able to touch and interact with since her death.

That blond hair, the tan, the Camp Half-Blood T-shirt, the medical fanny pack: only one person she knew could make such a grievous misstep in fashion with such casual confidence.
This was Will Solace. She remembered him from camp, a heartthrob that all the nympha pouted over losing a few months ago to a certain grumpy Goth kid.

Although Will’s face was mutilated, she could see his dismay at getting walloped. A real expression. Not another ghost, creepily floating around, lost and empty, like they’d been the next ones in line for the cafeteria when the entire school kitchen got shut down for health code violations.

Joey lunged forward to hug him.

Will made a muffled sound of confusion when she shoved him away immediately after the hug.

Tears threatened her eyes. She tried to ignore how alone she’d felt and how scared she’d been and how relieved she was to see another living—er—another sentient ghost. Even if the interaction did start with ghost on ghost violence.

Instead of expressing any of that, she did the courteous thing: she folded her arms, huffed, and demanded, “Why are you touching my legs, you perve?”

By now, Will looked baffled. What was left of his pummeled brow furrowed in annoyance. “I’m dating Nico,” he stated and pointed at her feet.

When Joey glanced down, she had to refrain from reigniting her panic. The edges of her shoes were grey and crusty, completely coated in some kind of stone. When Joey tried to wiggle her toes, she realized they weren’t coated in stone. They were stone.

Will’s fingers tapped against her rolled up pant leg, where ghostly dust fluttered away. It hadn’t just been her toes before.

“I thought it would only happen to living demigods, but I guess it can happen to ghosts too. You’re not supposed to sleep down here,” he said. There was a slight frown on his lips, as he gazed past her, to the two-story bronze gates around Hades’ black obsidian palace.

Joey wanted to shout at him. If she didn’t nap, she was scared she’d collapse in front of Hades and Persephone in their courtroom. She’d been so tired, and she’d only meant to nap for a few minutes. Getting past the Fields of Asphodel… just remembering who she was and that she had a purpose… it was exhausting. Every step threatened to shake her of what made her… well… her.

“There isn’t exactly a how-to guide on traveling through the Underworld,” Joey snapped. “But—uh, thanks for fixing my legs, I guess.”

Will sighed and fumbled in his fanny pack. He withdrew a trifolded sheet of paper and handed it to her.

Last time someone handed her one of these, it was Thalia Grace suggesting all boys’ coodies were worth giving up for an eternity of hunting. Clearly, Thalia hadn’t been investigating the right boy’s coodies.

“What is this?” Joey asked, suspicious it was another sales pitch at why she should relinquish makeup and hair products forever.

“A how-to guide on traveling through the Underworld and the quickest routes to the McDonald’s pit stops,” Will explained, “Nico does a seminar on it.”

Although she didn’t want extra reading, Joey stuffed it into her pocket, beside her rosewood box.
That could come in handy later, for the next time she tried to do an everyday activity that turned deadly. She'd be terrified to see what flushing a toilet would do in this place.

“So, does he give that seminar like, right after your First Aid class? I feel like that could make campers nervous about your faith in their survival chances,” she said.

“We try to have them on separate days,” he said, humming a healing song right after.

Joey could feel her toes start to wiggle. The sensation was surreal and almost painful after the numbness. Weird to think a ghost could feel pain, but she guessed they had to for the whole eternal punishment thing to work.

Everything was so bleak: the trampled black grass leading up to the fortress of a black palace, the black poplar trees, the massive swarms of souls. Pax and she needed to lead the Hermes cabin down here with an arsenal of paintball guns with neon ammo and shoot up the place. Maybe not Hades’ ideal way to redecorate, but it would be quick, effective, and fun. Hades’ direct antithesis.

Something had changed since Joey put her head down on the cold stone. A single shaft of sunlight glistened down from a crack in the stalactites, landing behind the gates of the palace. Joey thought she must have been hallucinating after the dreariness of everything else.

She refocused on Will and the way his skull caved inward around his hairline. Joey almost choked up while asking, “How did you die? Lose a fight to a bowling ball?”

Will paused. He mindlessly tugged up the side of his shirt, revealing a grotesque red rash and claw marks. With his other hand, Will touched the indent in his forehead. His eyes watered, and he shook his head.

“Cerebral edema and hemorrhaging, if I had to guess.”

Joey wanted to feel bad for him, but all she could say was, “Cereal edma?”

“I think... I think one of my half-brothers beat me to death with an electric bass,” he said, like that had anything to do with the previous sentence.

Will swallowed and caught Joey up on what had been happening upstairs while she was down here. On several occasions, Joey had to clarify, and assure him, that her sister and friends were not the bad guys. Though, she was proud to hear that her sister went on a murderous rampage on behalf of Joey’s death. She’d have been furious at her sister if Euna had frozen up and gotten herself killed.

By the time he was done explaining, Will had cracked away all of the stone but her pinky toe and Joey had full mobility of her feet—something necessary for any undead dance competitions she might enter. Those had to exist in Elysium for it to be paradise.

“I can’t get this last part,” he said apologetically as he stumbled to his feet.

Joey took his hand to stand up. They walked towards the two-story bronze gates with ghastly etchings of death scenes. Two undead soldiers flanked either side. One wore a bloodied, old school military jacket, with golden tassels, medals, and a white ascot. The other wore some Middle Eastern headdress and—

Joey made a face. His hand was burned away to the bone.

“So,” Joey summarized Will’s story, unsure if the guards would try to stop them, “One guy in pink
pajamas took out all three of you?”

“Four of us,” Will said, taking no heed of her tease. “Pax tried to stop him, I think. I just hope Annabeth and Piper are okay, though I could have easily missed them. They could already be in Elysium by now.”

From what Joey had heard, Annabeth was one of the best. Joey would have loved to have trained under her. The idea of someone being able to take out those three made Joey tense. She hoped Pax and the others were okay, too.

“So, how did you get to the front gates so fast?” Joey asked. Although she hadn’t followed Will’s timeline well, he must have died weeks after her. She wasn’t sure how time passed for the dead.

“Everyone knows who—” Will started to say until the blue uniformed man hailed him.

“Guillaume, it is good to see you,” he greeted with a thick accent that Joey assumed was from some weird region of France. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“We have been waiting for you,” his companion corrected, sighing and twirling a stiletto in his non-burned hand. He also had a thick accent, but one Joey couldn’t place.

“Hello Kléber. Al-Halabi,” Will nodded politely to each of them. “I thought you two weren’t supposed to be working door duty together anymore?”

The Frenchman turned up his nose and inhaled sharply.

The Middle Eastern man scowled off to the side.

“All the bureaucratic red tape,” Kléber said, waving his hand back and forth in front of his nose like he could beat the smell away. “This is why government directories are worthless. If you had a better system set up, Nico could have overturned Midas’s orders by now, and I wouldn’t be with this murderer—je dis ça, je dis rien.”[2]

Al-Halabi scoffed. “Eid wahda matsa’afsh,” he said.[3] Although Joey didn’t understand his words, she could recognize the sarcasm. “I’m not even in the right afterlife because of your conquest and your influences, damoteel.”

While old feuds were great and all, this was wasting time. Joey cleared her throat.

Kléber glanced at her, and bowed. “I apologize, Mademoiselle. Your sister is waiting for you. If it pleases you, Crevette, escort the young lady this way.”

Joey felt weird taking Will’s arm, but the look he shot her said it would save them a lot of time if she complied. It felt nice having Kléber recognized her presence. Since the Fields of Asphodel, she’d been scared of fading away.

As Kléber and Al-Halabi escorted them through the gates, Al-Halabi asked, “Have you heard anything topside about the angry spirits?”

“Angry spirits?” Joey asked.

Al-Halabi nodded and twirled his stiletto again. “Someone opened a bridge between the Underworld and topside. Hades permits a few ghosts to haunt the Upperworld every night, but nothing like this. Khawaaaja Kléber thinks someone is amassing an army and it’s connected to—”
The ground trembled. Joey clutched Will’s arm and he grabbed her arm back.

“What was that?!?” Will demanded.

Kléber glanced back and made a grim face. “Rumor has it: Nyx. Something has upset her. My instinct tells me that’s no coincidence with the ghost army.”

Al-Halabi sighed. “As much as Kléber is a corruptor and tyrant, he is also an exquisite general. He had similar inklings about events leading up to the Second Titan War—wait here.”

Al-Halabi and Kléber motioned for them to stop, then continued forward into a blinding light.

Once her eyes adjusted, Joey could see a lovely garden. Each flower bed was surrounded by dazzling gems: sapphires, rubies, emeralds, and diamonds. The flowers themselves gleamed silver. Trees loomed above the gardens, with orange and red fruit and flowers glittering in their branches.

The sole ray of sunshine from the ceiling beamed into the garden like a glaring spotlight. Combined with the sparkling gems, Joey felt like someone had shoved a kaleidoscope in front of a lighthouse beam and told her to stare at it.

Al-Halabi and Kléber had disappeared.

Will let go of Joey’s arm. “About how I got here so fast. Everyone knows me here. I’m Nico’s boyfriend. Or was.” He sighed and glanced upwards towards the light’s source longingly. Joey had to wonder how much hell a cavern like this was for a child of Apollo. “He’s not going to handle this well. After his mother, and Bianca… I’m so worried about him. No one else is going to know where to buy him Mythomagic Band-Aids or Walnetto’s candy, or force him to have a balanced diet…”[4]

Joey thought about Euna, and how hopeless her older sister would be on her own. None of the others would be harsh enough on her for training or grades. They’d let her laze to mediocrity.

“I’ve been down here for a few family dinners,” Will said, aimlessly. His blue gaze looked through the gardens. “They were… you can’t eat or drink anything down here. Do you know how hard it is not to offend someone’s parents when you can’t—”

Joey grabbed Will’s arm and dragged him towards the garden. “Wha—” he started.

Hearing him talk about family dinners made Joey remember her father’s homemade soondubu- jjigae that she’d never have again.

“We’re here to talk to Hades and Persephone, not to talk about your and Nico’s creepy bring-your-son-and-his-boyfriend-to-work-day,” she said, biting back tears, “I’m not waiting for those jerks to escort us. I mean, you only live once, right?”

“That’s really tasteless to say down here—” Will said, but was cut off when they almost ran into a massive black form.

Joey skirted to a halt. She almost screamed. There was a dark shade of robes standing behind one of the poplars, just ahead of them. She’d mistaken him for a shadow. Where his hand touched, the tree’s bark screamed in pain. His robes warped and gnarled with faces howling in agony. He was tall and wiry, reminding Joey of a rotting twisted oak. The aura around him vibrated with power and his stature reflected it.

The way the pale man peered around the tree trunk confused Joey. She’d be horrified to see what
this man was hiding from.

Following his line of sight made her jaw drop.

There was a young woman toiling in a garden bed. The sunlight glimmered off her billowing blonde hair and warmed her pale skin. Her apron had a flickering floral design—no—it was made out of various flowers that Joey quickly identified as blooming during the wrong time of year: daffodils, tulips, azaleas, magnolias, and hyacinths. All colorful springtime flowers.

She had the satisfied grin of someone knowing their labor would pay off—a smile Joey’s father also got while doing yard work.

“She’s beautiful, isn’t she?” the man asked, his oily, powerful voice an ill match for the adoring tone.

“How are you doing that?” Will asked in awe, staring up at the sunlight.

“Poseidon wanted to say his last farewell to a lovely surfer that died young. So, in exchange, I asked him for some sunlight. He caused a massive earthquake…” The man raised one hand out of the shadows, into the sun rays.

Will frowned. “You… you’re probably killing hundreds of people to give her that sunlight.”

The man quarter turned towards them, a smirk coming to his lips. His eyes blazed black with the fury of a wildfire. “137 in counting,” he answered.

Will swallowed. Joey dug her nails into his arm, hoping he’d realize getting righteous around this guy was probably as useful as reminding Hitler that Jews were people too.

“Wouldn’t you do the same for Nico? Or did I misjudge you as worthy of my son?” Hades asked, that dark gaze boring directly into them.

Will’s arm shook violently under Joey’s grip—or was that her hand shaking?

“I think it’s romantic,” Joey squeaked. She cleared her throat and said more firmly, “We both do.”

“Thank you,” Hades said, his continence warping back into a grin. Joey relaxed. She did not want to end up in this guy’s robes—either metaphorically or literally. He continued, “Normally, I would ask a living demigod to do this, but we’re short staffed right now. I hate dealing with the Romans, and most of the Greeks are already among the sleep.”

Joey blinked, glancing over to Will to see if this meant anything. In an uncomfortable moment, she realized she hadn’t asked Will why he wanted an audience with Hades. Requesting resurrection didn’t seem like it would be the Sun Boy’s motive.

Will’s expression remained neutral, though he disentangled their arms to stand taller.

“Among the sleep?” she asked.

Hades ignored her and continued, “Will, you can bring Nico back from the shadows and stop Melinoe. Being a son of Apollo, you’re most likely to succeed with the job, and in exchange, we can talk about giving you back your li—”

“Hades, are you being rude to my sister?”

The woman had come over from the garden. In the sunlight, her face was soft and kind. Her grin
was playful. She touched Joey’s arm and Joey could feel the warmth of an April breeze.

Joey found herself smiling back and doing a quick curtsy—something she’d never done before and felt super stupid about afterwards.

“I’m working,” Hades said, his shoulders slumping.

When Persephone glanced past them at the obsidian palace, her face fell and her gaze hardened. “It looks more like you’re showing deference to your bastard child’s boyfriend. What did you put Orpheus through when he tried to lead someone back from shadow?”

“Pers…” Hades said in a voice that sounded too close to begging for a god.

Persephone held her hand up. She gave Joey another smile, though this one was chilled. “Joey, I’m sorry I can’t give you a proper welcoming right now. Let me finish with this, and we can have a pleasant talk.”

Persephone turned back to Will, her eyes fiercer than any warrior’s. Hades frowned and Will took a step back.

“When you try to save Nico, you need to have faith that your love will be enough to bring him back and defeat his despair. You can’t talk to him. You can’t acknowledge him. If you fail at ignoring him, you’ve damned both of you,” she said icily. Her eyes shot to Hades. “That is close to the deal you gave that charming poet.”

Will glanced at Hades.

Hades shrugs helplessly.

“That’s cold,” Joey said.

The ghost of a smile returned to Persephone’s face. She took Joey’s arm and led her towards the garden. “Now, we can talk about your entry to Elysium—”

Joey resisted the movement, wondering if Persephone would still the world into an eternal winter when she was upset.

“That’s not why I’m here—” Joey said, withdrawing the rosewood box from her pocket. She’d almost forgotten. Had that been why she was here? She remembered Will’s comment about Nico, and about how worried she’d been for her sister. Could she just ignore them? The others? Wouldn’t they eventually die anyway? Just thinking it scared her.

Persephone frowned at the box. “Sister, if you stay, I can grant automatic entry to Elysium.”

Hades groaned behind them, like he and Persephone had argued over this before.

“You’ve already died a heroic death,” Persephone said sternly and Joey could tell that comment wasn’t directed at her. “But that box is a mark of struggle. Are you sure you want to keep holding it?”

This box was the only thing reminding Joey of her past life. She dug her nails into its golden filament. If there was anything else she could do for her sister and friends, she was going to do it. Returning this box was one of Psyche’s quests, after all, wasn’t it?

“Yes,” Joey said, lifting her chin. “Hera gave me this box. She wanted me to ask you for the
essence of a happy marriage.”

For a moment, Persephone looked stunned. Then she burst into laughter, Hades’ booming laughter echoing after.

The latter sound was horrifying and something Joey assumed was a special punishment for the particularly wicked.

Persephone wiped a tear from her eye, calming herself down. She snapped her fingers. A lovely undead handmaiden rushed over to bring Persephone a rose pen and flowery paper.

After writing a quick note, she took the box from Joey and opened it.

Everything slowed.

The flowers trembled.

Hades’ robe fluttered in Joey’s peripheral vision, towards the open box.

A motionless vacuum sucked the noise from around them, leaving the Underworld—despite its sunlight—even drearier.

Then Persephone placed the folded note into the box and shut the lid. Everything went back to normal.

Joey could hear Will give a sigh of relief behind her.

Persephone returned the box to Joey. Nothing felt different about it, though she supposed nothing would with a single piece of paper.

“Don’t let her open that around you,” Persephone said. “Tell her this is the key to her happiness. Give it to her without saying what is inside.”

“What’s in it?” Joey asked, glancing down at the flowers. Something about them felt ominous.

“A divorce lawyer’s number,” Persephone explained, “Staying with a hopeless cheater like that is anachronism at its worst. She needs to get with the times.”

Her eyes flicked past Joey and that warmth returned. She must have been looking at Hades. Feeling grossed out, Joey could tell Persephone actually liked Hades. Yuck.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Persephone asked again.

Joey nodded her head. She’d never been more certain. She turned back towards Will and Hades, who gazed at her evenly.

Hades narrowed his gaze. “Are you working with the one who called my helmet stupid?”

That absolutely sounded like something Pax would do. Barely containing a laugh, Joey asked, “How could someone say your helmet looks stupid? Doesn’t it turn you like, invisible or something?” She was pretty sure she’d heard Merry talk about that once.

“Exactly!” Hades cried triumphantly.

Joey trembled and was pretty sure the rest of the Underworld did too, though she couldn’t tell if it was because of Poseidon above, Nyx below, or from how terrifying Hades’ victorious attitude was.
Hades snapped his fingers and Al-Halabi and Kléber materialized on either side of Will and Joey. “It is time for you to leave,” Hades said, “Remember that, outside, ghosts aren’t as powerful during the day, so, it will be easier to work at night. I don’t normally let spirits escape, but… these two have been spreading rumors about holes where souls can slip away…”

He made a shooing motion with his hand, quarter turning towards Persephone’s little patch of sunshine.

Persephone waved her hand warmly at Joey before shooting an icy look at Will.

Will was already going to take Joey’s arm, the same way he’d escorted her in, when she paused. “Wait—Lord Hades.”

“Yes?” the intensity of his voice revealed his impatience. Those eyes flashed again.

Joey shouldn’t ask. Not just because of Hades’ impatience but because she wasn’t sure she wanted to know. “In… in the Fields of Asphodel, people forget who they are and mindlessly wander. Everything those spirits have done is so unimportant to them, they forget their own accomplishments. At least the people in the Fields of Punishment know who they are and that their deeds left a mark on the world. Which one do you think is really worse?”

A queer smile curled onto Hades’ lips. “Joey Song, you’re never coming back to my domain again. So I would not worry over such nuances as to whether it is worse to be forgotten and forget or worse to be in pain.”

Joey paused. Never coming back. She thought that sounded like a sweet deal—the Underworld sucked and Kléber was right about everything taking forever, like waiting in those stupid lines for an EZ pass. Why even make an EZ pass lane when the traffic in it could still get so congested.

A deeper instinct in her shivered at the thought, wondering what that could mean.

“Now go. You try my patience. Will is running out of time to save my son, and you need to deliver Hera some peace of mind,” Hades said.

Joey nodded. They gave their farewells to the King and Queen of the Underworld and Will escorted Joey towards the exit with Al-Halabi and Kléber on either side of them.

As they approached the two-story gates, Joey asked, “Do any of you know what he was talking about? Never coming back?”

Kléber gave an airy chuckle. “It could mean becoming immortal. That is one way to never need return.”

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Al-Halabi frowned and shook his head. He stared down at his stiletto, and Joey got the impression he knew there were other ways.

“I’m not getting any Apollo-style prophetic moments about it. Sorry, Joey,” Will said, giving her arm a brief, comforting squeeze.

Joey should have been ecstatic. They were going topside. Will might be able to save his boyfriend. She’d get to properly complete a quest and maybe see her sister again. But instead of rejoicing, she found herself asking, “Spirits can’t like… die permanently, right?”

Al-Halabi muttered a curse in Arabic, his glare switching to his burned hand. He changed the subject by saying, “We don’t know the location of all the routes out of here, but let’s pretend the
rumors are true about multiple ones. Where would be the best spot that you know of to contact Hera?"

As they talked about the best reentry points, Joey became more afraid of leaving the Underworld than entering it.

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Thanks for reading! Here’s a little break from the chaos in the Upperworld XD

Also, as a call out to you wonderful people--I’ve been getting a lot of really kind support recently from my constant readers. I really appreciate it! You guys are awesome and make this book series happen! :D <3

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Footnotes:

[1] Apparently, this is going to be the accepted weight measurement system in my version of the world. Pax weighs a fortieth of an O’Leary.


[3] Equivalent of saying, “you need cooperation from all parties for something to work.” I’m not sure if this is a common idiom for Syrian Arabic or the timeframe, but eh—we can say he picked up stuff while he has been undead.

[4] Super popular candy from the early 1900’s.
Getting hit by a car wasn’t originally on Pax’s bucket list, but he decided to add it and a happy checkmark on his mental record. [1]

He had run away from the fight, leaving the steam, flames, and storm behind. Percy and Leo were too enraptured to notice him. Well, Percy probably noticed, but whole flaming taco torpedoes deal was a bit distracting for him.

Flaming Taco Torpedoes: a great name for a band, and a great name for both the best food experience and worst bathroom experience of your life.

That’s when the Paxmobile sidelined him, taking him off his feet and onto the pavement. Breaks squeaked. A familiar voice shouted, “Cho!” from an open window. [2]

Pax wanted to wallow in misery and whine, “Ow!” loud enough for Croesus’s son to hear, but got a half a second of wallowing before almost getting stomped. [3] Pax rolled to the side to avoid a golden hoof. He found himself between the Paxmobile’s front and a distressed automaton donkey’s rear. One definitely ready to kick.

“Holy Titans—Ajax! Help!” a voice called beside him. Jack was trying—unsuccessfully—to scoot away from the hooves using his jaw.

For an instance, Pax didn’t feel like he could move again. Weirdly, hit by a vehicle wasn’t in his repertoire of things he was mentally prepared to handle. He snatched Jack’s head by his hair and rolled them away from Luke the Donkey’s shuffling feet, hearing a pancake-smashing pang from where his head had been.

Pax stayed crouched on the ground panting as Jack blathered, “—barely hit us. How am I supposed to write a sonnet about that?”

The driver’s side door slammed shut and Axel took two long strides to them.

“Ajax—that—that is you,” he said.

Axel knelt beside Pax and cautiously ruffled his hair, which showed a strange amount of resistance. Pax didn’t understand Axel’s confusion until the caramel locks fell all over his arms and shoulders.

He was still Calypso.

Pax opened his mouth to speak but felt like his words were made of too many marshmallows—normally an awesome problem if he wasn’t struggling to express himself. Finally, he managed, “I think I look like a pretty princess.”

“Yea,” Jack complained, “And like someone I used to bang. It’s weird and uncomfortable for everyone.”
Pax tried to laugh that off. He knew he should change back, but the thought of it made him tremble. How easy would it be someone else forever? To walk away and create a new identity, complete with a cool back story and costume change.

A chilly breeze wafted the scent of flames to him. Trees had collapsed. Windows on nearby houses had shattered. Panels had ripped off. Shingles were aflame. Pax hoped their cab driver had gotten out of here okay and wasn’t a sizzling pile of demigod collateral.

“Told I wish I could make rainbows appear,” Pax said. He stared through Axel’s firm expression. He thought about the tears that spilled down Leo’s cheeks, the ones that evaporated immediately into the night air, about how Leo had screamed in pain. “Or be really awesome at weaving. Or make people want to party. I—hate being able—”

Axel pulled Pax into his shoulder with one arm.

Pax choked on a sob and clutched at his brother. As he wailed, he felt the hair along his shoulders recede, becoming lighter until his normal jagged length returned. The cute work jacket morphed into a sweater and bronze breastplate. He was him again. Just a stupid, horrible godly thing that… that was meant to…

To hurt those I love the most.

No wonder Axel was going to play pin-the-dagger-in-the-demigod with Pax’s hand.

“Aw, my boys just need to hug it out. Axel, Ajax, pull me up against your shoulders to simulate cuddling,” their decapitated friend requested.

“Nope, we’re good,” Axel answered.

Pax had to agree. As desperate as he was, he just found his line on where he’d go for affection: corpses or undead things.

Axel withdrew, making Pax want to cry more. He ruffled Pax’s hair again, puffed up his cheeks, and popped them.

“Why did you hit me with your car? Was it because of the Reyna-condom thing?” Pax asked. As far as he was concerned right now, there were plenty of other reasons to hit him with a car, but he figured that’s the most likely one for Axel. After all, Axel was too awesome a driver to do so on accident without some major distractions.

Pax glanced over Axel’s shoulder towards the van, noticing how a stalk of corn had sprouted through the open driver door.

“Euna—” Axel started uncertainly, apparently willing to overlook the Reyna-condom thing in Pax’s current pathetic state.

“—turned into corn,” Pax finished for him.

“Something is wrong with her,” he said.

“I’d be upset too if I were turned into corn. That would be like reverse engineering for our people.”

Axel scolded. Before Pax could dodge, Axel snagged his ear and twisted it.
“Aye! Okay! No mercy for the sacrilegious!” Pax whined. His voice almost sounded normal again, only cracking once with physical pain instead of emotional.

“We need to get out of here to meet up with Calex and Merry—before others come for us,” Axel said, “It shouldn’t take too long to get to camp since we can use… donkey travel.” Axel looked annoyed at having to say it.

Although Pax knew Axel was trying to distract him, he wondered how often Axel said stuff like that to distract himself.

Not that someone like Axel would ever need to pretend everything was okay since he could warp reality with his sheer awesomeness… but in a universe where Axel was less perfect, Pax wondered how often Axel kept a poker face when he felt like the world was crumbling.

Axel shifted like he was going to throw Pax over his shoulder. From the way Axel’s arms shuddered, Pax had a strange feeling Axel would struggle to lift a kitten right now due to battle exhaustion.

“Don’t try to pick us up. You’ll kill all three—” Pax paused to stare at Jack. “Two of us? Jack, are you dead? Should I consider you dead again?”

“I don’t know,” Jack admitted, then proceeded to use that grating gurgle of a voice to sing the lyrics to Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*. If Jack had shoulders, Pax knew he’d have shrugged.

The Pax brothers helped each other stand up. Pax felt sore from the car hit, but not Hercules-punched-me-sore. It was more like a little car love tap. Something Pax felt like Hephaestus would do to Aphrodite if he could.

Axel hesitated, then picked up Jack by his dirt-smeared red hair.

They needed to build Jack a carry case. Or at least a towel. Pax could imagine it now. “Nice pet carrier. Is that a cat inside?”

At least they’d have the best Halloween prop ever.

They shuffled towards the back of the van, listening to Jack as he supplied some entrance music.

Before Axel opened the doors, Pax could hear Euna’s icily tight voice, “—to wear off by now. It won’t stop though. It’s so loud—it’s too loud—”

When Pax saw the inside, he gasped.

The far corner of the interior, behind Axel’s driver seat, looked beautiful, or as beautiful as a beat up utility van’s interior could look. The carpeting near Euna’s feet was covered in mosses, ferns, and flowers. Vines had wrapped wildly about her legs, torso, and Backbiter’s scabbard, like nymphs had given her a makeover. Pax couldn’t tell that Euna was sitting on a bench until she slammed her fist into the frame with a solid *crunch*. Some of her moss indented to show where she’d damaged metal structure under the cushions and plants.

Her legs were pulled up against her chest. Her other hand covered her ear. There were pieces of bent precious metal littering the moss in a circle around her. Her black hair trembled with each of her twitches.

Kally was in midstep towards her, one hand clutched tight to her chest, like Euna had tried
to bite it when Kally reached out.

The look on Alabaster’s face said he’d slap Kally if she tried to pet another rabid demigod. Well, he would, if his hands weren’t decorated in the world’s most expensive blocks.

Relief washed over his and Kally’s faces when they saw Pax, making Pax feel the tiniest bit fuzzy and less dead on the inside.

“Ajax, rouge satchel. Vial seven,” Alabaster instructed before the fuzziness could fully settle.

Pax’s muscle memory kicked in before his brain did. As he hopped into the van, he could envision the Witch Boy’s ingredient cabinets at Camp Othrys. All the powders, preserved skins, miscellaneous liquids, and bones had been color and shape coordinated since his little half-Mayan lab assistant could barely write his own name let alone read Latin nomenclature. Back when Pax had a place in life, had a full family, and all he had to worry about was how he and Matthias were going to prank Prometheus when the Titan kept predicting every whoopee cushion and paint bucket that they set up.

When Pax regained focus of the present, he had his hand in one of the satchels around Alabaster’s neck, and was withdrawing a rounded vial with two dots and a bar along the side.

A vial of pills.

Pax stepped towards the trembling daughter of Demeter. “Euna, these will make you feel better.” He paused. “Or kill you.” Pax glanced back at Alabaster. “These are going to make her feel better, right?”

“Ajax,” Alabaster growled.

“Right, question after potential crisis.”

A vine snaked from Euna’s leg to snatch the vial away from Pax. Apparently, she was on the act now, think later train with whatever was “too loud.”

The vine squeezed the vial until it shattered into her palm. She caught some of the raining pills.

“Only take two,” Alabaster snapped.

Pax hoped she’d heard before she tossed her head back. No water necessary.

The pills worked fast.

Euna went rigid for a moment. Then her eyes rolled up in her head and she collapsed back into the plant-filled bench, her black hair spilling across her face. Her skin seemed to glow dimly in the van’s yellow light.

Kally hesitantly took a step closer to Euna, putting a hand up to Euna’s forehead.

At Kally’s worried glance, Alabaster said, “They’re a derivative of the formula I use for Ajax’s sleep darts. I’ve been using them for my studies on the effect of lucid dreaming on prophetic dreams, so I can immediately plunge into uninterrupted REM sleep for an hour. Think demigod-powered Nyquil.”
“So, this is the best time to draw on her face?” Pax asked, knowing this was an opportunity he should not take lightly.

“Ajax,” Axel snapped from outside. With a much more inclusive and less chastising tone, he added, “We need to leave. Everyone settle in.”

Pax wanted to ask about the urgency, but he could hear what Axel meant. The steam, flames, and hurricane had stopped behind Alabaster’s house. Everything had gone quiet.

“Vroom vroom,” Jack agreed. Although he couldn’t turn to see, his eyes darted in the direction. “I call shotgun.”

As Axel slammed the back door shut, Kally stared after them. She took a seat on the tiny part of the bench still poking out of Euna’s plants. Her movements were slow, like she’d tried to carrying a grizzly bear before realizing grizzly bears weren’t for bench pressing.

“She is still with us?” she asked softly. She bent down to pull something out of her messenger bag. From the slow movement, Pax guessed she’d gotten the coolest injury someone could get from a battle: a pulled back muscle.

When Kally withdrew a medical kit that Will must have given her, her eyes watered. “I saw what he did to Annabeth and Piper when I dragged Frank and Jason over—”

The driver’s door shut. From over the seats, Pax watched Axel set Jack’s head in the passenger seat, then paused to debate on a seatbelt.

“Please, it was only mono for Annabeth,” Jack said from the other side of the seat. “It looked like you’ve been healing people though. So you are one of my siblings—”

“Jack,” Axel growled, deciding against the seatbelt.

Although Axel feigned mild irritation, Pax knew how scary Jack’s awareness was. It made Pax want to hug Kally and make her a safety bubble of teddy bears and a soundproof safe room. That was probably the only thing the Fates had left to dangle in Pax’s face. Please don’t hurt my not-girlfriend, Pax thought. She was the only one remotely adjusted in the group and they needed someone who was properly freaked out by a talking head.

“I can behave myself. She’s a friend or a lover or something, right?” Jack asked.

“Flash,” Alabaster said softly, “If you do anything to her, I’ll bring your punishment from Tartarus here.”

Jack made a choking sound.

As though Alabaster hadn’t threatened him with whatever his eternal nightmare was, he continued, “Kally, you said Euna had droplets that invoke godly powers?” Alabaster went from looking like he wanted to strangle Jack to his I’m-fascinated-at-the-expense-of-my-life face. Pax loved that face. It meant he could get away with stupid stuff. “I’m impressed how her mind and body can handle that. I wonder if she’s acclimating.”

“Acclimating?” Kally echoed, eyes widening with alarm. She withdrew ambrosia squares from her messenger bag and some unicorn draught from New Rome, handing a cube to Pax and painfully leaning forward to give one to Axel. She pointedly ignored Jack, who was now humming Hysteria.
“She said it wore off faster last time,” Alabaster said with a shrug. His hands and feet were still encased in metal. His shoulders were slumped with exhaustion and—although Alabaster tried to hide it—confusion. Pax knew Alabaster well enough to see that he hadn’t had enough time to process everything, from the Pax brothers being alive, to why Jack wasn’t dying, to going towards Camp Half-Blood… which Alabaster probably didn’t realize yet.

Pax was very willing to not point out their destination. As the van began to accelerate, Pax flopped down onto the bench beside Alabaster, aware Alabaster would be too tired to move away when Pax nudged him with his knee.

Pax set Nietz’s cage on the ground and opened it, hoping the weasel would frolic out. Instead, Baller scrambled over, evoking a soft call of delight from Pax.

The weasel hopped around Pax’s feet once, then dove after Nietz, nipping and biting at his unconscious brother’s ear to no avail.

“Nietzsche…” Alabaster frowned in concern.

When it became clear that Nietz was nonreactive, Baller bit him and dragged him across the van floor towards Pax and Axel’s trunk by the front seat. Beside it, Pax could see Axel’s surplus army jacket was on the floor, with Hunnie curled in the center. Baller deposited Nietz next to the other unconscious sibling.

“I don’t have enough energy to help them…” Alabaster muttered.

Kally’s teary eyes were scanning all of them, either taking inventory of who was the most injured, or trying to figure out which of the Triple A Chimera was the hottest. Clearly Axel.

“You’re doing that thing,” she said, examining him, “You… Pax?”

Pax jumped. The end of that first sentence was, ”where you stare really seriously.” He couldn’t have people taking him seriously. He’d start crying. His cheeks would puff up and he wouldn’t look nearly as adorable.

“So, you evaporated Hazel. That was cool,” he said to Alabaster, keeping his voice even. Ways to distract both of them!

“I banished new shadows from appearing on or near my property. She needed to either fight us without feet, or she had to completely shadow travel away,” he explained robotically, “I almost performed a similar spell to keep Lamia’s essence from reforming, so I already had the mechanics of the incantation worked out.”

Kally paused when she went to hand Alabaster an ambrosia square and realized he didn’t have mobile fingers to take it from her. Alabaster glanced over at the movement and saw the problem. Kally blushed; Alabaster looked puzzled.

Pax thought about the two of them sitting at a café in some fancy European town, sipping tea while Alabaster circled mistakes in a scientific journal and Kally hashed out the details of a chapter.

Pax reached out for Kally’s wrist and pulled her carefully into his lap.

*Old people,* he thought while trying to work around her injured back.

“Pax—” Kally protested. Her blush intensified when she was unable to catch her balance.
“What are you doing?” Alabaster asked, annoyed at the invasion of personal space on the bench.

Once Pax had Kally comfortably against him, he nuzzled into Alabaster’s shoulder. “It’s called sharing,” he said. All he’d wanted all night was a hug from someone that didn’t try to kill him in dreamland. This would suffice. “Didn’t either of you go to kindergarten? Besides, at this rate, you’ll both scream in horror the first time you accidentally hold hands. And it will be an accident. It’ll be worse than that time I told Morpheus to give Axel a sex dream with Reyna.”

They were entering a highway. Axel missed a gear shift, the van jerked, and Pax could smell burnt clutch from the back. “You asked him to do that?!” he demanded.

“Yep,” Pax said, trying to sound proud instead of numb. “For your birthday.”

“Wow—Axel,” Jack piped up, “Alabaster’s dream was right? Ramirez? And you never told me? Have you two—”

“No,” Axel snapped, scowling at Pax in the rearview mirror. Pax forced as much of an impish smile as he could manage. “We’re not talking about this, and you’re never to talk about Reyna like that, and it doesn’t matter anyway because it’s over.”

Jack laughed. “All that time of you rejecting girls, boys, monsters, and gods I sent your way? Na-uh. Our chaste warrior falls to the sweet blessing of Eros’ kiss, and you think I’m going to but bite mine tongue at such a celebration?”

“Jack, I’ll throw your head out the window.”

“No, you won’t. You missed me too much.”

“I’ll find Matthias’ playlist and play dubstep the entire way back to camp.”

“You wouldn’t dare, foul demon.”

While the two in the front argued, Alabaster had leaned down and bit the ambrosia square out of Kally’s fingers. If Pax had to guess, purely to spite him.[6]

In an attempt not to evolve the art of embarrassment into a new, more powerful emotion, Kally went to work cutting Alabaster’s sleeve off so she could attend to his wound. Although Pax’s presence made the process slower, they worked around him without complaint. Whether from exhaustion or kindness, Pax was happy for the proximity.

Pax waited patiently to see which of them would break first.

It was Alabaster. Pax could see him become conscious of how close he was sitting to Kally and Pax before he asked, “Wait—mono? You had the opportunity to kill Annabeth, and you gave her the kissing disease?” He looked at the seemingly empty passenger seat for distraction.

Instead of singing to heal where Hazel had slashed Alabaster’s arm, Kally very pointed started to stitch him up. Not gently either.

Yea, their whole group needed some real talk time about the whole killing Percy and Annabeth thing.

“I’m not gonna kill Luke’s creepy crush,” Jack chastised, “Besides, it’s like a two for one deal. A few months from now, Percy will be obnoxiously exhausted and sick. And—if recent
Tartarus fanfiction is correct—so will Jason.”

“Oh, Percy and Jason are not a thing.” Pax felt bad ruining Jack’s plan, but he figured Jack ought to know now. “I once smacked Percy’s ass when I’d morphed into Jason and you could tell he wasn’t into it.”

“Ajax—why—” Alabaster started to ask. He shook his head in disgust. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It did make sense at the time,” Kally meekly assured, finishing up the stitch. She put some gauze and medical tape over the wound. “I’ll sing over what’s left once I’ve attended to everyone else and rested a little from healing…”

She trailed off. Pax knew she was going to say Frank and Jason. The thought of her trying to ignore Frank’s nudity should have brought cupcakes and happiness to Pax’s heart.

Kally glanced down at Pax, frowning.

Pax forced himself to give that devilish smile and wink. “I can take off my clothes if you need to do a full body exam.”

Kally blushed, probably thinking about the time he streaked through New York, then shook her head. “Will everyone be okay?” she asked, standing up from Pax’s lap.

Reluctantly, he let her get to her feet. Kally stretched, wincing.

The pain Pax and Leo shared kept threatening to resurface. That kid of Hephaestus deserved a medal, not a child of Strife rooting around in his head. “Does ‘okay’ include future therapy, hours of hug sessions, and a lifetime of regression on self confidence? Because if it does, then maybe. With 65% in the positive direction,” Pax said, puffing up his cheeks and popping them.

Quieter, she asked, “Are you okay?”

He knew she wasn’t asking if he was injured.

If they were alone, Pax would have burst into tears right there, curled up in her lap—an impressive feat considering their current placement—and begged her to hold him. He was pretty sure he’d never screwed up more than he had tonight. But he didn’t want Alabaster to claim he was faking it, and he didn’t want to explain to Jack why he’d rather curl up with Kally—a hot chick that wasn’t a decapitated corpse—and he didn’t deserve to have Kally touch him.

Alabaster saved him from turning into a puffer fish of sobs. “Why did you leave the protective barrier around the house?” Alabaster asked. The tone wasn’t angry. More the I’m not mad, I just want to know how you did it, that he used when Matthias and Pax broke into the laboratory for prank supplies. “Does it have to do with that mark on your neck?”

Mark? Pax followed Alabaster’s glance and touched the bruise on his neck. Whatever it was hadn’t healed yet, even with his extra godly blood.

Icy fingers slipped over his.

Pax almost screamed, thinking the abominable snowman had somehow snuck up on a moving vehicle and bust through the wall in the stealthiest explosion possible.

Then he felt the warmth of a blanket settle over his legs, one composed of newspaper
articles about world catastrophes. The article on his left knee showed a picture of a dead baby panda at some zoo.

Pax felt like someone had scooped out his heart and crushed it. Well, the tiny reserve of his heart that hadn’t been crushed by the rest of the night. He opened and closed his mouth.

Alabaster yelped in alarm when something slipped between him and Pax.

“Have you heard about how Zeus hung Hera over the pit of Khaos, when he learned of her attempted treachery? Even the gods fear the abyss of nothingness and nonexistence,” a familiar voice cooed like a lullaby.

Pax choked on his own breath—a stupid feat, but impressive within the world of stupidity.

A girl leaned forward off their bench, one hand stretched back along Pax’s shoulder and one to Alabaster’s, so she wouldn’t fall forward, though it looked more like she was suspended by two chains. Those black locks—streaked with white, red, and purple—were shorter and jagged again, twisting back in chaotic spirals. She wore a leather jacket. A crowbar and a sledge hammer appeared at her feet.

Atē ignored both of them, her face angled at the slumbering form of Euna.

Euna mumbled in her sleep. The vines wrapped around her legs unraveled and lifted, hovering like charmed snakes between the daughter of Demeter and the Goddess of Mischief and Ruin.

“Atē,” Kally hissed. She snatched one of Axel’s throwing sticks off the wall and aimed it at the goddess. “What do you want?”

“Wow—Kally, put the stick down,” Pax said, his voice coming out a whisper. “Axel will hurt you way more than Atē ever could if you break that thing.”

Atē shrugged listlessly and tugged Pax’s hand so she could sit upright. Alabaster flinched and scowled as she did the same to him. Smoke still curled off her from her little appearing trick. “Euna asked a question while she was sleeping. It would have been rude not to answer.”

“I can’t see!” Jack complained, “Is the intruder hot?”

“It’s Atē,” Axel growled, glaring at her in the rearview mirror.

“That didn’t answer the question,” Jack grumbled.

Atē released Pax’s hand and shoulder, sliding her fingers down his bronze breastplate and under the blanket. She dug her nails into his knee. “Don’t go to Camp Half-Blood,” she said, “Lapis sent me. She said you and Axel shouldn’t go back. A chicken lizard told her—”

“Kukulkan,” Axel snapped.[7]

Pax wasn’t sure what to expect from Atē. Maybe a, “Sorry for using you to kill Will, cause massive chaos, and trap Nico. Here’s a Reese’s Stick.” That would have been nice. He hadn’t expected her to act as a convoy for his siblings.

“So, Lapis gave you a stickynote, a high five, and you poofed? No strings or massive chains attached?” Pax asked. “Just out of the goodness of your… whatever organs you have?”
Atë turned to Pax and stared at him with those blank, red eyes. If she hadn’t… acted how she had earlier, he might have thought he’d stunned her into silence. “She traded the favor for information,” she said.

Pax was scared of what kind of information Lapis would have that Atë might want, other than Axel’s workout schedule. She could get a lot of money for that from the nymphs at Camp Half-Blood.

“Let me take a guess: your mom doesn’t want any of us to go back to Camp Half-Blood?” Kally asked. She took a step back towards Euna, and Pax saw her glance at Backbiter’s scabbard. She was probably debating if she could get it to use Atë’s choker as a cut here line.

“No.” Atë tilted her head to one side and Pax could feel some of her hair tickle his ear. Part of him really wanted to shove her off the bench. Part of him wanted to cry and whine a, I thought you liked me! and knew pushing a goddess was a bad idea.

Pax went to shove her off the bench.

Atë caught his hand. Without revealing any strain, she continued, “Python would be disappointed if you weren’t there, Kally. Euna needs to come to camp. If rumor is correct, she’ll find the answers to some of her questions at Hera’s temple. Jack can come. You can roll his head into Cabin Seven and see who sings the last note. But… Alabaster…”

She turned towards him. “Are you excited to sit outside the camp that has banned you for having thoughts and for wanting to teach others how to have thoughts?”

Although Pax couldn’t see Alabaster with Atë between them, he could envision his friend tensing. Atë leaned forward to tap her nails in a walking motion along Alabaster’s restrains. As the goddess’s fingers left the metal, the material tarnished, cracked, and fell away.

She continued, “You and the rest of Chimera could go on a play date while you’re waiting. I’m sure there are some nymphs you can hunt down to gather ingredients.”

“The Association Against Sorceral Subjugation banned nymph poaching in the 1980’s,” Alabaster said evenly. Pax could see Alabaster flex his freed fingers.

“As they should have,” Axel said sternly from the front.

Pax would rather fall on another nail than hear that argument again.

“Now, Atë, I want you out of my car,” Axel growled.

She kicked her feet out, letting her ankles crack against the base of the bench on the backswing. “You are almost at camp. I should leave. After all, children of Strife always hurt those we love the most, especially the more we’re around them.” She frowned and stared at the floor.

Pax wanted to ask her if she wanted some polish and a rag to rub it in more. He already knew how much he’d hurt his friends.

Instead, she leaned over and kissed Pax where she’d bit him previously. When Pax gasped, he found himself inhaling her smoke as she poofed away.

In her place, there was a small box wrapped in her newspaper blanket. It rattled with something inside.
They sat in stunned silence for a moment, the van’s interior feeling too exposed. Pax wished he had a magical poof ability to avoid unwanted, inevitable questions. Kinda like those trap doors evil villains always kept in offices.

“Um, Pax, isn’t she your sister?” Kally asked. She set Axel’s throwing stick back on the wall. Her tone was too careful.

“She’s only my half-sister,” Pax mumbled, pulling at the sides of the newspaper blanket. Maybe he could hide under it.

“We’re only half-siblings,” Axel said, giving him a concerned glance in the thin slit of the mirror.

Pax sighed. “I want to wink at you so desperately as a joke, but it just feels too weird.”

“Ajax, I consider myself a very patient and understanding man when you consider our upbringing,” Axel said, “But, if you ever wink at me in that context, I will beat the incest out of you.”

“You didn’t—” Alabaster started.

“Nope. I said nope,” Pax said quickly, opening the box to keep from looking at everyone. “I was a good little boy and told her she had no manners since she hadn’t brought me—”

Inside, there were pastry sweets. Pax puffed up his cheeks and popped them: they were from his Chiich’s pastry shop. He’d recognize the smell anywhere. Beside them were a bundle of black orchids, the flower his father used to keep all over the club as a reminder of their home country. Lastly, there was a tiny ball of poof staring up at him with panicked, beady eyes. The furry black thing dashed out of the box, fumbling onto the floor.

Baller’s head popped up from his nest. He dashed after the new intruder.

They bolted around the van.

“What is that?!” Kally demanded, scrambling back onto the bench beside Euna.

“It’s a chinchilla,” Pax explained numbly, “She even gave me a live one.”

Alabaster pulled his knees up to sit pretzel style on the bench beside him. Cautiously, he withdrew a note from inside. “That’s a low bar, Ajax,” he pointed out before opening the card.

A voice recording played of Atë saying, “Lo siento muchísimo.”[8]

Pax flinched at the apology. He reached over and opened and shut the front a few times, making it go, “Lo s-L-L-Lo sient—”

Alabaster batted him away. He made a face and went to shut the card.

“What does it say?” Pax asked.

Alabaster frowned, glanced at Axel’s seat, then back at the card. He bit his lip. “I wanted to stitch the recorder inside the chinchilla, like one of those Build-A-Bear toys, but Lapis said you would like this more.” He swallowed. “Now you can open this each time I hurt you. And… and it has a heart with her name beside it.”

Pax tried to respond. He wanted to get excited about naming the chinchilla something
awesome or about having a tasty piece of home to eat and visualize the way his Chiich would scold them for swiping sweets from her stand.

But he felt too nauseous to eat.

All he could do was pull his legs up against his chest. He thought about how easily Atë restrained his hand when he tried to push her off the bench. He clutched at the sweater under his armor, the one depicting weasels eating humans.

Maybe Atë was once like him. But everything kept going wrong, over and over, and she stopped feeling like she was made out of cuteness and fluff and forgot how to give others her cuteness and fluff.

Maybe he deserved to be with someone like her.

Warmth encased his side.

Pax wanted to squeal until he smelled the smallest hint of eucalyptus and mint—Kally’s shampoo. She squeezed onto the bench beside him and wrapped her arms around him. Although she was trying to be sneaky, Pax felt her other hand slip along his back to tug on what was left of Alabaster’s sleeve.

Pax could feel her tears when she nuzzled into him.

Alabaster’s fist crushed around the card. Pax wanted to yip in protest—that had been a gift. But the crumbled paper was already on the ground, giving another obstacle for the weasel and chinchilla to dart around.

Pax really hoped Baller was trying to say, hi and not nice night for a snack.

Alabaster shoved the box down afterwards, shaking up the flower and pastry arrangement. “Hades damn it all,” he grumbled. When he leaned forward, putting an arm around Pax and Kally and his chin on Pax’s head, Pax could feel how he fumed and trembled with anger.

“You know you can’t kill the chinchilla, right?” Pax squeaked. “It’s not Harvey’s fault that Atë chose it for a gift.”

“We can get one of the satyrs to give it a nature’s blessing to assure it returns home safely,” Kally suggested.

“Most animals raised in captivity will die in the wild,” Alabaster pointed out.

“I’m sure some younger cabin members will take care of… Harvey,” Kally said.

Listening to them talk around him eased some of the tension in Pax’s stomach. He didn’t realize how tightly he’d clenched into a ball, but tried to become less ball-like by snuggling more into them. After a moment, he managed a smile and said, “You know, Atë gave me the sweater I’m wearing too. Are you going to undress me with the power of teamwork?”

The van decelerated to a stop. At first, Pax thought Axel was parking to hop in the back and yank his ear off.

Instead, Axel opened his door and paused. Pax could hear him sniff the chilly early morning air as it drifted into the car. Then he popped his cheeks.
“What is it?” Jack asked.

Alabaster and Kally sat up. Even Euna stirred.

Axel inhaled deeply and sighed. When he glanced over the seat rest, Pax could see how exhausted he looked. “It’s Reyna. She’s here. And so are the Romans.”

Thanks for reading guys! At least you now know Pax survived >>’’ We’ll get to Percy and Leo’s side a little later.

Also! Excitement on this front! For those of you who aren’t on a website that says how many chapters there are: I’m writing the last one this weekend! :D There will be 43 in Attrition of Peace, though I’m hoping to keep the word count below Blood of a Mayan. (It’s already too long T.T) Once that’s done and I finish some school application stuff (*cries* real life), I’m going to hash out some of my writing requests (don’t think I forgot you Calex-meets-his-awesome-step-mother-request :D)! Thanks for sticking with me so far guys!

Footnotes:

[1] The original start for this chapter was in Axel’s point of view with, When they slid into the Paxmobile, Axel still wasn’t sure they’d made the right choice.

When a talking head and demigod slammed into the hood of the car, he knew, regardless of the rightness of the choice, at least it didn’t result in Pax’s death.

[2] I am so tired of doing exposition and character building scenes in the Paxmobile. That’s why it disappeared for a full book. I’m straight up going to blow the damn thing up soon. Say goodbye to your home weasels!

[3] His most famous son is deaf.

[4] A question I often get from friends and family when I get into writing moods.


[7] This is hinted at in the second book. Lapis is the only Pax other than Ajax that can call upon the Vision Serpent. More on this—in proper mythological context—in the Pax family’s standalone story.

[8] I’m so sorry.
Reyna didn’t have the energy or time to deal with the arrival of the Paxmobile.

She’d calculated it in as a likely factor, but she’d been ignoring the possibility since the bouts started, and another should start soon.

When Thalia and another huntress, Christiana, ran into her tent to report the presence of a gold donkey and van along Farm Road, Reyna cursed. Reinforcements had arrived, but she didn’t know to whom they belonged or if they’d do any good if they were hers.

And they didn’t have time to find out.

Clovis would need her by the strawberry fields any minute. [1]

“Axel and Kally are their parley party, but there are others with them. They have a peace flag,” Thalia informed Reyna. “No Percy, Annabeth, or the others. No Nico or Hazel.” The last part sounded grim.

Christiana walked off with little more than a hand gesture from Thalia. Her silver jacket flickered in the moonlight as she exited to continue patrolling.

Reyna’s stomach lurched at hearing Axel’s name. She tightened her grip around her knife’s hilt. She jerked the blade out of the make-shift war table and stepped out of the tent.

*No Nico or Hazel.*

She thought about the way her hand had passed through Nico this past summer, like he was made of shadows, and what Calex said about the child of Hades tonight. During his rushed explanation, Calex had admitted the information he gave about Nico was vague and from a hysterical Pax—“someone dodgy at the best of times.” Maybe it was wrong.
Or maybe Nico was gone forever.

Reyna tried not to let her legs shake.

“Thalia, I need someone on standby to give me a signal the instant Clovis steps into sight,” she said.

The lieutenant of Artemis nodded. “I’ll keep an eye out for him.” Without pause, Thalia stepped back past the tent, towards the flood lights that the Romans had set up around the perimeter of Camp Half-Blood.

As Reyna walked towards the crest of the hill, Michael Kahale and Calex Rupin McKenzie came over, mid-argument.

“—here to help!” Calex snapped.

Michael held up a hand to silence the son of Eros when they intercepted Reyna.

“Reyna, the timing is tight. Do you want me to take care of this?” Michael asked, his eyes darting to follow Thalia’s departure.

She shook her head, but was happy for his presence. She was too worn down to do this on her own. If Frank, or Nico, or any of the others had come back, she would have felt better, and it wasn’t just because they could summon zombies or turn into grizzly bears.

“Is the unicorn droaght ready?” she asked.

She knew how futile the next fight would be. They’d only won a single bout this night, and Clovis was getting weaker and more despairing. But she had to try.

Michael nodded. From the way he sighed, she could tell he didn’t agree with her decision to talk to the peace party, but would never contradict a high officer.

However, Calex did not share his hesitation. He stepped alongside them.

They could see a few figures approaching from the road when Michael snapped, “Calex, you’re not supposed to be here for this.” Under normal protocol, Reyna would agree. Calex was too likely a candidate for a spy and traitor for Axel’s group.

“Likes Hades I’m leaving,” Calex hissed.

Reyna tensed. Everyone was discouraged and frustrated. She didn’t want to see a fight break out between these two. Calex looked like a Greek statue and was probably in the same weight class as one. Michael Kahale was one of the few people who could probably put Calex down, but, fortunately, he seemed to have a soft spot for his nephew on the godly side.

“You can stay, but not a word until I say so,” Reyna snapped.

Calex glanced at her with a look that said, remember, I can make you fall in love with someone stupid. Even the likes of Apollo.

Michael sighed again in defeat. His shoulders sagged as they took a stand, waiting for the parley party to come to them; Reyna wanted to make sure they were within range of the huntress’ bows if the peace flag was a trick.

When she saw them come into her floodlights, she tightened her hold on her dagger.
Quickly, she sheathed it, not realizing she’d kept it drawn.

Last time Reyna had seen Axel, he’d gone from nervously sliding an arm around her on the couch and naming her ninja zombie rabbits after famous fighters to setting the couch on fire and threatening to eat the hearts of her soldiers.

Now, he looked more like the monster he’d espoused.

The Nemean lion pelt swayed off his shoulders. In the dim lighting, she was disgusted to see the glint of two Roman praetor medals on the paws tied about his throat: one, she guessed, for former praetor Megara—missing in action—one for former Praetor Julian—slain on the battlefield. He wore the traditional Roman pteruges, leather skirts, overtop his pants and odd bracers—likely Mayan style.

A feline helmet was tucked under one of his arms: the Leonis Caput helm.

Reyna struggled not to signal open fire to the hiding huntresses, Lesedi and Christiana.

She felt so stupid for not seeing it before. Since the Pax brothers had escaped through the labyrinth entrance in her room, Reyna had mentally gone over each battle against the Leonis Caput during the Second Titan war. She should have recognized his fighting style, picked up on more hints, and pieced together who he was.[3]

The smaller daughter of Apollo, Kally, stepped forward with him. She held the peace flag, face drawn with more determination than Reyna had ever seen on the normally timid girl.

Neither looked armed, but Reyna knew that meant nothing with Axel. With his fangs and claws, he was always armed.

They stopped six feet away, enough distance to prevent a close range stealth attack. Axel must have had his Mist mask up; Reyna couldn’t see if his jaguar ears were tucked.

Before she or Michael could stop him, Calex broke forward. For a second, she thought he was going to attack them. Axel braced in anticipation like he expected the same.

But Calex tackled Kally into a hug and clapped his hand onto Axel’s shoulder. Kally dropped the peace flag, shattering her sturdy demeanor with a squeak. Axel relaxed.

Reyna could feel Michael Kahale roll his eyes.

“You twats,” Calex hissed, “You didn’t off anyone, did you?”

Axel’s expression was grim. Kally’s lip trembled. “We didn’t,” she said quietly.

Calex’s face fell.

Axel cleared his throat and stepped forward, away from Calex. Whatever clever shirt he had been wearing was shredded, like he’d been hit by a fire hose full blast for twenty minutes. His dark eyes met evenly with hers when he greeted, “Praetor.”

“Leonis Caput,” she returned.

She wanted him to puff up his cheeks, or frown, or show some loss of composure.

Instead, Axel gazed past her, assessing the situation: how the Romans’ barracks were outside the camp’s borders, that there were floodlights pointed inside, that the only people running
around were Roman. No Greeks.

There was a pause that she didn’t have the time for.

His eyes widened. “The Mist barrier… it’s almost gone.”

Michael Kahale grunted.

Although Axel could have been faking it, Reyna was relieved by his seemingly genuine surprise. Maybe he hadn’t come because he knew the camp was weak.

Kally blinked, glancing over to Axel. “How—”

“The Athena Parthenos’ eyes are closed. And Thalia’s tree is in dormancy. Even Peleus is unconscious,” Reyna said.\footnote{She didn’t want to give potential enemies unnecessary information, but Calex would tell them anyway, and she needed to speed this along.} Kally and Axel shared a look of bewilderment at what could knock out a dragon, the same confusion her troops had when they first arrived.

“Dionysus—” Kally started to ask.

“Is out due to some petty spat Zeus dragged him into,” Calex answered, sounding annoyed.

“Eris,” Axel growled.

If Axel and Kally had known about any of that information, they were doing an excellent job pretending they didn’t. Reyna dug her nails into the hilt of her dagger. She needed to know their intentions now.

“I’m not going to dance around this issue,” she said. “Are you here to help us or do I need to kill you?”

“Kally, Pax, Euna, and I are here to help,” Axel said.

Reyna wasn’t sure what she would have preferred: that he be the monster he was supposed to be, or that he offer his help when she knew he couldn’t do anything. None of them could do anything.

They needed a child of the Underworld or something close.

“Is Hazel or Nico coming?” she asked.

Kally swallowed, raising her chin. “From what Pax said, the goddess Melinoe kidnapped him when he was turning into shadows. And… Hazel—”

“Should have reformed from the shadow realm by now,” someone spoke behind her.

Kally tensed. Her fingers tightened along the peace flag.

Three figures approached behind Axel and Kally. One, Reyna readily recognized as Euna Song, the girl currently under scrutiny for the massacre of several mortals. Another—Axel’s little brother, Pax—was tugging furiously at a taller one’s arm to slow him down. The taller one wore a bulletproof vest, strange pants covered in runes, and—

Upon seeing the helm in his hand and the forked staff in the other, Reyna felt her jaw drop.
“The Cloven Terror?” she asked.

Michael Kahale clamped a hand over his sword.

“You brought the Cloven Terror to protect the camp? Is this a joke?” she demanded, scowling at Axel. She switched from holding her dagger to grabbing her sword hilt.

“And the Plague Bringer!” a cheerful voice came from Pax’s belt. “But I assure you, Al and I have no intention of protec—”

Pax slammed a hand down to the head dangling off his utility belt.

Reyna felt like she was going to be sick.

“Yea, it’s a gross and long story that we don’t really get either, but I’m sure Axel can tell you later to set the mood, since nothing sets the mood like severed heads and Goth boys going poof,” Pax said. He turned to Kally. “Not that I think that sets the mood. I’m a flowers and sweets kinda guy. Axel and Reyna are just—”

A flare exploded overhead.

“That’s Thalia’s signal,” Michael Kahale said. “We need to move.”

Reyna hoped she hadn’t arrived too late.

When she raced up to the edge of the strawberry fields, she couldn’t see Clovis or any monsters. Just the caution tape they’d set up along the perimeter of Camp Half-Blood’s borders.

None of this was ideal. They already couldn’t do much, and having the full Triple A Chimera here would demoralize her troops further.

They didn’t have the time to properly restrain the Cloven Terror either. If he turned on them —

Reyna skidded to a stop at the edge of the caution tape. Axel would have lunged over it had she not shoved an arm out in front of him.

He paused, glancing at her. Part of her wished she’d let him jump, but he was too useful an asset if he truly was fighting on their side.

She pointed to a body, facedown, three feet beyond the caution tape. One of her own new recruits, in full battle armor: Ellie Atmadja.

“If you cross into Camp Half-Blood’s territory, you fall asleep,” she warned. Reyna wondered how long it would take Axel to notice what else was wrong with the image, other than the trampled strawberry fields and gashes in the trees near the field.

Axel sniffed the air, his eyes narrowing to the other side of the field, closer to the Big House, almost outside of the flood light’s range. Where there was a small pile of bodies wearing a variety of Camp Half-Blood sleepwear. An area that wafted metallic in the breeze.
The ominous notes of a rapid piccolo solo came from the darkness beyond the floodlights. The rhythmic rustling of footfalls followed, along with a continuous crunch that Reyna guessed was a body being dragged, like the others had been.

A pale figure lumbered towards them. Michael Kahale was the first to start up the shouts.

“Come on, Clovis!” he cheered, trying to hide his worry.

“You’re almost at the border!” Reyna recognized Thalia’s voice from somewhere further along the perimeter. All her troops that weren’t staked out to ward off approaching monsters gathered near the caution tape to shout their support.

Reyna didn’t know how to tell them, but their shouts made it so much worse for Clovis. All their encouragement made him feel like he was letting them down with each bout he lost.

He stumbled towards them. Now, Reyna could see which sleeping camper he dragged behind him: a brunette girl that Reyna was pretty sure was the counselor of the Demeter cabin.

Clovis looked exhausted. Reyna remembered Jason once describing the son of Hypnos as bovine. He had a gentle face, thick figure, and arms too small for his body, ones unused to frantically dragging campers across the whole camp.

His blond hair was streaked with blood and dirt. One of his spindly arms dangled uselessly at his side. He wore white PJs, now dirtied to a tan. Even at this distance, Reyna could hear his huffed breath that bordered on a sob.

She knew how tired he was. She’d felt his pain, his fear, his frustration, and shame. He couldn’t keep doing this much longer.

The sound of a wind instrument increased in volume. A second figure marched forward two dozen feet behind him. As though to drown out the encroaching danger and their inability to help, Reyna’s troops cheered louder.

Reyna wondered what kind of monster would come out this time. Last time was something large and terrifying that tore up the grounds.

Now, a tall, lengthy humanoid figure approached. Its head was that of a giant kiwi bird skull, like someone had fused a plague doctor mask into their face. The bone-face donned a Renaissance-style lord’s cap, and the creature wore a multicolored jester costume. It pranced forward, tooting a sinister tune on its piccolo. Along its neck, even at this distance, she could see the hideous glare of a purple and orange polka dotted bowtie.

“Holy Titans. I think I actually preferred him with his boaring pig attire,” Pax muttered over the empty cheers.

“Clovis is by himself,” Kally whispered, “Against a god? What is Phobetor doing in camp. And none of us can go in?”

“That’s why we were on about Nico or Hazel,” Calex told her, in a hushed, quick voice, “We think Lou Ellen is in there, helping Clovis when she can. Phobetor claims he’s close to locking in on her location. But—unless someone has lots of experience being close to Erebus, the dream world, or a lot of experience controlling their sleep—they can’t go inside without falling unconscious. And Phobetor will start killing campers indiscriminately if someone outside tries to fire in.”
“There’s no way to help unless we have a way in there,” Axel realized, his tone grave.

But Reyna could do something to help. Even if it was temporary.

Clovis was about half-way through the strawberry field by now. She knelt down, focusing on him as he lumbered forward with Miranda Gardner. His desperate eyes darted to hers. Now that he was closer, he could see the clean lines the tears streaked down his cheeks.

Phobetor lowered the piccolo from his mask and Clovis released a despairing sob.

Reyna’s tattoo burned along her forearm. Although she couldn’t use her powers as effectively from a distance or as effectively on a single person, she reached out, feeling the familiar hopelessness, exhaustion, and pain. All Clovis wanted to do was sleep. But, Phobetor had made it clear to him—if Clovis dared sleep, Phobetor killed campers. Since Phobetor couldn’t get to another child of Hypnos in his dreams, the god brought Clovis’ nightmare into the real world.

What Reyna wanted to know was why Phobetor wanted to kill campers and why he had chosen this method.

Reyna willed Clovis some of her determination and strength.

Clovis’ shuffling increased in speed. His eyes brightened. For a split second, she could see his gaze soften with gratitude. He was closing in on the border and bringing Miranda Gardner to safety.

Then, Phobetor spoke, his voice booming over the cheers of her troops. Despite her resolve, Reyna found herself shaking in the presence of a god. “Ah, we have more of an audience now, Clovis. Look, our little nephew has come to join us.” He tilted his hat towards Reyna and—she realized from the sound of his cheek pop—Pax. “Shall I start the timer for the next bout? Horror movies these days. Never know the proper element of timing.”

Phobetor pinched his piccolo between two abnormally long fingers so he could adjust his bowtie. He released it, and gave a quick puff on his instrument.

Behind him, someone else trudged forward.

Reyna tried not to tremble more. She didn’t need this god to have reinforcements. She hoped it was Lou Ellen, with another trick—the daughter of Hecate had managed to stay awake inside the border, and had been tripping up Phobetor and causing little stunts to buy Clovis time. But Reyna doubted they’d be that fortunate.

The person approaching was a muscular boy with Asiatic features and a deep tan. He wore a baggy Camp Half-Blood shirt, a hoplite sword, and boxers, probably PJs. With much more ease than Clovis, he carried three campers, one on each shoulder, and another along the ground. He dumped them beside Phobetor, then stood there, swaying.

Although Reyna couldn’t be sure, she thought that one of the dropped campers was a Stoll brother. The other was a stocky blond haired boy.

“Matthias,” Pax muttered.

The last one was a mumbling Lou Ellen. The head of Hecate had a hand to her head, and Reyna could tell she must have been walloped.

“It appears that Sherman Yang, a young sprite of Ares, has a sleep walking problem.”
Phobetor gestured to the camper standing beside him, using his piccolo like a ringleader would a crop. “He is having a very confusing nightmare right now. One about his girlfriend, Miranda, being kidnapped. It’s a pity you can’t sleep Clovis. You’d normally be able to make him your puppet in his current condition, but now—”

Reyna wondered why Phobetor had let Clovis come so far before attacking. Now she knew: dramatic effect.

Sherman Yang ran towards him.

As much as she could, Reyna extended an adrenaline burst to the son of Hypnos. Clovis tried to drag Miranda to the line.

But the athletic son of Ares cut him off with two yards to go. His bulky form partially obscured the plumper boy. Sherman unsheathed his sword. “Drop her, you monster!” he snarled. Reyna wondered what nightmare Phobetor was feeding him. She also wondered how often Sherman woke up his siblings with surprise sleepfights.

Clovis dug his heels into the ground, stumbling. “Sherman—it’s—it’s me. C-C-Clovis—” Reyna could feel the sob swelling inside Clovis. She willed him to keep it together. But he was exhausted, unarmed, and had a broken arm from when Phobetor tore through the field as a giant boar. Despite all the effort with her powers, she could feel his hopelessness creeping in.

“Ah, little Clovis, are you ready for me to start the timer?” Phobetor flicked the piccolo to the side. It morphed into a hatchet.

All the cheering went silent. Her troops knew what was about to happen.

She felt someone flinch against her back. With her focus on Clovis, she hadn’t realized someone had knelt by her, propping her up with their own body and warmth. She hadn’t realized how worn down she was until she tried to pull from them. A combination of rage, resentment, and reassurance washed through her when she caught Axel’s spicy scent. Some extra fury to support Clovis.

Clovis glanced over his shoulder, away from her and Sherman, at Phobetor. “You—you only ever have one hostage that you use as a timer,” he tried to reason, like he had all night.

“Bigger audience. Closer to the climax,” Phobetor gestured towards the sky with his hatchet, where the Eastern darkness should soon have a hint of pink. “Bigger stakes. If you win this bout, little brother, you win it all!” Phobetor gave a bellied laugh. “I’ll even let you take a nap.”

Sherman Yang shifted stances to prepare a lung.

Phobetor raised his hatchet over Connor’s hand.

Reyna could sense some of her soldiers avert their gaze. Others shouted in anger. Michael Kahale threw one of the legion’s spears to land beside Clovis, so he was at least armed.

“I’m going to cut off Matthias’ leg and Connor’s hand,” Phobetor explained like he had with the others. “I’m going to chop off Lou Ellen’s head, for being such a nuisance. If you can defeat Sherman before my little timers bleed to death, you can take all four campers—Miranda, Connor, Matthias, and Sherman—to safety.”

“Oh gods…” Kally whispered.
“No--!” Pax shouted.

“Timer on.”

Phobetor brought down the hatchet.

Footnotes:

[1] For any of you that know the song, I kept getting “strawberry fields forever” stuck in my head while writing this scene… it made capturing the tone REALLY difficult.


[3] Mel wanted me to note through her betacomments: it’s okay Reyna. Axel’s sexiness and awkwardness would be too distracting for anyone.

[4] In my defense: if a demigod can charmspeak an inanimate metal sculpture into a sentient dragon, a god can definitely put a statue to sleep.

[5] Queue Overwerk’s Canon on the soundtrack: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=edOrKeBS-s8. I’m pretty sure the song’s opening starts with a flute solo, but I wanted Phobetor to have a piccolo… because piccolos.
Although Alabaster had only been listening to Phobetor for a few minutes, he had already made up his mind about the God of Nightmares: Phobetor’s plan was stupid and he should feel stupid.

Alabaster donned his helm and shoved Pax and Euna out of his way. Without much thought to whether or not it would work, he continued toward Camp Half-Blood’s boundary. Some part of his mind processed the potential variable of the camp recognizing him as the enemy he was and stopping him. But Axel had said the barrier was almost gone. From what Alabaster could feel through the Mist, it was.

No magical force halted his approach. Zeus must have been too distracted to smite him with a lightning bolt though—Alabaster realized in disgust—Alabaster’s disobedience would likely garner Zeus’ attention quicker than Phobetor’s little outburst.

Instead of an invisible wall, Alabaster felt a wave of exhaustion flood his body. The world wanted to slip away. This was how Phobetor was knocking everyone but Lou Ellen and Clovis out.

But Alabaster was a child of crossroads, including the line between the waking world and the dream world. His mother was Hecate: a goddess who accompanied Persephone throughout Erebos.

If Phobetor thought this was exhausting, clearly he had never been near a college during finals week. Claymore had been having Alabaster shadow enough classes to understand a fulltime doctoral student’s pain.

After imagining his entrance into Camp Half-Blood for the last year and a half, whether to kill Percy Jackson or to see if any of his siblings had survived the war, Alabaster thought he’d feel more upon discovering he could enter. He didn’t feel anything more than the exhaustion and a dull numbness when he sprinted towards Phobetor.

As he rushed past Clovis, Sherman, and Miranda, he nailed the back of Sherman’s knees with his staff, buying Clovis some time.

The child of Ares collapsed backwards.

Phobetor’s hand was in the upswing when Alabaster reached him. Phobetor stood with his weight on one foot while using the other to pin Connor’s arm down. The god had hacked the child of Hermes’ hand twice, leaving two gouging clefts—one in his palm and one along his forearm.
Connor withered and cried in his sleep.

Before Phobetor could sever Connor’s hand completely, Alabaster jabbed his staff forward. He caught Phobetor’s hand between the prongs at the end and twisted hard.

The hatchet flew off a few feet to the side.

Phobetor huffed like a middle-aged bourgeois that was told his house looked quaint. “Alabaster C. Torrington. Hecate’s infamous finest,” he sputtered. His clothing smelled like mothballs and rot, similar to the Leonis Caput. “Aren’t your nightmares that of your best friend falling in love with the enemy leader and your past lover joining them? Yet, here you are, defending those that shame you. Where did all that famed pride go that I heard of during the Second Titan War?”

Phobetor took a step back, disentangling his hand from Alabaster’s staff.

Although Phobetor pretended not to notice, Alabaster was pleased to see the god’s wrist broken.

“KICK HIS ASS, AL! NO ONE TALKS TO A LIEUTENANT OF KRONOS LIKE THAT!” came the broken rattle of Jack’s voice, followed by a few Romans muttering in disgust.

The cheering had gone silent except for Jack’s shout. Alabaster could envision the Romans’ discomfot and confusion.

He tried not to think about their hatred or the months he’d spent in isolation, running from a monster that couldn’t die with no one left to turn to, because his mother wouldn’t chose sides between her children and his friends were dead or had been blackmailed out of talking to him.

The Romans should suspect he would turn on them. They probably didn’t know if they should cheer, even if he was helping Clovis.

But he wasn’t doing this to help Clovis.

“I’m not here to save a camp filled with delusion and idiocy. I’m here to stop a thug from forcing his will onto others.” Alabaster glanced below Phobetor, to where Lou Ellen had sat up. She was crawling closer to Connor and Matthias. Though looking worn down and dazed, she winked at him knowingly.

Some distant instinct told Alabaster she needed a distraction.

He returned his gaze to Phobetor, raised his staff with one hand, and lowered his other to his handgun. “I’m sick of seeing demigods die to you and your kind’s flighty whims. I can’t believe the Romans and Greeks worship assholes like you. You don’t deserve to be a god.”

Someone made a catcall from behind him. “I forgot how hot you are when you’re indignant with theology, Witch Boy—Aye--!”

Alabaster sighed. His arguments might be taken more seriously without Ajax’s commentary or objectification.

Phobetor, however, took the insult very seriously. He sputtered and stomped his foot. He gestured behind Alabaster as though the son of Hecate had forgotten about Sherman.

The Romans made a choked noise of alarm. Probably from where Sherman was about to
Alabaster withdrew his gun. He quarter turned to find Sherman in full swing towards the less physically adept demigod. Maybe a camper might have hesitated, but—with the ease of proximity—Alabaster fired four shots into Sherman’s shins.

The son of Ares cried and collapsed onto the ground.

Clovis stared back at Alabaster.

Alabaster gestured towards Miranda Gardener on the ground. “Go!” he snarled. They didn’t need any more dead demigods.

Without checking to see if Clovis followed his orders, Alabaster returned his focus to Phobetor. From what he found, Lou Ellen had just needed a distraction. She, Connor, and Matthias had vanished in a trick of the Mist.

Meanwhile, Phobetor reached outward. His piccolo-hatchet flew into the air and returned to his hands. “Deserve? Deserve?!” His hatchet spewed spiders as he swung at Alabaster.

Alabaster dropped his gun to use both hands to block. The force of the blow sent a tremor shuddering through the staff and into his full body. He hadn’t gone toe-to-toe with a god—even a minor one—in over a year. But those months of constant preparedness with Lamia meant Alabaster had learned to recuperate his magic rapidly; he was ready for another fight.

“Do you know what dreams would be without nightmares?” Phobetor snarled. The spiders from Phobetor’s hatchet lunged off Alabaster’s staff, towards his face. “Everyone fusses over how creative Morpheus is, but—without my terror to compare to—what would be the sweetness of his dreams!? Lackluster and banal!”

With a few mutters, Alabaster set off a rune on his PJs and the spiders burst into flames. He twisted his metal pole to strike Phobetor. When he hit the God of Nightmare’s shoulder, Alabaster’s staff sunk in like he’d struck a tar pool.

As quick as he could, Alabaster disengaged, taking a step backwards. Alabaster withdrew a hex stone from one of his pouches and tossed it—

But the God of Nightmares was too fast.

His tar-like body morphed to avoid the projectile. To curse him, Alabaster would need to throw something that the god couldn’t dodge. Or didn’t want to.

Alabaster sensed a shift in the Mist near Phobetor’s feet. Something told him that he only needed to buy a little more time for Lou Ellen.

This time, snakes slithered down from Phobetor’s coat ruffles as he went to attack.

“I think—” Alabaster hissed as he kicked a snake away and deflected another hatchet blow. His body rattled with the strike. “Like your brother, you’re not as powerful when you’re awake in the mortal world. And, keeping all those demigods asleep must be straining you.”

Phobetor harrumphed, “I am the grand Ikelos, you impertinent boy!”

But Alabaster could tell he was right. There was a reason Phobetor hadn’t been able to put he, Lou Ellen, or Clovis to sleep, or expand his sphere of influence to the Romans. There was a
reason he couldn’t outright kill all the campers. Putting mortals into a sustained sleep was one thing, but—as Morpheus had discovered during the Battle of Manhattan—putting demigods to sleep was much more challenging, especially while knocking out a drakon, statue, and tree.

Lou Ellen reappeared by Phobetor’s feet, tossing away a snake. She gave Alabaster a thumbs up, then swiped her hand by the god’s foot.

The limb disappeared.

Phobetor gave a shout of alarm.

Someone else lumbered past Alabaster. He was shocked to see Clovis—seeming fully recharged—shove a Roman spear at Phobetor’s other leg.

Phobetor yelped and tried to shift his leg into tar. Although Alabaster wasn’t sure how the physics worked behind it—and would love to know—Phobetor couldn’t keep the tar leg’s footing without the other to balance. He stumbled backwards, flopping over Lou Ellen’s back.

She laughed and tossed two things to Alabaster: Phobetor’s detached foot, and a small, pink pigball. After Jack’s decapitation, Alabaster thought he wouldn’t be happy to see a dismembered limb for at least a week, but this one made him ecstatic.

The switch was simple, a slight of hand trick that kept Pax entertained for hours when he was little. Alabaster coated both objects with Mist, making the foot look like the ball and the ball look like the foot.

Lou Ellen scrambled over to their side, as well as she could with her apparent dizziness. Clovis prepared his spear for another attack.

Phobetor hissed in fury as he went to get to his feet—foot.

Alabaster tossed the fake-foot-real-ball in one hand. “It seems fitting that you’d lose this, considering it looks like you’ve been taking them from campers all day.”

“Give that back!” Phobetor huffed.

“Gladly,” Alabaster said.

He tossed the “foot” towards Phobetor. As he did, he and Lou Ellen chanted in perfect unison. “Incantara: sus transformatio.”

Logic told Alabaster the chances of success were 50/50: Phobetor was physically weak and vulnerable, and Alabaster and Lou Ellen were the former and current heads of Hecate. But Phobetor was a god. Petty spells shouldn’t work on him.

However, some part of Alabaster knew it would work. Like he’d done this before.

And as Phobetor caught the foot, smoke poofed around him. The jester costume deflated. His hatchet-piccolo fell to the ground, his kiwi bird mask right after.

In the place of the God of Nightmares sat an adorable grey piglet with a bowtie that squealed indignantly.
Thanks for the read guys! I hope you enjoyed this siblings combo XD

Soundtrack for this scene was *Toccato* by Overwerk. The artwork on the youtube video released by xKito makes me think of what would happen if Kally and Atē had a full conversation. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCnJAMkETiU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCnJAMkETiU)
No one knew how to react when the God of Nightmares poofed into a pig and ran into the darkness, squealing.

There was a breath of silence in the icy December breeze.

Then Calex, Kally, Euna, and Pax cheered.[1]

Everyone else followed suit.

Clovis looked like he was bowing for a second, then Axel realized the poor son of Hypnos had fallen asleep leaning on Michael Kahale’s spear. Axel had no idea how many bouts of torment Phobetor had put him through, but the boy was clearly exhausted.

Lou Ellen turned to Alabaster, unbothered by his Cloven Terror helm. She raised a hand for a high-five, and Axel could swear he read the words, “The power of Hecate’s Babes, am I right, Al?” from her lips.

Axel didn’t get to see if Alabaster stared at her in confusion, or if he was too miserable over losing a god’s foot as an experiment specimen. The impact of Reyna’s elbow in Axel’s ribs was too distracting.

When they first got here, he hadn’t wanted to touch her; he wanted to stay as distant from her as possible. But, when she had knelt down and her tattoo had glowed to signify that she was loaning Clovis some of her strength, he felt like he could sense her doubt. He could see her shoulders shudder.

On instinct, he had knelt down to help prop her up.

Now, after jamming her elbow into Axel’s chest, she rose like she hadn’t been the reason Clovis was still standing—at least sleep standing.

Around them, the troops bustled with activity. When Thalia made her way towards them, Euna’s face became more animated than he’d seen since her sister died. Kally and Calex set to work tending to the wounded that Lou Ellen had magicked past the barrier. They chattered about how Merry was tucked safely in a sleeping bag in the Roman barracks. Apparently, she’d tried to cross the boundary line and hadn’t woken up since—though Calex was pretty sure that was more from previous exhaustion than Phobetor’s extended magic.

“Oh Gods, my shins!” came from one of the wounded.

Nearby Sherman’s wails, Pax sniffled back sobs while doing tricks to distract Connor Stoll. The child of Hermes jerked awake, staring at the two clefts in his palm and arm. When Connor tried to lift his hand, he found the outer half of his hand flopped backwards, hanging on by some skin and
muscle tissue.

Connor, as would be expected, screamed.

“At least now you’ll be an expert with hand-and-a-half swords,” Pax laughed hysterically, trying to keep Connor from sitting up so a Roman medic could attend to him.

The decapitated head on Pax’s utility belt chuckled. “Someone’s pick locking days might be over,” he sang with that horrible scratchy voice. They really needed to get a solid gag for Jack, before he got them kicked out of camp or exiled out of America. “But! Your older brother told me some funny stories about you, so I’ll see what I can do.”

Axel didn’t know if it would be better or worse if Jack tried to heal Connor. Or even if he could heal anymore.

Axel felt the strategist in him turn off his sympathy. He couldn’t think about who the Romans had watched bleed out before they got here or who was in that body pile on the other side of the strawberry field.

This wasn’t a time to be celebrating this mini-victory. Phobetor wouldn’t stay a pig for long, regardless of how powerful Lou Ellen and Alabaster were. He might sulk off humiliated, but they would need to plan to prevent these bouts from happening again.

Axel couldn’t shake the feeling this was more a diversion from Eris than a finale.

When he caught Reyna’s cold gaze, he could tell she was thinking the same.

Axel was about to ask if anything else had happened at the camp other than Phobetor, when Calex stepped to his side.

Michael Kahale turned away from another soldier that Axel assumed was reporting on border patrol. He scowled at Axel. “Permission to speak out of place,” he requested.

Reyna scanned their environment, taking into account the way piglet-Phobetor had darted off, how Lou Ellen and Alabaster dragged Clovis to the border, how they still didn’t hear any commotion from inside the camp to hint at others waking up, and how her troop’s morale had lifted.

“Granted,” she spoke robotically. Her mind seemed to catch up with how odd his request was, and she asked, “Kahale?”

“You and the Leonis Caput need to talk,” he said, tone careful.

Axel pulled his shoulders back and straightened his posture. Regardless of whether or not he wanted to talk to Reyna as Reyna, he did need to talk with another tactician to exchange information, discuss potential aggression from the enemy, make battle plans, and figure out what troops were available where. But Axel got a sense that wasn’t what Kahale meant.

All of Axel’s self restraint went into not scouring his pockets for a cigarette. Well, the pockets he didn’t have in his leather pteruges. All he had was a leather pouch that Pax had assuredly put gum into—it had better be gum. And now was not the time for cigarettes, though maybe his smoking would give Reyna more reason to hate him.

“The war tent would probably be the best place,” Calex broke in.

Axel glanced from Calex to Michael Kahale. He leaned to the side to see what tattoo was on
Kahale’s forearm: a dove. Aphrodite’s symbol.

“That’s not necessary—” Axel snapped.

“Yes it is, mate,” Calex cut him off, grabbed his shoulder, and twisted Axel to face the tent. “You two go debrief and update us on the battle afterwards.”

Before Axel could protest, Calex gave him a solid shove forward.

Axel stumbled once before catching himself. He paused to gather his composure and mentally add kill Calex to his to-do list.

His ears twitched to hear Kahale’s whisper, “It’s best to deal with distractions before they become distracting during a dangerous situation.”

He didn’t hear Reyna give a vocal reaction, though he could envision her cold eyes boring into Kahale’s soul.

After a brief pause where Axel began to turn back towards them, Reyna stepped past him towards the tent. “Leonis Caput,” she called without waiting for him to catch up.

Axel clenched his jaw. He glanced back to the others.

Kahale glared at him, fingering the hilt of his gladius in the quietest of threats.

Calex gave him a charming smile and a thumbs up.

Axel lowered his Mist mask momentarily to bare his teeth at Calex.

Calex and Kahale both paled.

Without intending it, Axel got the distinct feeling he’d made Michael Kahale regret advising Reyna to be alone with him.

Lifting a hand over his face to recraft his human features, Axel turned back towards Reyna. He found Thalia had run up alongside her. In the glint of the floodlights, the silver studs on Thalia’s punk boots and pants glistened. The Lieutenant of Artemis spoke rapidly. Within a few paces, Axel caught up enough to hear, “—eyes still closed. So, it seems like the statue, drakon, and the rest of the camp are still out cold. Christiana even tried firing toilet paper at them, to see if they’d wake up in anger, but they got no response.”

“You TPed the Athena Parthenos?” Reyna asked.

“For a good cause,” Thalia said. “We also tied a rope to Lesedi and sent her in. She faceplanted fast.”

“So, we still can’t get in,” Reyna growled.

Thalia nodded grimly. She glanced at Axel as soon as he caught up to their stride. Thalia and Reyna paused at the entrance of the tent.

Thalia shoved Axel’s shoulder hard. A shock ran through Axel’s body, like he’d been tased, and he could smell what was left of his shirt smoldering. Axel had to grab the tent post to keep from collapsing. His legs clenched up and his chest shuddered.

“My brother had better be alright,” she snapped.
Axel wasn’t sure what to say. Last he’d seen of Jason during Alabaster’s hailstorm, Pax had been repeatedly kicking Jason in an area that might end the Grace family line. If Axel had to take a guess, this wouldn’t be good information to assure Thalia.

Thalia’s glare darted past Axel, back to the others. “Is Euna alright?” she asked, her tone softening.

Axel straightened. “Go talk to her,” he managed.

Thalia hesitated, glancing from Reyna back to Axel. “I hope you realize that fight against Percy and the others really hurt your application for the huntresses.”

He couldn’t tell if she was joking.

She nodded to Reyna before walking back towards the others.

Once she left, Axel slowly lifted his right knee to stretch his leg. He didn’t want to show Reyna how much Thalia had hurt him, but it was better than collapsing as soon as he released the pole.

“You wanted to be a huntress?” Reyna asked. For a split second, there was humor in her voice.

Axel lowered his leg. This felt like Kronos had used his time manipulation powers to take them back in the past and suspend them in the calm of their stay at Camp Jupiter, where Santiago was dead and Axel still had hope that he might join the legion. “That’s the rumor Ajax has spread,” he said.

Whenever Axel rejected a proposition from a camper or monster at Camp Othrys, that’s how Pax would comfort them. Not that Axel wouldn’t love traversing the forest on an eternal hunt but…

Despite how the exhaustion carved deep circles under Reyna’s eyes, she looked regal in her cloak and praetorian armor. When Axel released the pole, the curtain wrapped around it fell, obscuring the entrance behind him.

He hadn’t been sure what Reyna would do after he left Rome. They’d warned them about Camp Half-Blood, but with how little she must trust him…

“You came,” he said.

For a heartbeat, she stared at him. Then Reyna continued into the tent. The set up was small: a few fold up chairs around a flimsy table with a map of Camp Half-Blood. There was an extra sword rack on one side with some paperwork. An overhead light swung gently from one of the supporting poles. A cot was stretched between two posts, one that Axel guessed Reyna hadn’t touched.

At least the tent material kept out some of the cold air. Axel had been struggling not to shiver the whole night. The Leonis Caput fur was warm, but there wasn’t much left of his shirt, between Percy’s firehosing him and Thalia zapping him. And pteruges weren’t designed for New York winters. There was a space heater in one corner, one Axel wished was a little closer.

Reyna absently slipped her knife out and twirled it between her fingers. She walked to the map of Camp Half-Blood, scowling down. There were notes and sketches jotted on scrap paper nearby. A copy of Ovid’s Metamorphoses lay open with highlighted pages.

“Regardless of whether or not you had fabricated the warnings about Camp Half-Blood, I knew this camp would be in danger. With Frank pursuing you, it wasn’t difficult for the Senate to agree to two task forces—one on high alert in Camp Jupiter in case your warnings were a distraction, and one to come check here.” She jammed her knife into the corner of the map. “Now, what happened
after Calex left? If you don’t have any information that will be useful, then make yourself useful elsewhere.”

Axel forced himself not to react to her curtness. This was better than he’d expected. He gave her a brief rundown of the end of the fight, focusing mainly on the end condition of their allies and how quickly they’d be able to recover and help here.

Then, they recapped the current pieces they knew were on the board: Phobetor was at camp, keeping everything quiet, someone had kidnapped Hemera, according to Pax, Lapis had traveled into Tartarus to deliver a message to someone, and Hiro had taken Percy’s little sister, Melinoe had snatched Nico to use as a “shadow bridge” for something, Até left a vague warning about the Pax brothers coming to camp, and Eris was distracting all of the gods with petty fights.

Although Reyna’s dark gaze didn’t portray much, her shoulders shuddered when Axel talked about Nico and Will.

Axel wanted to prevent any pauses in the conversation. That would force them both to think about other things. “I saw you have the huntresses on border patrol. Monsters haven’t realized the barrier is down yet, I take it?”

“They’ve killed a few on sight, but no mass numbers yet.”

“You don’t have that many huntresses,” he observed.

“Most of them are with Artemis, hunting a Fox that can never be caught,” Reyna said, “I was lucky I was able to get a hold of Thalia. Communication is still mostly down.”

“And we have your troops and a handful of injured campers,” Axel put a hand on the war table, his brain straining to connect Eris’ illogical dots. “We’re dealing with a goddess that doesn’t need an objective,” Axel muttered. He wished he could pull Pax or Alabaster in here. Pax thought a lot like his mother, and Alabaster had been assigned to taking down Camp Half-Blood’s borders during the Second Titan War. But Alabaster would never cooperate with Reyna and Axel didn’t need Pax’s commentary—

Reyna’s fist shook around her dagger as she dug it into the table, plastic twisting up with each turn.

Axel paused.

*Her heartbeat, her scent, her determination—*

*Shut up,* he scolded the Leonis Caput, confused by his sudden interest.

*And you stand here, once a warrior, now a coward—*

Axel didn’t understand its egging. He was too tired to fully shut it out.

This wasn’t the place for this or the time. But, if Phobetor did start the games up, and there was nothing they could do, then Axel might never get to apologize. Could he apologize for being what he was?

*Such an apology would be that of a pathetic, broken spirit.*

He puffed up his cheeks and popped them. There was nothing he could really say, but…

“Did any ninja zombie bunnies survive?” he asked.
That was not what he’d wanted to say.

Axel wasn’t ready to be punched in the face. Her fist hit him solidly, knocking him a step backwards. Reyna had pivoted for full follow-through and force. “You set my couch on fire,” she snarled.

Axel spit some blood to the side. “Frank was trying to capture me for execution—”

Before he could fully recover, Reyna slid forward to jam her elbow into Axel’s diaphragm. “You ate Frank’s ear.”

His legs still felt like jelly from Thalia’s tasing. Upon stumbling back into the sword rack, Axel lost his footing and would have been impaled had it not been for the Leonis Caput cloak. He could feel the shape of the swords smash into his bruises. “I didn’t eat it—” he cut himself off to duck away from Reyna’s foot as she tried to crack his skull open with her heel.

When he jumped up to his feet, Axel could hear the sound of metal against metal as Reyna withdrew her gladius.

Although Axel probably should have had a stronger reaction, all he could growl was, “great.”

*Leonis Caput. Lieutenant of Kronos’ army. Falls backwards on sword rack before being skewered to death by the woman he loves.*

*The only worthy opponent is one that struggles until death. Fight her as we’re destined, you worthless fool!*

Axel wanted to snarl at the Leonis Caput. *Not helping.*

*A true warrior only wants a worthy opponent. She only wants us when—*

“You humiliated me in front of my troops,” she snarled.

Reyna grabbed Axel by the back of his hair. While holding him in place she drove the tip of her sword straight at his chest.

Axel reached past the blade to latch his fingers over her sword hand. He grunted, feeling the tip sink a centimeter into his skin. Up close, he could see the fury in her black eyes, the way her lips trembled, how the swaying light cast highlights in her black braid. He could feel her breath on his face. He could smell her honeyed scent mixed with sweat. And he knew she’d kill him if he let her.

He wasn’t going to die here. And he certainly wasn’t going to humiliate himself any further by not actually fighting.

Axel reached into his pouch with his free hand and withdrew his lighter. He struggled to regain his footing and stand taller.

Both their hands quivered as Reyna strained to push the tip of the gladius further in. Her stance was better. He clenched his jaw as a spike of pain spread in his chest, as the blade slowly sank in and blood spread along the scraps of his shirt.

“I was trying to figure out how to tell you…” he snarled, “Xma’su’tal Xib, Liik’il Xtaabay!”

*My turn,* the Leonis Caput gargled a laugh. Like a black fog, the Leonis Caput wrestled control from Axel and turned its attentions to the preator he was born to destroy.
Thanks for reading! Axel and Reyna have… *ehem* some tough stuff to hash out.

Footnotes:

[1] Mel has repeated expressed her sheer disappointment that Kally doesn’t shout something obscene, or at least special, at Alabaster. So, apparently I feel the need to state: Alabaster likes Kally because she doesn’t publicly humiliate him. And while Kally is slowly evolving from a shy doormat, she has yet to reach her final form, where she can express herself without hesitation, and where she can ask Alabaster if he'll use his wand to cast "aguamenti" on her.... I really hope Kally doesn't go to Pax for flirting advice.

[2] I looked up TP to make sure there weren’t any extra letters to it, and I found there is a wikihow entry on toilet papering someone’s house, down to proper throwing and stealth techniques. Pax, I know you and Mattias are out there, giggling behind some computer screen. I will find you.
As Reyna watched, Axel dripped some of the blood from his lip onto his sparked lighter. The room glowed with a turquoise hue. She could feel her ears pop, and the lights in the room dimmed.

Up close, the transformation was horrifying. Already, Axel’s Mist mask had dropped. But she could see his ears—previously flattened with shame—twitch with his snarl and an emotion she’d never seen on his face. The fur along his hairline seemed to expand, his fangs lengthened, his eyes dilated to the point of blackness.

“How many of my comrades do you think you’ve slain in battle? How many lost children that I gave a home did you send to the Fields of Punishment without trial or to the slavery of Ares’ undead army, while your dead go to the Elysian Fields?” he growled softly, in a gargled tone that barely sounded his own.

As the Mayan spell set in, Reyna could feel Axel’s grip on her sword hand tighten. Axel’s claws dug into her skin as he pushed her hand backwards, the tip of her sword slowly withdrawing from his chest.

She’d wanted him to fight back. She’d wanted a reason to hit him and battle him like the warrior he was. When he just took the beating, it was like he’d accepted his shame and wrongdoing as an all consuming fact that could destroy his pride, his intelligence, and his skill. All the things that made Axel someone she could...

She wanted to get angry at the thought, but, now, she found herself trembling at the sight of the monster inside Axel. He gave her a wicked grin. “All the products of godly rapes and murder, wishing there was justice in the world, and learning what they gained from their suffering was an eternity more, unless they begged forgiveness of their tormenters and pretended they were not the ones wronged.”

Once the sword tip dislodged from Axel’s flesh, the Leonis Caput began to twist her wrist. The blade began to twist with it.

He dropped the lighter and reached for the hand she had in his hair. Reyna went to wrench it away, but he caught it and pressed her fingers to the scars on his face. “Each of these represents someone of yours I’ve murdered. My helm keeps count of those before I kept track.”

Reyna tried not to react. She tried not to think of whom each mark belonged to or how much she had loved his scars and had thought about tracing them. Was this really Axel? Some part of her hadn’t believed it until she saw it.[1]

Rage roared in her ears, warding off the fear. Fear magic, she reminded herself, he has fear magic.
Something snaked around Reyna’s ankle. She didn’t realize what was happening until it was too late.

The Leonis Caput’s tail ripped her foot off balance.

At the same time, he snapped her wrist outward to ruin her grip. Her gladius dropped.

Reyna twisted in the direction he forced her wrist, to avoid a broken limb. She lost her footing and tumbled backwards.

Axel lunged after, his movements like the fast flicker of a candle. “Did you have the decency to remember my fallen comrades’ faces? Did you give them the honor of at least a number, or have you shamed them to the forgetfulness of nightmares?”

Reyna hooked her ankle around the leg of a chair and snapped it between the two of them. Before Axel could get to her, he would have to smack the piece of furniture out of the way.

It gave her enough time to roll to the side and snatch her fallen knife from the ground. Her breath was tight.

She remembered the months of mandatory therapy Camp Jupiter had forced on her and all the other soldiers who had seen combat. All the questions they’d been asking her, and she could never say that the first person she’d killed was her father.

She thought about how uncomfortable it was—the first time she met Axel and, she felt like he understood everything. All the guilt. The helplessness. Before Nico and Coach Gleeson, she didn’t think she could talk to anyone about it.

But she couldn’t. She couldn’t talk about her father and she couldn’t focus on enemy casualties. She had to keep her soldiers alive.

“You already know I tried to forget them,” she snapped at him as he kicked the chair away.

The Leonis Caput lunged forward again, lifting one corner of its lion cloak like a shield. This time, she was ready to step around his tail, to accommodate for his heavier weight class.

Reyna stabbed.

Axel deflected her knife jab with his cloak while slashing out with his other hand.

She twisted to avoid the danger of his claws.

Up close, she could still smell him. Under the intermix of sweat and singed flesh, there was a spicy chocolate aroma. His expression became deadpan with that stoicism that made her insides boil. She honed in on her anger, wanting to ignore what was lying under it.

This time, when Reyna sliced forward, the Leonis Caput released the Nemean Lion pelt. He let her knife slash into his arm bracer. While her blade skidded off the leather, he grasped the wrist of her knife hand. He pinched her joint between his claws and wretched wrist outward, away from her body. Reyna hissed at the strain on her ligaments. As he completed the wrist lock—again, she fumed—he stepped forward to grab her face with his other hand.

Using the same move twice? Her feelings must have been distracting her more than she was willing to acknowledge. But she was not going to let him claw at her face.
While twisting her right hand away from them, and while grabbing her face, he stepped a foot forward. She could feel him brace his leg into the back of hers to prepare for a leg sweep.

She scowled, and dropped her weight down, to drive her hip into the side of his knee. Simultaneously, she smashed her free hand into the arm that had clutched her jaw.

With his grip on her face broken and his balance off, the Leonis Caput stumbled to the side. Using the opening, Reyna lunged at him, wrapped her arm around his neck, pinching his blood flow between her forearm and bicep.

“Axel!” she snapped, “Can you even hear me?! You know why I killed them! And you know why I won’t dwell on it. I refuse to have another mania—”

Axel growled, digging his claws into the leather notches of her bracers. He sharply yanked her arm down to alleviate the pressure she’d put on his neck. She could feel Axel use what little balance he had to drive his hip backwards into hers, to uproot her balance, onto his back, and take her down with him.

They both crashed onto the floor, their heads almost clocking, and their bodies falling adjacent to one another.

Before the Leonis Caput could recover, she ripped his claws from her bracer. Reyna rolled over, snatching up her knife. She wasn’t going to let that wrist lock work a third time.

The handle felt slick with sweat as she rolled to pin him and pressed the blade against his throat.

Most people would have struggled. He should have struggled.

But, when Axel raised his hands, it was to clutch his head, not to strike her. His expression contorted in pain that couldn’t have come from any of the wounds she’d given him.

When Reyna hesitated, she had to wonder why she brought her father’s mania up. Why would she tell this monster anything about that? None of her friends knew that other than those that were there when she confronted her father.

“We were both defending our ideals and nations the way we knew how,” Axel’s voice wavered between that monstrous gargle and his usual, calm, low voice. His body shuddered under her, like poison was tearing up his insides. “We both did what we thought we had to do. That’s why… why I can’t hate you for it.”

Axel’s breath came out in labored gasps. He let go of his head, leaning back onto the ground with a thump. He let his hands flop onto the ground above his head. The motion felt like a diversion, and Reyna pressed the blade tighter.

Axel blinked, glancing down like he hadn’t noticed the knife at his throat until then. More of his golden iris was visible again. His expression smoothed to a wistful frown. He sighed, “By the Titans, it would make our lives so much easier if I could just hate you for it.”

Reyna wanted to flick her knife between her fingers, or twist it into the table. Currently, Axel’s neck was in the way of either, and she wasn’t ready to let him go yet, either to Tartarus or out of the tent. She was still shaking with… with what she decided was rage.

Though, some of her anger crumbled. A part of Reyna realized it was dangerous to stay in here and to keep talking.
“Thank you,” he said suddenly. “It’s a huge relief to know you can wrestle the Leonis Caput down.”

“What was that?” she demanded. When he’d done that Mayan spell in her room, she’d been so enflamed with anger, she didn’t register how different he looked, and she didn’t remember his voice altering. “That sounded like a different person.”

Axel puffed up his cheeks and popped them, debating on something. His eyes looked distant as they stared past her, then slowly returned to her face. Finally, he said, “Alabaster knew I woke up from nightmares about Santiago and about what I was doing for Kronos. So he, Hecate, and Mnemosyne[2] made the Leonis Caput helm as a gift. A way to sort of…” He shrugged. “Temporarily store and alter my memories until I had time to deal with them. They knew I’d reject something like that; I’m too stubborn, so they gave it to me under the guise of an enchanted magic enhancer…”

He sighed, “I wore mine too often.”

Reyna wasn’t sure she completely understood. Armies often drugged their troops—both during and after atrocities—to keep them compliant and reliable. This sounded like a more complicated version of that tradition. But that was no excuse.

“Can that thing take over at any moment?” She thought about how much she had trusted him alone with her in New Rome and Camp Jupiter. She wondered what it would have been like if he’d shifted during their walk among the citizens of New Rome.

Axel shook his head, looking exhausted. He pressed against the blade enough to slide his hands behind his hair and prop up his head, leaving him—if possible—more prone. “No. Either I have to give it the reigns, or it needs to… to catch me when I’m weak.” He released a shaky breath. “Not that it takes away any of the accountability for my actions—it’s still me.”

Axel may have accepted that as fact, but, after hearing him say it, something about that felt… wrong. She remembered when Leo had been possessed by the eidolon and fired on her home with the warship, something that still made her furious at him, but something she knew he couldn’t control.

They stared at one another. Seeing Axel’s tufted ears in that neutral position, instead of down in anger or shame, with his arms tucked back like they were relaxing in her living room… it made her feel warm and calm. A stupid feeling.

“I can help you get rid of that mania, if you would want help,” he said.

Reyna was taken aback. She wanted to be surprised Axel caught that comment in his prior state, but—

She remembered his dumb crooked smile when they’d been sitting on the aqueducts, “I’m never going to forget when you have something to say.”

“It’s taken care of,” she snapped. Nico’s face flashed through her mind, and she clenched the knife hilt. They had better be able to get that kid back.

“Reyna…” Axel frowned. “What we went through was different, but I know what it’s like to lead a group of soldiers, that you’ve trained and adore, to slaughter. I know how painful it can be to do that and maintain what makes you… you. I’ve always admired how well you did it. I know how lonely that can feel though, and I don’t want you to…”
He trailed off.

*Feel alone.*

Reyna wanted to crack his skull against the ground. She felt like Coach Gleeson had decided to use her chest plate for batting practice. What Kahale had said was wrong. Before, this was something she could shut out, and exploit Axel as a useful resource. Now, he was too prominent in her mind. The worst part: she didn’t have a plan, or an instinct on how to act. Reyna thought about how she betrayed the legion to save the others last summer, but this was different. There weren’t dozens of campers’ lives at stake. Just Axel’s life and her emotions. And she’d learned to disregard her personal feelings for her duty.

Maybe Axel could feel how violently she was shaking—he forced a crooked smile and said, “But our sabotage unit was always way better than yours.”

Reyna felt her voice crack with her laugh. “You wish,” she choked out.

The comment shattered the violent atmosphere. It was like they’d just finished a playful session of training.

He glanced over the technique she used to pin him and how effective it was. “Zero to three. I’m going to be paying for you and your friends’ hot chocolate until Zeus decides to end the current age of man.”

Reyna followed his gaze and became painfully aware she was straddling him. She regretted the glance. His rapid transformation was infuriating: a minute ago, he was a snarling monster, now he was an eighteen year old boy, flexing his arms behind his head with a shirt too shredded to hide the body of an acrobat. And a forming blush when he noticed her noticing him.

“You act like you’ve never been threatened by a woman with a knife before,” she said, trying to keep her tone even.

Axel laughed airily. He glanced over her again and swallowed. “This is completely unprecedented.”

With someone like Axel, she doubted that, though his blush said otherwise. Reyna leaned closer, earning a sharp inhale from him. “Axel, do you remember when I told you that I’d kill you if you slipped up once?”

“I’ve been waiting to see you fulfill that promise,” he said.[3]

“Are you going to help save Nico and protect this camp?” she asked. Although her mind and heart were reeling from everything, the world grounded back into focus when she remembered what was going on outside the tent.

That wistful frown returned to his face. “I’ll do whatever it takes to protect the people you love. I’ll even give Frank a free swipe at my face, as long as he promises to be a human when he hits me. I… I do feel bad about his ear.”

Reyna glared at Axel. An oath on the River Styx wouldn’t give any assurance for a heathen like him. But they could use all the help they could get, and Alabaster had just saved Clovis and bought them some time. They needed to use them. As maddening as it was, she wanted Axel around.

She withdrew her knife and stood up. “Frank still throws a mean punch as a human. Now,
we need to plan out our next move, since we have more than one person who can go into the camp and Phobetor is temporarily out of commission.”

Axel stood up beside her, pulled his shoulders back, and straightened his back. She forgot how much he towered over her when his Mist mask was down. He adjusted the Nemean Lion cloak to cover more of his skin, looking like a cat shaking off water.

Something dripped off her face onto her breastplate. She glanced down to find a red splatter. Until then, she hadn’t registered the blood from where the Leonis Caput had grabbed her.

Axel reached over hesitantly and touched her cheek with one hand. The contrast of this gentle caress versus the snarl of claws from earlier was stark. His ears stooped down. “I’m sorry circumstances couldn’t be better for us.”

There was only one response to that: Reyna hit him in the face again.

This time, Axel paused. He closed his eyes, made a face, and looked playfully annoyed when he opened them.

He released her cheek. “So, Phobetor?” he asked, like they had never paused to brawl.

Reyna released a tense breath that she didn’t realize she’d been holding. “Let’s go to the war table—” She glanced over to the upturned chairs, knocked over sword rack, and skewed papers. She wondered what Calex and Kahale would think of this. “Let’s clean up the war table and get back to strategizing before he depigafies and strikes again.”

They separated, Axel going to fix the sword rack while she flipped over the chairs. She kept catching him glancing at her. Something felt tight in her chest. As she tossed some of the papers onto the table, she sighed. “Axel,” she said.

He paused.

Without making eye contact with him, she said, “I’m sorry too.”

So… the author desperately wants these two to *ehem* get together and make sure Axel can never join the huntresses of Artemis (for the good of humanity and prosperity). AND THEY KEEP REJECTING ALL THE SCENES I PLAN IT! *hisses* I hate dealing with rebellious characters…

Regardless, thanks for the read! I hope you enjoyed and are as frustrated as I am *glares at Reyna and Axel who scowl back at me as a reminder that they can kick my ass* *Author crawls under writing desk in fear of characters that may one day come to life*

Footnotes:
I wrote Mel an AU beach episode for her birthday that had Axel and Reyna as a side couple. (I’ll eventually post it on here.) Her betacomment here was, “WHERE’S THE HOPE OF MY BEAUTIFUL BEACH EPISODE???”

Titaness of memories.

Mel Betacomment: Is this their weird flirting or an actual threat?! I’m as confused as Pax!
“So, do you think Reyna is deflowering Axel or do you think she’s giving him a fast pass to visit Luke?” Jack asked when one of the Romans took Connor into their barracks.

Pax wanted to follow after Connor, but the look the Roman gave him was clear: come near me or mine and I’ll scoop your eyes out with a ½ teaspoon. At least, that’s the specific fraction for the cooking utensil that Pax interpreted through his skilled glare-reading.

And, despite all the wanting-Axel-to-bang-his-not-girlfriend going on, Pax was still terrified of her overtly dedicated followers that wanted to kill him.

Calex and Kahale were stationed a few yards away, outside the tent, to make sure no one bothered Axel and Reyna. They gave each other a worried glance at a clatter and snarl from inside. The light inside dimmed and twisted turquoise; Pax knew Axel was using magic. Fear magic: good for mood lighting.

Calex and Kahale looked really nervous about their decision.

If Pax was closer, he would have assured them, it’s okay. They just flirt weird.

Alabaster sighed as he and Lou Ellen walked over from the caution tape. He’d been dragging the dead from the strawberry field while Kally helped fix up the wounds Phobetor had given Lou Ellen in prior bouts.

“Your interest in everyone’s sex life is disturbing,” Alabaster told Jack, wiping the blood off his hands with a Wet One sanitizer wipe.

Alabaster was pale—well, he always looked like he took tanning advice from an empousa—but he was paler than normal. Pax could tell from the way Alabaster’s fingers shooked that he was taking this as well as a blender to the face. None of the Romans were jeering at them anymore, but their wariness and suspicion were noticeable. And Pax was waiting for someone to make a comment to Alabaster that would lead Pax and Kally to kicking the Tartarus out of that person.

Pax wanted to give Alabaster a hug; he could tell the child of magic needed encouragement. But he also knew how much a hug would humiliate Alabaster. He would never want to show weakness in front of the Romans.

Unlike Pax, who had been sobbing over Connor. Now that his friend from Cabin Eleven was gone, he turned his attention to Matthias. The Nord was muttering in his sleep, his teeth chattering. Pax took the Peace, Love, and Reese’s Sticks flag they’d made and draped it over the mechanic’s body. He couldn’t read lettering, but Kally had assured him that’s what she wrote after all his pestering and guilting.

As Lou Ellen came even with them, her green eyes widened with glee. “Wooh—a talking head. How did you guys pull this one off? A combo of using a healer of Apollo and some good ol’ fashion necromancy?”
Alabaster went to shake his head, but paused. He glanced over to where Kally was putting Clovis’ arm in a sling. The child of Hynos was out cold in a sleeping bag, probably high-fiving his dad in the dream world.

Kally noticed them, blushed, and gave a tiny wave. Then her brow furrowed in confusion, probably because of the uncomfortable curiosity in Alabaster’s gaze. After seeing a few of his obsessive experiments, Pax figured she’d get used to his absent-minded mania.

Though, Pax wasn’t sure if Alabaster’s interest involved the desire to replicate Jack’s condition—was that considered a condition? Or more a change in life style?—or if Alabaster wanted to end it, for the good of humanity and to end the irritation of being the caretaker of a virile and incessantly talking head.

“Ah, children of Hecate,” Jack cooed, “Never bothered by the severed limbs of necromancy. Just my interest in their sex life.”

Probably the latter.

Pax, for one, was happy to have Jack back.

He glanced over to Lou Ellen. When Pax had first gotten to camp, he’d been so busy terrorizing people with Cabin Eleven and gathering supplies to defeat Santiago (and doing Eris’ evil bidding) that he didn’t pay much attention to the Hecate cabin counselor. She had curling brunette hair and green eyes, as stunning as Alabaster’s and Lamia’s.

Then, something clicked. “Didn’t you say something about Hecate’s babes up there?” Pax asked.

“Yea,” she said, bending her middle and ring finger to her thumb to make the rock on symbol. “Bitches and witches.”

A sharp pain shot through Pax’s forehead.

He, Jack, Alabaster, and Lou Ellen all cried in pain.

“Someone altered our memories,” Alabaster hissed, clutching his head.

“Are you okay!?”

When Pax managed to blink away his tears, he found Kally touching his shoulder in concern. There were blood flecks on her glasses and the sweater he and Axel loaned her was stained red at the cuff. It looked like Kally had given him permission to draw on her face, between the red-rims around her eyes, and the dark circles surrounding them. Though, Pax would have added a sunflower drawing to balance out the darkness.

There was a Roman with Kally, one with lighter, leather armor, and a white packet with a caduceus symbol.

Were these the only two healers here other than Jack? Did that mean… did that mean Kally was sorting through fifty percent of the dead and injured campers?

Pax thought about the little factory line of corpses that Alabaster and Lou Ellen dragged over. Sure. They’d been on adventures and she watched Joey get incinerated in flames, but…

“Have you seen a dead body before? Or had to pronounce someone no-longer-functional?”
Pax asked. She hadn’t been on the side of the house with Will or... “This doesn’t count.” Pax gestured to where he’d pinned Jack’s hair to his utility belt.

Kally tightened her grip on his shoulder.

Pax had so many people he needed to give hugs to today.

Before he could wrap his arms around her, the Roman medic took a step towards them. Kally released Pax’s arm and moved away to give the Roman room.

“I can’t believe they let you heal the head of the Hermes barracks,” he snapped at Pax’s beltline.

“Cabin,” Kally corrected softly.

“Kleptocracy,” Pax suggested.[1]

Despite his clear irritation with the Roman, Alabaster glanced at Pax in surprise.

Pax waggled his eyebrows at Alabaster in the best I-know-smart-words-too-and-I-know-you-find-smart-words-hot expression he could make.

“This is Ric Bardking—” Kally started to introduce.

Jack rolled his eyes. “Pft, better than you could have healed him. Ajax explained the severity of the situation and why it was dire—that Connor Stoll needed to live.”

Pax nodded. “He needs to take care of my chinchilla.”

“You don’t belong here, abomination,” the Roman hissed at Pax’s beltline.

“Tell me,” Jack sang softly, “Little brother—”

“Flash,” Alabaster snarled, hovering his fingers over the collar rune on his sleeve. But the matching tattoo around Jack’s neck was only half there—the circle had been broken where his skin...
had been hacked. And a broken magic circle—as any fantasy nerd should know—wouldn’t work.

Jack started to sing, “Have you ever danced with the devil—MMPH!”

Pax pulled his sleeve over his fist and shoved it into Jack’s mouth.

Jack grunted and gave muffled, indignant wails.

There was a collective sigh from everyone except Lou Ellen. “You know, Alabaster and I could have just convinced him there was a gag in his mouth,” she said.

“Do you wanna try and do that now?” Kally asked, looking disgusted by Pax’s predicament. After this, Pax would really need to get Jack to brush his—Pax would really need to brush Jack’s teeth for him. No one should have to have Pax’s hand in their mouth.

“No,” Lou Ellen said cheerfully, “I’d rather see Ajax try to sanitize his hand later. I’m going to go check on Miranda and steal her nose before she wakes up.”

Pax almost went to wave Lou Ellen off, but had to remember his dominate hand was in Jack’s mouth. By the time he was ready to wave, she had already skipped away.

Kally nudged Bardking’s shoulder. “Hey,” she said. Despite blushing in her attempt to be authoritarian, she tried to sound firm. “These guys are good guys.” She nodded to Alabaster and Pax. Merry would have been proud—Kally was sounding less like a doormat each day.

“Aw, you didn’t even hesitate to nod at me, Cyclops!” Pax cheered.

“I’m sorry,” Bardking grumbled. He took a deep breath in, like it was painful, and turned his full attention to Alabaster. “What you did for us was—”

“I didn’t do it for you,” Alabaster cut him off. There was a hint of panic in his voice. Pax could tell Alabaster still didn’t know what to think of helping: if he should feel disgusted with himself for aiding who he did or relieved he’d saved lives.

Either way, Bardking scowled at his response. “Regardless of your intention—”

“Alabaster,” Kally cut into Bardking’s exquisite use of tact. She sounded rushed and nervous. “Would you be willing to go back in with Lou Ellen to pull out more campers? No one else can go in yet, and we were discussing the campers might be safer out here, under the Romans’ protection—”

Pax could see Alabaster’s fingers go white as he clenched his Cloven Terror helm. It was one thing when Alabaster went in there out of instinct—to stop a thug from forcing his will onto others—but another when he had to make a conscious decision, especially when being asked by a hot Greek like Kally.

Before this could degrade into a fight about gods, justice, the universe, and other boring, unimportant stuff, Pax removed his hand from Jack’s mouth, grabbed the ends of Alabaster’s sleeve, and dragged him further along the caution tape, away from Kally and Bardking.

“Ajax!” Kally started to call.

“Wait—I have vital intel about Phobetor that I need to give Alabaster before he goes in there—it could be the difference between the safety or destruction of the camp and its cute bunnies!” Pax called over his shoulder.
Alabaster stumbled along without resistance. When they were a few yards from the others and it became apparent Kally and Bardking weren’t going to follow them, Alabaster reached a hand forward. Pax assumed Alabaster was going to scold Pax, so was stunned when Alabaster squeezed Pax’s hand and whispered, “Thank you, Ajax.”

Pax felt his heart do back-flip, pull out a giant foam finger, and sprint around his ribcage in a victory lap.

Just as quick, Alabaster pulled his hand away.

“He really likes monologues,” Pax blurted.

“Excuse me?” Alabaster slowed their walking pace and raised an exhausted eyebrow at Pax. From the way his shoulders sagged, Pax could tell who needed to curl up with the weasels and Harvey after this.

“That’s an important piece of intel about Phobetor. You can’t get that intel everywhere, you know,” Pax said. His legs were shaking. Maybe they both needed to curl up with the weasels. Pax could feel his cheeks redden, but remembered how angry Alabaster had been when Pax snuck into his room.

“Is that why you brought me out here?” Alabaster asked. In the glare of the floodlights, those emerald Hecate eyes seemed to glow.

Pax glanced around them. Most of the Romans were further back in the strawberry field, attending to the bodies Alabaster and Lou Ellen had pulled over. Lou Ellen was running back through the strawberry fields, presumably to retrieve more people. Ahead of them, Pax was pleased to spot an easy excuse.

Thalia, Euna, and some blonde huntress were talking ahead. Judging from their posture, they must have just met up. It looked like the blonde huntress was giving a report. Euna waited patiently to the side, staring into the strawberry fields.

“No,” Pax said definitively. He reached back over to take Alabaster’s sleeve again, wishing it was his hand. “I wanted to eavesdrop on Euna and Thalia’s conversation and make it look casual. Pretend we’re talking about battles or how hot Kally is or something.”

Alabaster smiled softly and Pax felt his insides melt, like the times Pax forgot his Reese’s Sticks in the Paxmobile over summers and Axel clobbered him for the mess afterwards. He hadn’t seen Alabaster smile like that in so long.

Pax couldn’t help Alabaster with his smart-person ethical problems with Camp Half-Blood… but… “Where’s Claymore?” he asked.

“In my pocket—No, he’s not an action figure.”

Pax had been about to gasp in excitement. Now, Pax’s hopes for a grumpy, middle-aged action figure (with motion-activated scathing remarks) were dashed before they could fully form. “Should you talk to Claymore about this?”

They slowed to a shuffle, and Pax remembered following Alabaster around Camp Othrys when they were collecting samples off of monsters for Alabaster’s hexes. Pax had crafted many carrying bags so he could always keep one hand free to hold Alabaster’s sleeve. Alabaster’s freckled face would crunch with calculation, the same way it did now, as he used his spare hand to review a list of ingredients he needed.
“Probably. He hates being locked away as a Mist card for too long anyway,” Alabaster mused.

Despite their slow pace, they were almost to the two huntresses and the daughter of Demeter.

Pax puffed up and popped his cheeks. He was normally so good at blurting stuff he wasn’t supposed to. Now that he really needed to, all he could think about was that time Morpheus decided to teach everyone how to disco and was sad half the dancers were asleep by the end.

All he wanted to do was explain Lamia. To tell Alabaster about the time he’d accidentally—for once actually accidentally—eavesdropped on Jack and Luke’s conversation when he went to ask Jack for advice.

“She’ll try to kill Alabaster when Ajax tells her that he didn’t mean this as some creepy courtship.”

“We can’t have the two most powerful children of Hecate fighting over a Mayan brat, Jack.”

“My boys will only dally for whom their hearts and loins yearn. Ajax is thirteen. He’s too young for that crazy monster bitch. And, Alabaster is a big kid. He can take care of himself.”

“Not if any children of Hecate side with Lamia. Besides, have you forgotten Ajax’s current situation? Starting a war between two useful resources certainly sounds like something a double crossing spy would do.”

Pax had hated it. He hated it when Lamia dressed him in children’s clothing that were four thousand years out of mode and when she called him Demetrius or Altheia. The names of her dead children. Something… something about it reminded him of Santiago shoving him into that horrible burgundy dress shirt and slicking back his hair.

He’d especially hated the look on Alabaster’s face when Alabaster blasted him out of the laboratory on hearing everything. Well, he hated being blasted. Being blasted hurt.

Maybe, had he told Alabaster then, Alabaster would have stayed. Maybe the Battle of Mount Othrys wouldn’t have been such a disaster. Maybe Alabaster wouldn’t have let Flynn—

“Do you remember that time Morpheus tried to teach Axel how to disco?” Pax blurted. More than his legs were shaking now. He could imagine the next iteration of man that the gods would make. Not out of wood or clay. Jell-O people.

“What?” Alabaster asked with a quiet laugh. “I’m not sure water from the Lethe River could cleanse that from my mind, but that’s not what you were going to say.”

Pax puffed up his cheeks and popped them again. Alabaster ought to write a Care Guide for the Annoying Pax for Kally with how well this boy could read him. Not that it would matter soon. They’d stopped walking.

Pax enlaced his fingers with Alabaster’s. “We’re still friends, right?” Pax asked.

Alabaster pinched the bridge of his nose with his free hand. “You’re as annoying, ill-timed, and tactless as ever,” he muttered. Alabaster sidestepped closer to him, so the Romans couldn’t see their hands. Pax held his breath, thinking maybe he could find some loop in the laws of physics to
keep Alabaster’s arm pressed against his shoulder forever.

He could feel Alabaster’s reluctance to speak. “Jack told me everything when I found him.” He nodded to Pax’s belt.

By now, Pax could tune out Jack’s humming and had completely forgotten there was another person with them. Considering how loud Jack usually was, his surrogate father’s tune was quiet; Pax almost couldn’t recognize *Can You Feel the Love Tonight?*

“But, Jack’s mind was also even worse after Tartarus. And he’d say or do anything for you and Axel…”

Jack made a, “Mm-hm,” of affirmation before continuing to hum.

“Ah,” was all Pax could say.

“I didn’t know if what he said was true until I saw you. And even then… I’m still pissed at you for not telling me.” Alabaster’s grip became uncomfortably tight on Pax’s hand. “I would have never thought you were Rome’s spy had you told me. It made me think—if you could keep Lamia from me—what else could you lie about.”[2]

Pax wanted to give Jack a hug, though that might be kinda… gross currently. He’d made stuff way easier for the two of them. Pax felt his eyes water when Alabaster relaxed his grip. What he really wanted to do was give Alabaster a hug. He didn’t hate him! That fact alone was enough to warrant a party, complete with moon bounce.

“But yea, we’re still friends.” Alabaster’s gaze narrowed as he clarified, “Just friends… Now let go of my hand.”

Pax grinned at him. “No.”

Alabaster touched the fire rune on his sleeve.

“You never had time to recharge it,” Pax teased, “I checked.”

Alabaster’s eyes widened, staring over Pax’s shoulder. “Ajax.”

“Witch Boy, I’m the master of diversion. Do you really think I’ll fall for—”

“Phobetor is back.”

And, judging by the way Alabaster gestured, was standing right behind Pax.

“Cho…” Pax grumbled.

Thank you for reading! :D I hope everyone is having an awesome winter break and fantastic holidays if you’re celebrating!

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Footnotes:

Euna: Parka Fluff Hug

Forty: Euna

Parka Fluff Hug

(or: A Stony Disposition)

*Even the gods fear nothingness.*

Euna couldn’t place where she’d heard it before, or why her brain was slogging over it, but the words kept repeating like the mundane mantra of a school pledge—something you repeat everyday without really caring why. She stared off into Camp Half-Blood, where Phobetor had been severing people’s limbs as a timer to torment his little brother.

Some uncomfortable part of her understood Phobetor’s absentmindedness. Some part of her agreed with Alabaster—or as much as she got out of Alabaster’s rant—that they should kill the unworthy god.

Something she’d heard the plants whisper— the plants? farmers? worshipers?--- slithered through her mind, *They manufacture us in mass quantity until perfection is reached, while the unworthy and weak are tossed without concern, and the perfected are consumed by a thankless, thoughtless overseer.*

Demigods harvested like plants. Or plants harvested like demigods. That sounded like something stupid her English teacher would say about some book she’d say she read, and actually read through the glory of SparkNotes. Did the gods weed out their unwanted children, to force the others to grow stronger?

Euna shook her head. What was wrong with her? She never had thoughts like that before. One of her favorite past times had been *not* thinking about things. Blank walls could be as captivating as the plot for *Game of Thrones* when you were good at zoning out.

“I heard what happened to Joey.”

Euna jumped. Apparently, she was still *really* good at zoning out.

She’d been trying to listen to Thalia and Christiana—something about Lesedi waking up, and sound coming from inside the camp. And something about a dragon rolling in toilet paper? Christiana had left…

When she focused her eyes on Thalia, she registered what Thalia had said.

*Joey.*

Euna opened her mouth to respond, and was confused to find she couldn’t. Her voice wouldn’t work. Her face felt warm, except for a tiny line of cold streaking down her cheek. At first, Euna thought it was just a side effect of such a weird sleep schedule and constant fighting and running, but…

For the first time since they’d left Santiago’s horrible Mayan temple, Euna could feel a tear
Thalia’s stunning blue eyes softened with understanding. Euna wondered how many sisters this huntress had buried.

Thalia didn’t try to say she was sorry or something stupid like that. Instead, she pulled Euna into a tight hug.

Euna felt the fluff of Thalia’s silver parka compress against her face. The fur lining was so warm. The material acted like a muffler, and Euna enjoyed how the sounds of the Romans attending to bodies and the sounds of a waking camp all quieted to a murmur of fluffy silence.

Euna patted Thalia’s back with one hand. Without realizing it, she’d left her other on the pommel of Backbiter.

“Hey, if you ever need anything, you know where I am,” Thalia said.

“All over the wilderness,” Euna noted. Thalia smelled like the wild. “That narrows it down.”

She’d meant the comment legitimately—there wasn’t a lot of wilderness left. But she realized how ridiculous it sounded when Thalia laughed.

“You wanna be a huntress,” Thalia said like she was clarifying Euna’s comment, though Euna didn’t think there was much to clarify.

“Yea.” Maybe Euna could find some peace like that.

She thought about her father—how warm his face was when they were gardening and how stern it was when scolding. She didn’t want to see how he’d be without Joey around. Especially since Euna wouldn’t be able to replace Joey’s ambition and strength.

She couldn’t go back to her old life after watching her sister die like that either. She couldn’t bother with school. After seeing the little taste of Santiago’s corporate meeting and his league, she could never be part of an office space. What if she zoned out during a holiday party and strangled everyone with the laurel and mistletoe because she was having flashbacks?[1]

Backbiter’s pommel became uncomfortably icy to Euna’s touch. She withdrew from Thalia. The world came back to its loud harshness: Romans shouting, confusion in Camp Half-Blood, injured screaming—

Euna thought about how the Romans might come after her when this was done. “I guess it would be a good place for you to keep an eye on me too.”

Thalia raised an eyebrow. “If you mean to keep you safe, sure. We take care of our own.”

Someone shouted from behind Euna.

Thalia made a face, then waved in return. “Looks like Lesedi’s up. That means the other
campers are waking up. You should come—"

"I'll be over in a minute,\)" Euna said.

Thalia nodded, her black, choppy hair dipping momentarily to cover her tiara. She squeezed Euna’s shoulder.

Then she was gone, running back towards the others.

Euna stood there, in the small patch of shadow between two floodlights, almost at the end of the strawberry fields. Something moved dimly in the shadow.

There was a bustle of strawberries near the edge of the caution tape. When Euna focused on it, she could see a tiny, grey piglet staring at her through it.

Despite Euna’s hatred of Phobetor, she knew how it felt to be pigballed and had some sympathy.

But only enough to hold off for a second before drawing Backbiter. Maybe some people had qualms with killing cute things, but Euna could go for some pork belly from this jerk.

The piglet huffed before melting into black tar.

The tar warped and twisted upward until the minstrel-adorned, bird-skulled piccolo player stood before her with a hatchet.

Someone yelped.

The monster turned and Euna could see Alabaster and Pax nearby.

Back by the barracks, none of the Romans or conscious Greeks seemed to see the God of Nightmares.

He took a step closer to Alabaster, twisting his hatchet.

The child of Hecate looked unarmed. She thought she’d seen him poof his staff earlier. Alabaster withdrew his card deck from his pocket, but neither he nor Pax looked ready for another fight. However, the head on Pax’s beltline looked ready to belt out a battle cry.

“How \textit{dare} you make me something cute,\)” Phobetor huffed at Alabaster.

Pax looked more offended by that comment than scared. “Dude, how are we related?\)” he asked while stepping between the god and child of magic.

Euna knew Pax was comfortable having dumb conversations with gods, but she’d rather be more practical.

Euna lunged forward.

Phobetor stumbled away from her, further beyond the caution tape. A disgruntled sound sputtered from his mouth, and she realized something valuable—he was afraid of her.

\textit{Ikelos, twisted coward, one who refused to side with me to spite his brother,} Backbiter hissed.

\textit{Oh, now you can talk,} Euna thought. But that didn’t matter. What mattered was collecting
this god’s head.

Phobetor held up his hands as she took a step forward.

“Wait--!” Pax squeaked.

Alabaster reached around Pax for her arm, probably to stop her from falling asleep beyond the camp’s boundaries.

But nothing happened. She stepped into the caution tape and felt it stretch against her arms.

Phobetor sputtered again, “Wait—young child of Demeter—your sister—don’t you want to see your sister again?”

Euna wanted to call his bluff. Her sister was dead. Nothing the God of Nightmares could do would change that.

“My dearest aunt said you should see Joey finish off her quest in Hera’s cabin. It will be quite the fun spectacle. I’ll let you in.”

Although she didn’t see eyes in the kiwi bird skull, she could sense his gaze lingering on Backbiter’s blade.

“Uh—we shouldn’t do anything my mom considers ‘fun,’” Pax whispered.

Euna paused. What quest could Phobetor be talking about? The convoluted Traitor’s Prophecy could hardly be called a quest. But—

Hera. Hera’s quest box. Where Hera wanted Joey to bring her the key to a happy marriage in exchange for her blessing Joey and Apollo’s… relationship? Euna felt slow when her mind clicked all the pieces together.

“When she comes to me for aid, I will do what I can,” Persephone had told Euna. Had Joey visited Persephone after death? Her godly sister lived in the Underworld during this time of year, right?

Euna ran forward into camp, past Phobetor. She felt the caution tape snap against her and flutter down in the freezing breeze. The world didn’t blink or anything to signify that she’d fallen into Phobetor’s dream world. Instead, she felt the temperature rise slightly.

Camp was still too cold compared to its normal temperature. With each step, her vision diminished; the shadows inside the camp swallowed the floodlight’s illumination. The smashed strawberry field and gnarled trees became dark twists as she ran past. In the distance, she could hear the whisper of the camp’s river, but—other than that hushed din—there was nothing.

No pegasus clopping. No campers laughing. Not even a monster snarling out of the trees. Euna couldn’t shake the feeling that this wasn’t their camp, but an eerie abandoned memory.

Shouts trailed dimly behind her, and Euna was aware Alabaster and Pax had come after her. Their rushed footfalls meshed together with the sound of hers—

Euna tripped on something.

She stumbled and kept going without looking back. By now, she could see the soft flames of the central hearth, silhouetting the newer, small cabins—except Hecate’s, which cast its own
green flicker. The central fire’s amber light glowed off the larger monoliths, making Zeus and Hera’s marbled columns look like those of mausoleums.

The bodies of campers were scattered all over the camp’s center. Everyone was wearing PJs. Phobetor must have lurked into camp at night, just early enough for someone to sound the alarm. Then everyone fell among the sleep.

“Just asleep,” she caught Alabaster’s hiss. He and Pax were almost directly behind her.

A few campers looked like they might be stirring, but she didn’t have time to check.

She instinctively slowed down when she saw the light from Cabin Two’s ajar door. There was another fire inside. A giant marble statue sat on a throne in the far end of the cabin. More like a temple than a cabin.

When Euna got to the doorway, she paused.

There were two figures inside. They were so faint, like holograms in mist, she thought they were tricks of the light.

One was a Caucasian, pale haired boy with a giant crack in his skull and blood staining his unsteady visage.

The other was her sister.

What was left of her sister.

Joey’s black and pink bob had been singed. From what Euna could see of the shade, her sister’s pale skin was charred black. Euna wasn’t even sure how she knew it was her sister, but—

“—whatever, Will. Like I’m going to sit around waiting for a goddess. I’ve got better things to be doing, you know.”

That was definitely her sister.

Will sighed. “I guess we could be trying to scare the campers awake outside.”

Joey huffed—a motion that would have normally puffed her hair out of her eyes if her ghostly hair hadn’t been so crisped. “I’m still creeped out that Al and Clubber—”

“Kléber.”

“—said most of those bad guy spirits were funneling out here. You don’t… you don’t think this is what Persephone was talking about, right? The whole strife following this thing?” Joey gestured with a small box in her hand.

Will shook his head, considering Hera’s statue. “No, I don’t think us coming here caused any of this… I just wish the gods gave us better instructions. I don’t even know where to look for Nico or Melinoe—”

“Joey?! Will!”

Pax shattered the hushed conversation.

Until that moment, Euna could pretend this was all a dream Phobetor had rigged.
When Joey jumped, and turned to them, Euna felt some part of her give.

Joey’s face was almost completely destroyed. Her jaw bone was cleanly exposed. There weren’t any eyes in her sockets.

“Pax?!” the ghost squeaked in indignation. “You’re not supposed to be here! Augh—I haven’t touched up my make up since before hearing Mr. Charon’s horrible taste in Christmas muzak.”

Euna could hear Pax’s voice quiver with sobs. “It’s okay, I’m sure you would still look like you’ve been through Hades and back.”

“You know you can alter your appearance from that of a corpse,” Alabaster said calmly.

Joey turned on Will and Euna got the feeling her sister was glaring. “Did you know we could do that? Why didn’t you tell me?!”

“It was in the pamphlet I gave you,” Will said. As he said it, the blood receded from his face, and the crack in his skull vanished. “I didn’t find it necessary when it was just us.”

Joey huffed again. Then her burnt out face turned towards Euna. “Stupid pamphlet,” Joey grumbled. She fumbled something out of… her pocket?

After a second of scanning the pamphlet, Joey’s skin reappeared in its pale glow. Her black bob with the pink streak fluffed back out—still looking disheveled, but there. Her face reconstructed, down to the mascara tear-streaks on her cheeks. Euna forgot that Joey would still be in their dark clothing from when Miranda had ordered a stealth hit on the Hermes cabin. That had been so long ago. Joey had tied her black shirt to the side to expose her midrift.

Then Euna’s fourteen-year-old sister was before her, hands on her hips, giving Euna a skeptical scowl. “I’m sure you’ve been just as lazy as ever since I’ve been gone.” Joey rolled her eyes. Although her words sounded scathing, Euna could see the red rim around Joey’s dark gaze and the way she bit her lower lip to keep from sobbing.

Euna choked back some tears. The world felt like it was dissolving. Her sister was here.

She tried to think of something—anything—to say. Finally, she settled on, “Joey, I told you not to talk back to people like that—“

Joey folded her arms. “Santiago pulled a thing of thorns through Pax’s tongue—”

“I have a cool tongue ring because of it—”

“—I couldn’t just sit around like the rest of you—”

Euna thought about how her body wouldn’t react that day—how she couldn’t think after taking Hemera’s god droplets until she heard Joey’s death scream. But her words were now coming out of reflex, not thought. “But you’re always getting us in trouble because of that stupid mouth of yours! And I’m your older sister—I’m—I’m supposed—I’m supposed to protect you—”

“‘Because I’m the oldest,’” Joey mimicked with the deadest expression she could. The tears lingering on the edge of her eyes disappeared. Although she was shouting, and trying to look angry, Euna could see a smile tugging at the corner of Joey’s lips. “Just like how you’re supposed to get all the highest scores and kick the most butt at the dojo?”
Euna felt herself smile. If she wasn’t certain her hand would go through Joey, she probably would have slapped her sister.

Will glanced over to Pax and Alabaster in confusion.

“As far as I can tell, the species of Song children express affection through acts of anger,” Pax explained.

Joey snorted, gesturing at Alabaster. “Who is this guy with you? And why do you have that sword, Euna? And Pax—EW! Is that a HEAD attached to your belt?! Is it HUMMING?!”

From behind her, Euna could hear Jack’s screeching chuckle as he said, “A spitfire. I like your personality, kid.”

“Oh, that is disgusting,” Joey complained.

Will’s face fell. “Is that the psychopath’s head?! Holy Apollo—did the gods give him Orpheus’s curse?!”

“QUIET!” someone thundered.

The room shook.

The voice seemed to resonate from the walls themselves. The fire pit in the center dimmed.

The massive statue in the back of the room leaned forward from its throne. Those cold, white eyes emitted contempt. Euna remembered how colorful this goddess looked when she first saw her: the glisten of peacock feathers, the vibrancy of her cloak, the gold of her hair ribbons. But here, she looked cold.

“How dare you use my sacred cabin as a place for revelry and ruckus!”

“Hera,” Will said in awe, dropping to one knee. He shot the rest of them a look. Euna didn’t really feel like kneeling. The effort to get back up would be annoying, but she figured the consequences for not doing so would require further effort.

Something scraped behind her.

Euna glanced back in enough time to see someone dart out of the cabin. Alabaster and Pax weren’t anywhere to be seen.

“Ah, the girl who thought she could handle the same trials and tribulations of Psyche and Hercules for the hand of a god. Have you returned to finish your quest? The Underworld appears to have treated you well,” Hera sneered.

When Euna turned around, Joey still looked stunned. She shook her head, cleared her throat, then made a face. “Wait—ugh—was that really why I got that quest? For Apollo? Gross.”


Joey sighed. “At least I got a quest out of it. One ahead of Miranda Gardener and my sister.” She stepped—really hovered—forward. She paused, glanced back over to Euna, and gave her a warm smile, like she had when they were little and Joey won her first dojo competition. She turned back around to set the rosewood container at the feet of Hera’s statue. “Here’s Persephone’s box with the ‘secrets to a happy marriage’ or whatever.”
Despite everything, an expansion of happiness warmed Euna’s chest. Maybe Euna would have to visit home after this. Then she could tell her dad that Joey had done the Song family proud. Maybe Euna could get Pax to make a trophy that said Heroes First Solo Mission.

Hera glowered. “You no longer want Apollo’s hand in marriage? Fickle girl. Marriage takes dedication and work.”

“Yea, we have this wonderful invention called dating to figure that out if we wanna marry someone, now.” Joey waved her hand and Will looked like he might pass out from her flippant reaction. Euna felt it justified. Apollo was way too old for her sister. “Apollo made me realize I should prioritize good looks and dancing below making me laugh and caring when I get shoved into a sacrificial fire pit. If I would want anything for what I did, it wouldn’t involve him.”

“Want?” Hera sounded livid. The statue gripped its armrest. “You heroes, always seeking rewards for the tribulations you bring upon yourselves.”

Joey raised her chin. “No—I mean—yea, I’d like to not look like a corpse as a reward. But… no…”

Joey stared off to the side for a moment, her right hand tightening into a fist. Euna wasn’t used to seeing Joey hesitate. That was something Euna thought was pretty awesome and annoying about her sister: her resolve. Joey knew what she wanted and didn’t hesitate to go after it.

This was new and—for the first time—Euna wondered what Joey had gone through since she died. What could make her sound so uncertain?

“I… I want a chance to be important in the scheme of things,” Joey said, her voice shaking. “I don’t want to fade away or be forgotten or forget. Hera,” Joey made eye contact with the goddess again. Er—stone to eye contact. Could Hera see through this rock? “I… I would like to complete another trial. I would like to do another tribulation. Let me do a quest for you.”

“Also,” Will piped up. “If you could warn the other gods of what’s happening in Camp Half-Blood—”

Hera’s face twisted towards Will. “This camp wouldn’t exist if the gods would honor their marriages,” she snarled. “Why should I help the children of whores?”

“Irony alert! Because none of our parents had to wreck a marriage to have us!” a voice came from outside. “My mom may be a horrible whatever, but she’s not a whore, you b—”

“Ajax, shut up,” another whispered.

Hera snorted. Her face turned, like she was surveying the occupants of the room. Then, the statue leaned over to pluck Persephone’s box off the floor. The room shook with the movement and the grinding of rocks reverberated off the walls.

“Um—Persephone said not to—” Joey started.

“Heroes don’t usually volunteer themselves to me, Joey Song, daughter of Demeter. I need to check that you completed the quest sufficiently before I can give you another.”

Hera opened the box.

Everything hushed. The light from the central fire dimmed further. All Euna could focus on—all any of them could focus on—was the small slip of paper Hera withdrew from the box.
When she shut the lid and set the box on the ground, the universe seemed to sigh in relief.

Except Joey. Joey swallowed audibly.

Hera went completely quiet. There was no expression on that stony face. After a few more moments, Euna thought Hera’s statue had gone back to doing what statues normally do: be a statue.

Enough time had passed that Euna was about to ask Joey, Will, Alabaster, and Pax if they could consider their breakfast options. She was feeling some breakfast burritos.

Then, Hera spoke, in a voice too sweet, “Joey Song… I can give you everything you want. You won’t look like a corpse anymore. And you won’t fade away or be forgotten.”

“Wait—you’re—you’re okay with what Persephone gave you?” Joey asked. Although Joey was facing Hera, Euna could envision her sister’s gape. Joey scrambled to gain her composure while saying, with much more confidence, “You’ll give me another quest?”

Joey twisted to give Euna another grin, as though to say two quests a head of you. Get on my level.

“Oh no. A quest won’t be necessary. I know a fitting reward for conspiring with Persephone,” Hera said, and snapped her fingers.

Nothing seemed to change. Euna couldn’t understand what was wrong, though she knew something was. Her sister was still smiling at her. Hera’s statue resumed its original position of glowering down at them.

Will stared at Joey in horror.

Euna didn’t get why. Even if Hera hadn’t given Joey another quest, at least Joey had completed this one. They could go get breakfast, swap stories, and exchange their goodbyes. Joey could scold Euna for joining the huntresses of Artemis and for not trying to get in Calex’s pants. Joey could depart for the Elysian Fields with a proper party. That’s where ghosts like Joey would go now, right?

Would it be rude to eat in front of ghosts? Could they get ghostly meals for Will and Joey in a mini celebration? Euna knew how terrible it was to watch others eat when you didn’t have anything.

But Joey didn’t continue to gloat. Nor did she shout indignantly when Hera’s presence exited and they were left with this icy, silent room.

She kept grinning at Euna with that same proud smile. Euna couldn’t see through Joey anymore. Her sister’s skin looked ashy. Euna hadn’t understood when a grey-white color spread from Joey’s foot, up through the rest of her. Not until Euna stepped forward and touched Joey’s cheek, now as cold as the walls of Hera’s cabin.

Everything was so quiet. All this time, Euna had been hoping for silence. She’d wanted the plant and farmer prayers to quiet. She’d wanted to get her sister’s scream out of her head. She’d wanted everyone to stop asking her if she was okay.

Now, all Euna could do was stare at her sister’s form—frozen in a life-size statue, matching the one of Hera behind her—wishing Joey would talk.

Euna’s fist shook around Backbiter’s hilt. Her gaze drifted over to the rosewood box. The
silence was filled when Backbiter reminded her, *Even the gods fear nothingness.*

Soundtrack time! Written to Arai Tasuku’s Aileen’ Unseen Things and Time Passing Bell.

Mel Beta-comment: “I NOW WANT EUNA TO GO AFTER HERA AND CHOP HER UP!”

Thank you for reading! Mel is ready to pass out *Camp Othrys Part II: The Fillet of Hera* shirts. Stay tuned for next week’s chapter: *Ajax: We Could Have Had a Slide or a Fireman’s Pole* to see who else joins in that shirt party.

Footnote:

[1] What Euna doesn’t realize: office parties inspire this type of anger in anyone. The traumatic past is unnecessary.
Had Pax not genuinely been terrified that Hera would turn Alabaster into a Christmas ornament if she got her hands on the child of magic, Pax would have thought hiding against the wall with him was kinda hot.

But the way Alabaster gritted his teeth and trembled with anger at the Queen of the Gods’ presence was a bit of a deterrent. Will’s alarmed shouts at Euna made things more difficult. When Pax peeked his head in the doorway and saw Joey had been turned into a statue, the chances of a boner went from unlikely to nonexistent.

Pax’s head was on too much of a delay to fully process what had happened. First, Hera was calling his mother, and Alabaster’s wonderful mother, whores—falsehoods, though Pax couldn’t speak for Will and Jack’s dad—and then Hera made one of his dead friends into the best staring contest partner ever.

Normally, Pax thought shouting, “no!” for a prolonged period of time was overdramatic, but this situation might warrant the dramatics.

Especially when Euna stepped out of Cabin Two. Her eyes looked blank. She held Backbiter in one clenched fist and the rosewood box in the other.

Pax hadn’t realized he was crying again until he saw the emptiness on her face.

Alabaster said something to her, but Pax couldn’t make out his words.

Euna wasn’t really the hugging type from what he gathered. And Pax knew Euna had trouble looking at him because his features reminded her of Santiago Pax, his father—she often scowled when he brushed his hair out of his eyes. Last time though, he’d at least been able to talk to her about her sister’s death when he’d morphed into someone else. Everyone else had been stupid, saying “sorry,” but he knew “sorry” didn’t do anything for someone who was gone.

But her sister’s death had made sense last time: a heroine standing up to an unjust tyrant. This… this was…

Pax choked when he tried to stop his sobs.

Then he felt something latch around his wrists.

“Cho!” he cried. He glanced down to find splinter-ridden tree roots twisting around his skin. For a split, nauseating second, he could perfectly envision the shackles in his father’s temple.

*This is the opener of passages*, Backbiter hissed.

Euna’s put the rose-colored box in her pocket and reached forward to grab Jack by his crimson locks and wrench him from Pax’s belt.

“Hey!” Jack cried.
“Euna!” Alabaster snarled. He’d summoned his imperial gold gladius from a card. “We’re not your—” Vines snapped up from the ground, snagging around his arms.

Euna wasn’t looking at either of them though. She held up Jack’s dripping head, like the christening of Simba in *The Lion King*.

“You said Gaea resurrected you because your voice can make the ground and air wither,” she said. “Can you make me a passageway to Tartarus?”

“Wow—you can’t just wrestle a man away from his friend’s belt and—”

Euna’s gaze narrowed. “Do it or I’ll cut out your tongue.”

“Oh—um—I think I can—” Jack’s tone had altered from offended to nervous. “If Orpheus can crack open the world to what lies beneath, then so can I.”

“Then sing,” Euna’s voice quivered.

The tree root around Pax’s left arm went slack. Numbly, he glanced down to see Alabaster had sliced through his own bindings and was working on Pax’s. “Euna—wait—what are you doing?!” Alabaster demanded, slicing through the roots around Pax’s right arm. “That might kill —”

Jack cleared his throat—what was left of his throat—and sang. Hearing Jack’s horrible retching notes made Pax grind his teeth. This was different than last time: it felt like Jack’s voice was amplified to the point of making accidental war with any aliens unfortunate enough to be flying by Earth. Hades, Pax was pretty sure a deaf person would try to strangle Jack right now and be disappointed there wasn’t enough neck left to strangle.

“Ain’t no mountain high enough,
Ain’t no valley low enough,
Ain’t no river wiiiiide enough,
To keep me from getting to you!”

The ground whined under their feet, like it was begging Jack to shut up. Pax sympathized—as much as he loved Jack, cutting his tongue out was starting to sound like a swell idea.

“My love is alive,
Way down in my heart,
Although we are miles apart.”

A throbbing erupted in Pax’s head. Beside him, Alabaster crumbled down to one knee. He’d dropped his sword and held his hands over his ears.

Weakness spread though Pax’s limbs. Without realizing it, he’d also put his hands over his ears, but the barrier did nothing. It was like wearing his anti-charm speaking headphones to cancel out a rocket blast or a scolding from *Chiich*.

Although she kept on her feet, with Backbiter in one hand and Jack in the other, Pax could see Euna starting to tremble. As though to alleviate the pressure against her eardrums, her mouth moved to scream, but the sound was swallowed by Jack’s wretched screech.
“If you ever need a helping hand,
I’ll be there on the double,
Just as fast as I can.
Don’t you know that there ain’t no mountain—”

The earth beside them released a thundering crack. Pax was pretty sure that was the sound of ground spirits trying to destroy themselves—maybe that’s why earthquakes happened.

The front half of Hera’s Cabin crumbled.

Pieces of marble splattered everywhere, so they could perfectly see the extinguished fire and statue of Joey smiling and Hera scowling in the back of the cabin.

In the rubble of the entrance, the ground snapped and crinkled. As the dust settled, they could see neat little tiers descending down into the blackness of the earth. The front of Hera’s cabin was now a set of stairs to nothing.

Jack stopped singing.

Despite the silence, Pax could still feel his ears ringing. “Dude!” he complained.

Jack was panting. “Voilà!” he said. “Now, I’m not privy to the idea of returning to Tartarus, so if you could redeposit me with the tiny Pax—”

Euna blossomed a beautiful, white flower in her hands and shoved it into Jack’s mouth. Then, she tied his hair around her belt loop.

Pax managed to get his feet working. He stumbled forward, careful not to tumble down that narrow passage. “Euna—I know it feels like we’ve hit rock bottom and we don’t want to take Joey for granite, but—but Hemera’s drops might still be messing with your head, and I know Backbiter sounds like the name of a nice, caring sword, but he’s not—”

Euna glanced his way.

Pax felt his rambles cut off at the icy rage in her black eyes.

“I want to do this,” she said, lifting the rosewood box from her pocket, the thing that could carry the essence of a god or an abstract thought. “Even the gods fear nothingness. I’m going to bring evisceration to them.”

And, with those words, the daughter of Demeter descended into nothingness, carrying Persephone’s box, Kronos’ scythe, and the head of Orpheus Metal.

But Pax wasn’t going to let another one of his friends disappear. Biting back his manly tears, he sprinted after her.
“Ajax, stop!” Alabaster snarled.

Pax got about two steps before Alabaster tackled him—a fact that relieved Alabaster, considering, despite his shortness, Pax was much faster than Alabaster was when he got up to speed.

Pax squirmed and twisted to crawl towards the hole in the earth. Alabaster just hoped Pax wouldn’t start hitting his pressure points to get away.

“Witch Boy—she’s alone—Jack doesn’t count—and she’s upset and—she—she lost her sister again and—we can’t just—”

“Euna!” Alabaster shouted. “We don’t even know if your plan will work!” he tried vainly. That girl was beyond reasoning.

There was no response from the descending stairs. Alabaster’s ears were still ringing too much to hear if her footsteps were still echoing up the narrow corridor.

Pax punched the ground. “No! Euna! I don’t want anything bad to happen! Er—anything else bad to happen! You can’t just run off like this without giving us a detailed itinerary of your plans and copies of your birth certificate!”

Alabaster could feel Pax hiccupping with sobs under him. Alabaster frowned while he struggled to keep Pax pinned. Her plan was crazy in an ingenious way. The side of him that hated the Olympians admired her audacity, but her forethought was lacking.

“She’s listening to Atë’s advice,” he guessed. Pax stopped squirming at his comment. “Your sister pointed out that the gods feared being eviscerated in the pit of Khaos. I think… I think she wants to use Luke’s sword to cut off a piece of Khaos, put it inside Persephone’s box, and, I assume, give it to Hera.”

Pax twisted and Alabaster could see his hazel and brown eyes go wide. “We’ve… we’ve gotta stop her… right?”

Alabaster snorted. “Why? While I’m not sure if her plan will work, I’d rather help her then pretend a goddess didn’t just lock her sister’s soul in a piece of rock.”

“I don’t want her to get hurt!” Pax’s squirms resumed. “She needs hugs, and cuddles, and a good romp with a lieutenant of Artemis, not a stroll through Tartarus with my psychotic surrogate father’s head and Luke’s homicide-inducing blade! Joey wouldn’t have wanted this—I don’t think. I mean, that’s a pretty obscure plan for her to predict not wanting, but still!”

“Ajax—”

Pax bucked Alabaster off. Alabaster flopped onto the ground beside him.
He could assess how upset Pax was considering the motion wasn’t accompanied by—

“As much as I want you on top of me—”

“Eros damn it, Ajax!” Alabaster growled, though Pax’s pause gave Alabaster enough time to grab Pax’s boot, so he couldn’t crawl away. If Alabaster had time, he could pin one of his blades through Pax’s pant leg—

“—I’m going to go help my friend—uh—Euna and I don’t talk much, but I’ll still call her a friend! I’m not sure how I’ll help her, but I’m going to!” Pax declared.

Alabaster refused to express how much it scared him to think of Pax disappearing into Tartarus—where the Olympians wanted the Triple A Chimera—to chase after a crazed demigod that was struggling with hearing voices in her head exterior to Jack’s and Backbiter’s.

There was no way out if they lost Jack. They had no sleep and no plan.

“Jack probably tapped into the labyrinth to make that passage,” Alabaster reasoned, keeping a firm grip on Pax’s combat boot. “At least grab a guide!”

Axel thought the world was ending. He remembered stories of gods cursing full towns. He found himself wondering which god Camp Half-Blood had forgotten to sacrifice a chicken to and—for the sake of keeping Reyna alive—if anyone had a chicken on hand that they were willing to sacrifice.

Then he recognized that horrific sound as Jack’s voice.

Something must have gone wrong. Pax must not have Jack’s head, else he’d have literally put a sock in it.

After seconds of Jack’s song, Axel and Reyna had collapsed to the floor in the tent, their limbs obeying them about as well as Medusa’s hair post-mortem. The noise was worse than deafening—it made Axel want to cut out his ears with his obsidian blades.

When the earth began to tremble, he’d wrapped the two of them in the Nemean Lion cloak as best he could, to protect them from any sector of the tent that might collapse. Reyna rolled them away from the sword rack and table. Then they lay curled together, their hands over their ears like that would do anything.

Axel tried counting. He tried meditating, but nothing would help. That sound was all consuming.

Until it abruptly ended with a sharp crack and one last quake through the ground.

Everything felt muted.

He couldn’t hear at first, relying on his other senses. He could smell Reyna’s sweat and the faintest hint of her honey shampoo and feel her accelerated heartbeat where he’d burrowed his face against her neck.
They pulled away from one another slowly, glancing around the tent, as though to assure its continued existence.

Reyna’s eyes were wide. “What in Tartarus was that?!” she asked. He could tell she was talking louder than normal by the tremble of her lips.

“I think it was Jack.” Axel puffed up his cheeks and popped them. “We’re lucky he didn’t accidentally kill us with whatever he’s doing.” If there was one trait Axel could describe Jack as, it would be sloppy.

Axel’s limbs still felt weak. He guessed that he’d fall over if he tried to get up too fast. That was probably why Reyna was still half-curled up with him.

They should have run outside. They should have been checking on everyone to see what happened, but Axel was happy Reyna let them take a moment to recuperate.

And to kiss him.

Axel inhaled sharply.

He’d barely tasted her lips when he heard someone shouting for him in the distance.

Normally, Axel kept strictly to his duties as a leader, but—with Reyna’s hand clutching the clasp of his Nemean Lion cloak, with her legs entangled with his, and the end of her braid tickling his arm as he reached for her face—he wanted to be selfish.

However, when his ears reflexively tilted towards the sound, he could recognize, over the muddled confusion outside the tent, that the person shouting was his little brother.

Both he and Reyna withdrew at the same time. As though the kiss hadn’t happened, Reyna rose to her feet. As she adjusted her cloak, she aloofly said, “We’re not allowed to die until we figure this out.”

Axel snorted. “My brother will resurrect both of us if we do.”

They exited the tent.

Kahale and Calex were still gaining their footing outside the flaps. Everyone around camp looked like they’d collapsed from Jack’s song and were in various stages of disorientation.

Axel didn’t understand Calex and Kahale’s stares of bewilderment until he remembered how he and Reyna looked: the claw marks across her face, the sword wound in his chest, their ruffled, disheveled armor.

He had to wonder how Calex kept Kahale out of the tent when the Leonis Caput started shouting. As he reflected on them wrestling in the tent, Axel hoped the heat in his cheeks wasn’t too apparent.

“What happened?” Reyna asked the confounded centurion.

Axel couldn’t focus on Kahale’s answer. He knew the Roman wouldn’t have any answers. And he needed to find his brother.

“Axel! Holy Titans! Axel!”

To Axel’s bewilderment, Pax’s shouts came from inside Camp Half-Blood. He could see
two forms dimly approaching across the strawberry fields, their figures ghostly in the floodlights.

Although Axel’s body wanted to wave a surrender flag after fighting both Percy and Reyna, Axel pushed himself to sprint towards the barrier of camp, leaving Reyna, Kahale and Calex to shout after him.

Others around camp were gawking in confusion. Most must have thought Phobetor had returned or that the source of that awful sound was approaching.

Axel skidded to a stop at the caution tape. That’s when he noticed, in the distance where the floodlights faded away, there was a line of tape that flickered gently off one post. A break in the Roman barrier.

He bit back his questions about how Pax and Alabaster had entered when he saw the look of desperation on Pax’s face.

Pax half-slid under the tape to reach him, clasped Axel’s hand, and half-scrambled back to his feet to tug Axel back towards camp.

Based off the frown and slight shake of Alabaster’s head, Axel grounded himself, mentally and physically, to resist Pax’s incoming pleas and tugs.

Alabaster jogged up alongside them as Pax talked, quite possibly faster than Axel had ever heard. “Hera turned Joey’s ghost into stone and Euna saw and she stole Jack’s head and Persphone’s box to take it to Tartarus and Witch Boy thinks she’s using the labyrinth to pull a piece of Khaos out to punish Hera and we need to go get her before she hurts herself!” With less enthusiasm, he finished, “Oh—and Will’s here.”

“Hi.”

Axel startled when the translucent figure of Will Solace moved beside Alabaster. He hadn’t noticed the child of Apollo frowning at the Roman set up.

“But that’s not as big a deal, he just looks a little Windexed,” Pax protested, tugging furiously at Axel’s arm. “Euna needs a very forceful hug and probably some serious therapy, and probably to have all the talking objects she’s holding removed from her—”

Stone. For completing her quest..? Axel clenched his jaw.

There wasn’t a labyrinth entrance from the direction they’d come running. Had Jack made one? As Axel’s head parceled through the information to figure out the best course of action, he settled on one fact: they’d need to move quickly to intercept Euna.

He took a step forward, feeling the caution tape against his skin. He didn’t fall asleep, but Axel did feel the distinct resistance of the Mist barrier. With Phobetor absent, it must have been reforming. He could see the fuzz of magic like frost creeping up a window.

Alabaster caught Axel’s arm. “You were supposed to convince him it was dumb to go down there.”

The three of them had gone into the labyrinth numerous times without hesitation. Axel scowled down at Alabaster’s steady, green eyes, remembering the times they’d disagreed over the best war strategy and how Pax would bolt to avoid them using his spy intel as the deciding factor. But this was backwards: normally Axel argued with Alabaster not to be so rash. What had changed to make Alabaster so prudent?
Axel remembered how helpless he felt when Santiago Pax pushed Joey into the sacrificial flames. Instead of letting the guilt sink his stomach, he let the rage energize his limbs. He wouldn’t let the Song sisters down twice, regardless of Alabaster’s worries.

However, the praetor’s firm voice did make him hesitate, “Leonis Caput.” From the sound of it, Reyna stood directly behind him. “You are going to stop the daughter of Demeter, right?”

Now, Axel better understood how Alabaster felt when he’d snarled, “I’m not doing this for you.” At some point, Axel and Reyna would need to have a thorough argument on her thoughts and feelings on her own religion and why she worshipped gods who handed out such punishments.

For now, though, Axel needed to get out of here before they decided to have a Roman senate meeting on whether or not he could take another step forward.

“Will her plan work?” Axel asked Alabaster. He hadn’t meant to ignore Reyna, though he found himself wondering if she’d try to kill him if he helped Euna.

Axel wished he could ask Merry about the possibility. But he didn’t want Kally, Calex, or even Thalia trying to come with them. Traveling the labyrinth was easier with a smaller, experienced group.

Alabaster shook his head. “I don’t know. If my theory about her intention is correct, she could just as easily be swallowed up by Khaos as she could tear off a chunk.”

Reyna took a step alongside him, her dark gaze icy. “Axel,” she said, “This could easily be a trap designed by Phobetor and Eris. Is there another labyrinth entrance you can enter that isn’t in camp?”

Alabaster looked annoyed to agree with the praetor. “I’m not even sure Euna and Jack are using the labyrinth. That’s just a guess. That tunnel could go anywhere.”

Which made it all the more important to catch Euna before she got too far. “I’m going to make sure Euna is safe,” Axel informed them cautiously. “Then we’ll get back as soon as possible to help protect the campers and see what we can do for Joey.”

Reyna nodded slowly. “This still feels like a poor decision, but I understand the importance of speed and that you’re not going to budge. Go.”

Alabaster balked.

“Yay,” Pax said, putting more effort into tugging Axel’s arm. “Now that’s settled, Mom, Dad, Scary Step-Mother, let’s go! After all, a Chimera-less Roman troop is a happy Roman troop! You can be all morally confused about us while we’re gone!”

Axel leaned into Pax’s tugs to sprint forward.

Alabaster took a step after him—

---only to step away from camp, like an invisible hand had pinched Alabaster and flipped him 180 degrees.

Alabaster looked stunned, then enraged.

“Don’t worry, little Child of Magic,” someone chuckled bitterly. “While the Athena Parthenos and Thalia’s pine woke while I was… decommissioned, I’m about to put them and the
Mist barrier back among the sleep. After all, I need to open the doors for my friends.”

Axel glanced back at the same time as Reyna. Several of her troops had gathered nearby, clearly nervous about her discussion with the Triple A Chimera. But none of them had spoken. They were glancing behind them to the shadows by Farm Road.

By now, Axel was more annoyed to hear Phobetor’s voice, but the form of a giant boar with a bowtie wasn’t what was alarming.

“Nico!” Will’s soft voice called.

Indeed, Nico’s form flickered there, black smoke twisting around him. He was frozen midstep with his Stygian iron sword at his feet, his mouth warped in the middle of a scream. Behind him, a woman stood with a hand outstretched towards his image, like she could yank him in a marionette’s dance.

Her body was split down the center, half like that of a blackened mummified corpse, the other half paler than the campers who had bled to death. She wore a white funeral dress. Several looming dark forms shifted in smoky swirls behind her and Phobetor.

“Two-faced!” Pax gasped.

“Melinoe!” the goddess of ghosts shrieked. “And now, thanks to you, my little spawn of Eris, I have a shadow bridge, something weak I can suspend between here and the Underworld. Let’s see how much of my ghost army can shadow travel through him before he dissipates?!”

Like Axel feared, Melinoe jerked her fingers, and Nico mimicked the spasm. His scream unfroze, and the child of Hades released a horrible shriek. As his body fuzzed in and out of shadows, ghoulshand hands erupted from the darkness flickering about his stomach, and grabbed the edge of Nico’s waist, as though to pull themselves out from inside him.


Melinoe laughed. “Percy Jackson may have thwarted my clutches before, but I’m going to make sure he has ghosts that haunt him. Even if it means killing every camper in Camp Half-Blood.”

The ghosts in the mass of darkness behind her moved forward.

“Nico—no!” Will shouted. Frantic, he searched around to find a way to help.

Reyna withdrew her gladius.

Will tried to grab her shoulder, but his hand went through her. “Reyna! Ghosts and ghouls only have real power until dawn, and I can sense that the sun will rise in the next ten minutes or so.”

Reyna trembled all over with what Axel readily identified as fear. “Romans!” she shouted. Her tattoo began to glow. Her fellow troops had cowered at the sight of the goddess and the small gathering of ghouls now creating a wall in front of her. At Reyna’s call, the soldiers stood at attention. The barracks bustled with noise as resting Romans gathered their arms.

“We hold off spooks until sunrise! Cuneum Formate!”

Kahale and several others closest fell into the start of a wedge formation. Axel could see
Kally and Calex standing by Thalia and the other archers, both looking horrified.

Reyna shoved Axel towards the Mist barrier. “Go!” she snarled before turning towards Melinoe to lead her troops against an encroaching ghost army.

We're almost done with the book!!! I've had kind of a rough week, and it is always nice and relaxing to post a chapter for you guys. Thanks for coming along for the ride and sticking with the adventure!

[1] Mel’s betaquestion: Which one is Pax calling the mom and which one is the dad? XD
Note: I do something a little different with the point of view in this chapter. I hope it isn’t too distracting! Let me know if it is!

In the ensuing chaos—of Alabaster snarling a quick, “Dawn will make your ghosts worthless,”

And the boar with a bowtie withdrawing a pocketwatch from a pocket that involved cartoon logic to say, “Oh, my good boy, we have plenty of time,”

And Reyna’s and Melinoe’s troops engaging—Pax frantically searched for his friends who were less trained in the art of not dying during war. [1]

He didn’t catch sight of Kally or the others as Reyna and Alabaster shoved him and Axel backwards across Camp Half-Blood’s boundary lines. But, he did see another figure.

Off to the side of the Roman wedge formation and the line of ghosts, there was a girl with a leather jacket, multi-colored hair, and a crowbar and sledge hammer in either hand. Atē didn’t have her usual bounce to her, nor her serial-killer-doll stare. Her shoulders slumped. She looked sad while waving her crowbar at Pax in some form of parting. Either that or a threat. With his family, you could never be sure.

Despite being out of breath, Pax puffed up his cheeks and popped them. He turned from Atē, the ghost army, and the Roman defenses and ran alongside Axel towards the creepy pit of nothingness and frowny faces that had destroyed half of Hera’s cabin.

He and Axel donned their helms for ease while running, the Silver Tongued Snake’s head narrowing his peripheral with more darkness. He stayed close to Axel, knowing his brother had better spooky time vision.

As they stumbled back through what was left of the strawberry fields, towards the central hearth of camp, Pax wondered if this was the best choice. He hadn’t thought the ultimatum would be—A: let Euna vacation in Tartarus or B: abandon his friends to a ghost army and the Roman army, both of which probably wanted to kill them.

Pax snapped back to the present when Axel hissed, “You didn’t tell me campers were up.”

Ahead of them, Pax could see one of the many lumps had risen from the ground, hopefully a camper.

Without breaking stride, Axel sprang over the camper, using the camper’s shoulder for balance. Meanwhile, Pax skid between the campers legs and rolled back into a run. In their split second of passing the camper, Pax recognized the trembling child of Hermes as Chris Rodriguez. And he was pretty sure the Leonis Caput and Silver Tongued Snake had just made Chris pee his PJ pants. Memo to self: mock Chris forever.

“In the words of Alabaster,” Pax responded as they saw the gaping hole in front of Cabin Two. Several sleepy campers gathered around it, gawking down and saying they needed to find Chiron. “‘Jack’s voice wasn’t exactly soothing.’”
In retrospect, Pax wished he’d have said something cooler when they bolted past the gawking teenagers. Like, “Zeus’s farts smell like Aphrodite’s perfume,” since neither god would know which one he’d insulted, or “Weasels forever!” to commemorate the Triple W team that he, Axel, and Alabaster had left in the Paxmobile.

He didn’t have time to add on before Axel stepped into the narrow corridor with Pax following after. With each step down, the walls narrowed. By the time Pax counted step fifteen, he could feel cool stone press against the arms of his weasel sweater. The light from the campfire above them had dwindled to a mocking hint of glow off Axel’s golden helm.

With that and the dim light of Pax’s celestial bronze daggers, all he could see was the looming Nemean Lion pelt descending ahead and the red plumes of the helm undulating in the tunnel’s slight breeze. Pax remembered stories of the Leonis Caput “stalking the labyrinth,” as the monsters liked to call it—the monsters that placed bets on how Pax’s brother would kill Roman captives.

After Pax saw Axel win his first coliseum fight to secure their entry into Camp Othrys, Axel forbid Pax from attending the whole “stalking the labyrinth” shindig. Something about how Pax wasn’t old enough to watch R rated films? Pax had never thought about it much, since it was prime prank time, but now, he wondered if this was how the Roman victims saw his brother.

The updraft blasted Pax’s face with the smell of… seawater? Why seawater? It would be awesome if Euna took a detour to some beachfront real-estate, but that didn’t seem to fit the whole bent on godly destruction thing.

Axel stopped moving.

Pax could taste salt when he swallowed. He got the uncomfortable urge to scramble back up the stairs, until the plumes on the Leonis Caput helm faded into the darkness.

“I can’t see where we’re going,” Axel said. Pax could hear his brother puff his cheeks.

Pax swallowed again, trying to rid himself of the ocean taste. Something felt wrong about the smell of openness in this black confinement. “Aren’t you supposed to have like, bat sense or whatever?” he squeaked.

“I’m not sure this is part of the labyrinth,” Axel said, “If it is, either something is blocking my view, or it hasn’t linked fully into the network yet. I’m not sure how this works if Jack bent the labyrinth to his will. The labyrinth is a living thing. It doesn’t like to be controlled.”


Pax wanted to tease Axel for getting claustrophobic, but that would be like punching a honey badger in the nose: both upsetting because honey badgers are cute and because they are incredibly dangerous.

“There’s a door here,” Axel finally said, “Be on your guard.”

“Oh, I wanted to relax with Reese’s Sticks and Kool-Aid the whole trip to Tartarus,” Pax whispered.

The door didn’t open the way he was expecting. Instead of hearing the click of a knob or the ominous swing of a dungeon gate like Pax had heard in video games, the barrier gave way noiselessly.
The brightness blinded the Pax brothers when they stepped out of the darkness. Instead of some dank cavern, they exited into overcast sunlight. The brothers paused to allow their eyes to adjust to the brilliance, their bodies to the warm breeze, and their noses to the intensity of salt and smoke.

When they’d adjusted, neither moved. Both were too stunned.

They were on a huge ship.

A grey ocean bled into a colorless sky every direction they looked. Parts of the deck were smoldering, the smoke curling to disappear into the bleached landscape. Various charred boards looked like they were patched together with broken dreams and wishful thinking.

There was a hollow carnival atmosphere to the ship, like an abandoned theme park. A pool was in the center, filled with crystal clear water and formerly white patio chairs with blue towels scattered around. A bar extended from the deck into the pool for easy access.

Before the Pax brothers recognized any of the people drearily shambling past the broken spots in the floor, they saw the posters on the bar shack’s outer wall: one was for an Orpheus Metal concert. The depiction of Jack’s maniac grin above his emaciated body felt uncomfortable. Axel and Pax looked so much younger with their drums and guitar. That was back when Axel had long hair in a ponytail and Pax had pink highlights.[2]

A few feet away, another poster depicted Percy Jackson with a drawn on mustache. Several knives and tail spikes protruded the wall, illustrating someone’s target practice.

Axel didn’t need to see the mast’s statue of a princess in chains to state, “This is the Princess Andromeda cruise ship.”

They both puffed up their cheeks and popped them.

Axel and Pax removed their helmets and attached them to their belts so it was easier to look around.

Pax felt himself tremble. He glanced at the door they’d come through, only to find a Johnny Rocket’s entrance. The circular window in the center of the door showed the remains of a food fight in the restaurant. But there were no grinning Camp Othrys members. Just a few people scrubbing the floor with their heads down. Something about them looked familiar.

“But… but why is it here? And… and how? Did the whole ship decide to take a joy ride out of Tartarus? Are we in Tartarus already?” Pax whispered.

Axel shook his head. He clenched his jaw, trying to pretend the sight of their dilapidated ship didn’t bother him. “What did Jack say when he sang?”

“What? The song about geography?”

“No,” Axel shook his head, “It’s about being there for a lover and conquering geography to get to them, right?”

“I don’t listen to old people music and I was a little preoccupied with the earth splitting to listen to lyrics. But, if it was something about that, then why are we on a ship looking for Jack’s lov—”

Then Pax saw her.
He felt like he’d eaten a full backpack’s supply of walnuts. The world tunneled until everything was fuzzy but her black, jagged hair and her mutilated, scarred face. Pax didn’t know he’d stopped breathing until he gasped out, “Flynn.”

She was mopping the deck, staring at the boards with that icy, absent glare she often got when Jack wasn’t around. Like when he’d last seen her at the Massacre of Mount Othrys, her legs and lower waist looked crippled and crushed from where Jason Grace had blasted a pillar onto her and Krios, and from when Pax couldn’t protect her like he’d promised Jack he would.

The random shades doing chores on the boat weren’t strangers. They were their friends that died during the war.

Pax could feel his cold sweat when Flynn looked up at the sound of her name. Her eyes softened for an indiscernible moment, then they narrowed. Get the fuck out of here, she mouthed.

Yep. That was Flynn.

But Pax couldn’t move. He felt too nauseous. He wanted to curl up and sob on Axel’s arm, but he also wanted to never touch another human again.

Axel would have normally noticed his brother’s increase into hyperventilation, but movement from one of the only non-ghosts aboard distracted him.

A beautiful woman stretched out on one of the white beach chairs. There was another non-ghost beside her, lounging on a chair facing away from them. All Axel could see was the man’s muddy sandals.

She folded up her tanning reflector, set it on the stool beside her, picked up a bottle of suntan lotion and a fruity drink, and stood.

For an instant, Axel thought it was Reyna. The woman’s hair billowed in loose, black waves down her back. A complicated, revealing purple swimsuit clung tightly to her caramel skin, one with way too many unnecessary straps. Something Reyna would never wear.

“Fei Lin, my wonderful daughter, you missed a few spots on the deck. And you forgot it’s rude not to properly welcome guests,” the woman said with a warmth of a pillow used to smother puppies.

She’d walked up to Axel before he smelled the aroma of roses intermixed with the smoke and seawater.

Faster than he could block, Aphrodite slapped him across the face with the bottle of suntan lotion. “You,” she said with the same tight sweetness, “scorned me for a demigod. And not just any demigod, one that gets all sweaty and gross from fighting too much, and reads really boring books!”

Axel thought about breaking Aphrodite’s neck. The more childish side of him wanted to uncork that suntan lotion bottle and pour it on her hair, since he knew it would make her squeal and amuse Pax.

But Pax was trembling so violently, Axel feared the shakes might dislodge a floorboard and drop them into the mess hall. Pax probably wouldn’t notice Aphrodite’s cringe.

They didn’t have time for the Goddess of Love. He hadn’t registered that she’d stopped her night visits when they got to New Rome. Too much had happened.
And this wasn’t the place for a confrontation. He needed to get Pax away fast.

Axel focused on Aphrodite’s ear, to prevent himself from identifying any of the ghosts around them, and to decrease the effectiveness of her love magic. Despite his attempts, he was furious to find himself thinking about nipping her lobe.

“Why did you bring us here?” he demanded, trying to find something wrong on Aphrodite to ward off any attraction.

“Eris brat, take this,” Aphrodite instructed, handing the bottle to his little brother.

Pax squeaked as the charmspeak took over. He reflexively extended a trembling, sweaty hand. Tears streaked down his cheeks when he glanced from the goddess to Flynn, who had gone back to swabbing the deck.

Aphrodite began to rub herself down with the lotion, moving her straps in a way that made Axel avert his gaze. Each motion was so deliberate and tender. He tried to picture Reyna’s face when they were cleaning up the war tent, the way her cloak had loosened on one side to look goofy and lopsided, the strands that had come out of her braid—

“Stop that,” Aphrodite snarled, the sweetness temporarily dissipating. When Axel glanced back at her, she went back to smiling and applying lotion.

“I didn’t bring you here. I was just having a pleasant, quiet vacation with one of my lovers and your friends interrupted it. The Plague Bringer and the clueless daughter of Demeter, right?” She sighed and went to flip her hair, though the locks had shortened to a dark, pixie cut and her eyes shifted from dark to brilliant blue. “It seems like Jack was looking for his love as a way to lead him and his friend to Tartarus. Oh, Jack and Flynn’s love story!” She grabbed the suntan lotion from a flinching Pax and hugged the bottle to her chest. “Such a delightfully tragic one. Just a pity the heroine forsook her beauty and cut up her face.”

Flynn had stopped mopping. She glared at her mother in a way that told Axel—if Flynn’s charmspeak worked on Aphrodite, Flynn would force her mother do worse than cut up her face.


Aphrodite dabbed the lotion along the ridge of her brow and gave the bottle back to Pax. He jumped. “That’s cute and sweet of you to say that, Ajax. Peitho and I were wondering if saying that makes you feel better about what happened.”

“Which way did they go?” Axel interrupted. Out of all their fallen comrades, Pax had the hardest time with Flynn. Pax could make jokes about everyone else, and reminisce on stories, or cry about how much he missed Alabaster, but never anything about Flynn. Axel didn’t need Aphrodite teasing his little brother when the dead girl was in front of them.

A glance down at Pax confirmed Axel’s suspicion. Pax was biting his lip to keep himself as together as the softhearted kid could.

“Hm?” Aphrodite asked, “Did you say you wanted my help?” In a gesture that looked absentminded, she took the suntan lotion from Pax and motioned it towards Axel. Meanwhile, she licked the rim of her fruity drink.

Axel had nothing to bargain. He could try to kill her again, but that had left him on his knees, pining over her for weeks. He knew what she wanted, but he could never humiliate himself like that. As much as the smell of her perfume made him want to droop his eyes, they were
surrounded by the destruction caused by negligent, vengeful, and sadistic parenting by her and gods like her.

A *thunk* came from the chairs by the pool. Aphrodite’s boyfriend stood up, stretched, and slung an AK-47 across his back. He wasn’t wearing a shirt over his muscles, but did have a scarf tied around his head to hide his face, like a Somalian pirate. His sunglasses blazed with a backlit fire. Just the sight of him made Axel furious.

Aphrodite sighed and tossed her suntan lotion onto the ground.

“Oh, you’re not going to be able to follow your friends off this ship. If you want to tail them, you’ll have to go a different route, assuming I let you,” Ares said, smirking.

Axel scowled. Any worry he had about Aphrodite’s wiles evaporated in the presence of the war god. He reflexively went to grab his sword hilt, only to remember that all his weapons other than his obsidian blades were in pieces in the Paxmobile. He didn’t even have his frying pan.

“What in Xibalba are you doing in Tartarus?” Axel snarled.

“What in Tartarus are you doing in Tartarus,” Pax corrected quietly.

The war god gave a billowing laugh. “We’re not in Tartarus! What? Did you forget I control the souls and vessels of all the fallen losers in battle? Hades and I had a field day—”

“—Fields of punishment day—” Pax said.

“—drawing lots on who got your crew.” Ares reached over and ruffled Flynn’s hair. Axel could feel her hatred. He remembered how she’d publically humiliate people if they dared to initiate contact with her at Camp Othrys. Well, everyone other than Jack or Pax.

Although Axel hadn’t always agreed with Flynn’s brutal methods, he found himself wondering how he could free her and the rest of his crew from servitude to this godly child. But where else would their souls go? Could they have a worse fate?

Ares released Flynn. He cracked his neck. “I couldn’t justify getting Jack though. He had to get his own specialized eternal torment. Though, it looks like he’s got the Orpheus curse now.”

As much as Axel wanted to obliterate his least favorite couple off this ship, Euna and Jack were getting further away every second, and Pax looked closer and closer to a mental breakdown.

Axel set a hand on his brother’s arm.

Pax flinched.

Axel withdrew and frowned. “Ajax, let’s get out of here. I’m sure we can find another labyrinth entrance somewhere on the ship. I think we had one in the boiler room.”

If there was one thing Axel knew gods hated, it was being ignored. He went to gently corral Pax towards the Johnny Rocket’s entrance.

“Oh, you think I’m going to let you go after you helped Hephaestus gather the parts for his giant rat trap?” Ares asked.

Rat trap? Axel paused. He remembered Hephaestus hiring him for a retrieval quest in exchange for the location of Leo Valdez.
“Ugh, Stygian ice is SO bad for your skin!” Aphrodite complained. When Axel glanced back, he could see both she and Ares rub their arms at the distasteful memory.

Despite everything, Axel crackled a smile. He hoped Hephaestus enjoyed hatching whatever trap he’d concocted.

Pax released a nervous laugh. Since Axel had directed him away from Flynn, color started to return to his face.

Ares seemed too relaxed with their reactions. The war god lowered his hands, resting one on the pistol grip of his rifle. “I gotta hand it to you, kid. Normally, I like punks like you with all of your spirit and anger—”

“—oh, it’s monologuing time—” Pax said.

“—but, at least pricks like Percy are useful. You… I haven’t hated anyone as much as you since Ghandi.”

“Give me a medal of honor,” Axel grunted.

“If you upset this fine lady—” Ares gestured beside him to where Aphrodite was examining her perfect nails like she wasn’t part of the conversation. “—I’ve been thinking a lot—”

“That must have been very difficult for you,” Pax said sympathetically. Axel probably should have stopped Pax’s side commentary, but he was a bit too proud of his little brother to do so.

The war god seemed unfazed as he finished, “—thinking about what to do with you.”

“I’ve beaten you before, Ares,” Axel reminded him, struggling to ward off a smirk.

Though… Axel wasn’t sure he could defeat Ares now. He had no weapons but his claws and teeth. He was exhausted from fighting Percy and Reyna. And he needed to keep Pax safe and hunt down Euna and Jack. Plus, there was the ghost army at Camp Half-Blood with Reyna…

Axel thought about continuing to ignore Ares to find the closest labyrinth entrance. Then every ghost on this ship—all their dead friends—would be sent after him and Pax to drag them back to the deck.

He was not in the strategic position to smirk. Axel sighed.

“No… no…” Ares chuckled and unslung his rifle. As though to emphasis how unnecessary the weapon would be, he leaned it against the closest patio chair. “You’re not going to fight me. See, I’ve been Googling the best godly punishments. Normally, I just kill people.” Ares shrugged. “But I found out Hera had a way more brutal suggestion.”

Axel wanted to make some snarky comment about a 4,000 year old man going to his mother for advice, but the words died on his lips.

“Some little myth about a guy named Hercules? Something about his first family…?” Ares said.

Aphrodite giggled.

Axel couldn’t puff up his cheeks and pop them. His insides felt frozen.
Ares couldn’t do that, could he? That wasn’t normally in Hera’s department of power either but, she was the queen of the gods—

But Axel could already feel his claws lengthening without his consent.

From the energized grin on Ares’ face, the god knew what Axel was thinking. He slung an arm over Aphrodite’s shoulder and pulled her close as they watched Axel struggle with himself. “I know you love to hunt and battle, kid. Now you’ll hunt and battle the things that you love. I think that’s well within Aphrodite’s and my domain.”

Throughout their trip down Jack’s corridor and onto the ghost ship, and—really—throughout most of his interactions with the Greek gods, Axel hadn’t been scared. Annoyed and enraged? Definitely. Now, for what Axel thought was the first time ever, he found himself trembling in fear before a god.

When Pax saw Axel’s shaking hands reach up and clutch his head, Pax asked, “Um, Lord of Primordial Awesome?”

“Ajax…” Axel whispered, “Run.”

We’re almost at the end! Only one chapter and an epilogue to go!!!! :D Thanks for reading! *ehem* please, don’t kill the author.... >>’

Footnotes:

[1] As Mel pointed out: books Pax should write.

[2] This is actually a continuity error from Ch 21, Blood of a Mayan. Making a note here for me to fix it (since I care deeply about my character’s hair… apparently?) XD

When Axel collapsed to his knees, Pax had to pause to reconsider their life decisions. Maybe they’d pushed the whole *Paxes are the coolest thing since chimpanzees learned to ride bicycles* too far. Maybe the Fates were filling in a *Mad Lip* with *Cards Against Humanity* for the Pax brothers.

Whatever the reason, the timing of Axel’s mental episode was about as good as the timing of Achilles’ last step.

“Ares, are you this pathetic a coward? Fight me like a real warrior—” Axel’s voice crippled to pained pants. Pax could almost *hear* Axel’s internalized, meditative counting. This was what Axel did when the Leonis Caput’s memories synced with his: the way he quivered, covered his face, crumbled into himself, the rage and malice he emitted, the way he tore at his ears and hair like a bunch of microscopic Ares-lice were stabbing him with baby spears.[1]

Pax wanted to tell Axel now wasn’t the time for hardcore dander removal nor the time to challenge Ares, but—

“Aphrodite, if you were ever hoping we’d… you wouldn’t let…” Axel released an inhuman growl, his claws dropping to hug himself. The tips of his nails sank deep into Axel’s exposed forearms and gashed his skin.

“Wow!” Pax said. As terrified as he was of the ship, and as nauseous as he was from seeing Flynn, he couldn’t be useless right now. *That* wasn’t a normal-Axel-breakdown. The Silver Tongued Snake needed to get to work. He focused on trying to take care of Axel, and about how to talk them out of this and crawl back up to Alabaster and Reyna with a white “halp” flag. Assuming the ghost army hadn’t overrun Camp Half-Blood, but one thing at a time.

Pax set a hand on Axel’s shoulder, trying to surreptitiously remove Axel’s claws from his arm. He gave Ares and Aphrodite a sheepish smile.

Aphrodite raised an eyebrow at him and Ares looked amused.

“Listen, Jerk of War and… Aphrodite.” Pax realized calling her “leave favorite goddess” was probably a bad idea right now. “I know we started off on the wrong foot, what with Axel almost castrating you during a fight and some other minor—”

When Axel’s hand shot out to shove Pax, it was hard enough to throw him off balance. Pax’s back slammed into Johnny’s Rocket’s wall and he skidded down to the ship’s deck.

“*Get away from me!*” Axel snarled, his voice wavering.

Pax sat there, stunned, watching Ares laugh. Aphrodite sighed and fluffed her now-long locks. “Oh, I’m going to enjoy this,” Ares said. He removed his arm from Aphrodite’s shoulder to crack his knuckles.

The ship workers—their old friend—all paused in their work duties to watch. They looked horrified. The mop in Flynn’s hands snapped against the floor.
Ares walked towards Axel and set a hand on his forehead, forcing Axel to look up.

“Hey!” Pax shouted. This was bad. Pax couldn’t fight Ares, or he didn’t think he could.

He was about to yell, “No face-high fiving my brother!” when Ares did something he didn’t expect.

“I remove my curse from you,” Ares said, “And grant you a fighter’s, my, blessing.”

“No…” Axel whined. His hands went slack and flopped to the floor.

“Well, go forth, Monster of the Labyrinth, and hunt your prey.” Ares detached the Leonis Caput helm from Axel’s belt and placed it over Axel’s head. The God of War grinned, taking a step back to admire his handiwork. He looked at Pax and grunted, “Ajax Pax. I think we’re supposed to give you a five second head start or something, but I don’t care about that shit. Ready or not, he comes.”

Pax didn’t understand. He numbly watched his brother get up and turn towards him. Although Pax could normally see through Axel’s Mist alterations, Axel’s figure blurred with that of the Leonis Caput: his limbs turned skeletal, his skin seemed to hang loose. In the grey light, the plumes of his helm smeared to a bloody mane. Normally, even in costume, Axel had the look of a strategizing human. Now, his body heaved like a hungry, wild beast.

“Ajax, run,” Axel’s voice sounded distant, small, and scared. In alarm, Pax realized he couldn’t see Axel’s mouth move under the helmet, just the vile grin of the monster. “Don’t use anything I’ve taught you.”

But… but Axel had taught him everything. They trained together every morning since their acrobat days. And, besides, what was Axel talking about? Pax could hear him in there somewhere and it’s not like Axel would ever—

The monster threw its head back and released an agonized wail, two-toned with Axel’s baritone and the Leonis Caput’s growl. One that twisted into a raw scream.

Pax scrambled to run. Shaking, he snatched up one of the smoke bombs Alabaster had resupplied in his utility belt and dropped it.

Right as the green tendrils billowed into the salty air, the Leonis Caput lunged. Pax rolled into the smoke screen, the way he’d always dodged—

And felt the Leonis Caput’s claws dig into his hip, then around Pax’s utility belt.

Pax screamed in pain, wrenching to the side to dislodge his brother’s grip. Axel lifted him by the belt. Something sharp scraped his skin.

The leather around Pax’s waist gave. Pax flopped onto the deck, his pants loose. He scrambled backwards, kicked the material off so he’d have full mobility, and struggled to get the skinny jeans over his combat boots. To save time, he kicked those off too.

The ocean breeze dissipated the green haze enough that Pax could see the Leonis Caput stand to full height.

Pax’s heartbeat thundered in his ears. The ship’s deck, his brother lost like an animal, someone laughing like a stereotypical villain in the background: he’d seen this before. He knew how this ended.
He was already shouting through sobs, “Ares’ big, scary, evil plan. To have one brother pants another…”

Pax trailed off when the Leonis Caput dangled the utility belt off one obsidian blade. All of Pax’s weapons, tricks, and household goods were on there: his daggers, helm, smoke bombs, knock out darts, serums, EpiPens, and emergency gum and condoms. Pax was naked, and it wasn’t just because he’d kicked off his pants.

“You don’t happen to have any walnuts on you, right?” Pax whispered.

As the Leonis Caput drew Pax’s own celestial bronze daggers, Pax puffed up his cheeks and popped them.

Then, the Leonis Caput tossed Pax’s other defenses over Aphrodite’s and Ares’ heads, into the deck’s swimming pool. Aphrodite followed the progression with an iPhone. She giggled at Pax’s Pegasus boxers. “Oh, this is going to get such a high rating on GodTube.”

“Ares, Aphrodite stop this. Ajax isn’t the one you want—” Axel’s shaking demand felt detached from the Leonis Caput, and came out more as a plead.

Ares laughed. He cracked his neck to one side, took Aphrodite by the waist, and pulled her into one of the patio chairs. “No, but I’m rather enjoying this. Front row seats to see you beg for mercy.”

Pax needed to make a plan. But he wasn’t the planner, Axel was. And—even if he had weapons—he couldn’t attack the Leonis Caput. That was his brother in there. He wanted to find a good corner of the ship to curl up, hide like a baby, and cry for his mother—er—cry for a good maternal figure. What he needed to do was talk their way out of this, and reason with Ares and Aphrodite, but that sounded as useful as reasoning with Hercules’ foot. Plus, Pax already found himself shrieking, “Chinga a tu puta madre!” at Ares.[3]

Not a great start to diplomacy.

The Leonis Caput slid one of Pax’s daggers into its fur to sheath it. With the other in hand, it began a jerky, twirling dance towards him. The jagged movements reminded Pax of their weasel’s war dance—everything was disjointed to confuse its prey.

Tears streamed down Pax’s face while he scrambled back to his feet. His breath was tight. Every time his mind synthesized intel about his brother for a weakness—

Axel Pax


**Weaknesses:** Stupidly stubborn, social justice warrior, guilt-ridden, nicotine addiction, his little brother, killing his little brother, killing his—

Pax sprinted towards the back entrance to the bar. The door was slightly ajar. If he was smart and quick, maybe he could trap Axel. He could kick Axel into the bar shack, brace the
exterior door with some of the patio furniture; then, he could release the chain holding up the metal
gate that covered the guest access and lock the gate to the bar counter. No one would have to die.
No one would need to be pinned to a deck. They’d just have to pants Ares, get that on video, and
post it along with Aphrodite’s video.

Despite how silent the Leonis Caput was, Pax could sense him closing in. The sense of
approach made him choke on his gasps.

When Pax got close to the door, he launched off the ground with his nondominate foot,
planting his next step on the doorframe to run up the wall. He hoped Axel’s momentum would be
too fast—that he’d skid into the shack or, if Axel could stop, that Pax would backflip off the
doorframe, land behind Axel, and kick him inside.

In mid-flip, he registered his mistake.

Axel knew when Pax was getting ready for a flip.

Claws sank into Pax’s shoulder.

Pax screamed.

Pax’s momentum broke.

In the split second of reaction time, he reached down with his other hand to jam his fingers
at the exposed pressure points along Axel’s forearm.

But the Leonis Caput had already hurled him off course.

Pax slammed into the deck. His face smashed into a piece of smoldering wood near the
patio chairs. On contact, his shoulder cracked.

A sob erupted from his mouth.

For a stunned moment, all he could smell was rot, saltwater, and smoke. He thought about
all the warm days he’d spent on this ship, playing pranks with Mattias, performing concerts for the
bored army, and about the times Jack talked Luke into some beach days in Belize so he and Axel
could visit Chiich and show Alabaster their home town.

He thought about how Jack was a decapitated head now, how Will, Joey, Kouta, and
Santiago were dead, how Lapis and Hiro had left he and Axel to help Eris bring a ghost army to
obliterate Camp Half-Blood, how his topside friends might already be dead, and how—if they
survived—his only chances at a healthy, happy relationship would be dating each other. When had
the fates decided his story would be so angsty?! He hadn’t asked for much; he didn’t want glory or
fame—he just wanted infinite craft projects and a dozen Pax children!

Pax tried to push up off the grossly warm muck on the floorboards.

Pain erupted in the shoulder that had cracked. He squealed. The arm wouldn’t move. The
other trembled violently.

Footsteps approached.

His gaze hardened on his functional hand, placing it flat against the floorboards.

As soon as he went to push off, a bronze blade slammed through his palm, thudding into
the deck at an angle, pinning him.

Pax stared as glittery blood smeared onto the slimy wood and his hand. His cries clogged into hyperventilation. He remembered this. He knew what happened next.

But, in his dream, he’d never heard Axel speak.

“Ares—please—” Axel’s distant, small voice trembled violently. For the first time since Frasco died, he could hear Axel choking on sobs. “Stop! I’ll atone for my sins—I’ll—I’ll do anything—”

Someone laughed.

Pax’s mouth was moving. He was screaming something at Ares, some kind of curse or swear.

He tried to yank his hand up, to force the blade out of the—

The world flashed white for a moment.

Pax squealed again. He’d forgotten his blade expanded at the base. Everything flared, like he’d shoved his injured shoulder and pinned hand into a meat grinder at the same time. He couldn’t—couldn’t get enough leverage—

“Aphrodite—p-p-please—please—I’ll be your slave! You can use me however you want—I won’t resist—and I’ll never think of Reyna again, and I’ll tell you I love you—”

“Ares, maybe we should reconsider—”

“Stay strong, babe. He’s no Adonis.”

Pax twisted his neck, catching sight of the animalistic arch of Axel’s legs. Axel still looked like he’d become the monster, but Pax could hear Axel’s hysterical tears. That was his brother trapped inside. The Leonis Caput withdrew the other dagger from his furs.

“Axel…” Pax whispered.

After Frasco died, Pax had never wanted to hear Axel cry like that again. He’d wanted to keep Axel smiling and laughing, like Axel always kept him safe and fed.

“Please—gods! Titans! Anyone! Hecate! Morpheus! PLEASE!” Axel wailed.

Pax choked back a sob. “Axel, it’s not your fault—”

The Leonis Caput’s legs leveled with Pax’s shoulder. “Don’t say that—”

“Don’t go all stoic about this. Talk to Reyna, Alabaster, and Kally.” Pax tried desperately to get his breathing under control so he could talk fast. He forced a smile, one that probably broke the Guinness Mythological Records for fakeness. “And quit smoking. You know those things have a c-c-component of urine for fl-flavoring.”

The Leonis Caput slowly knelt beside him. “Shut up, Ajax—” Axel couldn’t finish the comment.

“We’ll see each other again. Remember? I’m like a stomach parasite—”
The Leonis Caput grabbed Pax’s hair.

“—you can’t get rid of me.”

Aphrodite had gone completely silent. Ares made a grunt, like he wasn’t pleased that Pax had to get a lot off his chest before the whole eternity elsewhere thing.

The Leonis Caput pulled Pax slightly upright by his hair. Pax strained not to scream at the pain in his shoulder, or the way the dagger tugged at his hand on the deck. But he knew Axel was the one in there, seeing all of this. He wanted to pretend things were as painless as possible.

“Regardless of this, you know, you’re still the best big brother anyone could ask for,” Pax whispered, “Sick burn to Kouta, right?”

Axel wept as the Leonis Caput hefted up Pax’s second dagger in his other hand.

While Pax was trying to act relaxed about the whole eminent death thing, he had to close his eyes when he saw the tip pointed at his throat. He may have loved Axel, and wanted to minimize the killing-your-own-brother-guilt thing, but he was still a coward.

Pax could feel Axel’s body tense. He figured the moment was coming, and said, “Goodbye, Axel. I love you, bro.”

He’d thought a lot about what would be the best or most heroic last words. He figured nothing could top those.

Author’s Note: Thanks for reading! Sooooo, this was supposed to be the last chapter in the book, in the spirit of Riordan cliffhangers, but Mel basically said she’d murder me if I didn’t put an epilogue in. Who else is in the murder party?

Axel, put your hand down. I revoke your right to be part of this party.

Footnotes:

[1] One day, I need a drawing of this.

[2] This scene was conceived to What’s Up People by Maximum to the Hormone.

[3] *ehem* Don’t say this. It’s a very impolite thing to imply someone should do with their mother.
A gentle hand settled on Pax’s shoulder. The warm pressure alleviated some of the strain from where Axel held up Pax’s hair. The pull on his hand, from the dagger pinning it to the deck, disappeared, like it had been removed. All of his pain dissolved at once.

“Ajax,” a male’s soft, calming voice said, “You can open your eyes.”

Pax swallowed. He didn’t think death would happen that quickly. He assumed there would be a lot more choking on blood and dramatic “auuugh!” noises.

When he squinted, unsure he wanted to let the person know he was conscious yet, he saw an enormous someone crouched on his other side in a white tuxedo. The ends of a black ponytail tickled his face. The person radiated a relaxing energy.

“God?” Pax asked.

A Catholic afterlife? With his Mayan and Greek blood, and with all the blasphemy, he had not seen that one coming.

As an afterthought, he had to ask, “Wait—are you a dude?! The conservatives were right?!”

The man gave a strained chuckle. “Ajax, wrong religion.”

“Oh… Yahweh?”

“Quiet, Ajax,” he said.

When Pax opened his eyes fully, he could see that his dagger wasn’t embedded in his throat. This man’s other hand, three times the size of an average hand, had clamped around Axel’s forearm to keep the dagger suspended in stabbing position. The deity’s arm wasn’t even tensing as the Leonis Caput struggled to wrench control.

“Look who crawled out from hiding in the gutter,” Ares growled somewhere out of sight.

Pax wanted to ask what this man’s house looked like if his gutters kept tuxedos that clean.

Pax glanced up and saw a familiar face. The man had grey, caring eyes, long dark hair, and horrific scars deeply embedded in his skin, worse than Axel’s or Flynn’s.

“Human lover,” Aphrodite snorted, “Eugh, we have got to get you some good foundation!”

Once Axel had choked back his sobs enough, he managed, “Prometheus,” in attempted greeting.

Prometheus gave Axel a genial smile. “I’m here to pay an overdue debt to an old friend.”
He pulled the Leonis Caput’s arm further away from Pax’s neck.[1]

Axel released Pax’s hair to claw at Prometheus’s grip, though—with the bird problems he’d have in the past—Axel would have to do way more than that to bother this guy.

Once Prometheus had tugged Axel a comfortable distance from his brother, he wrapped that arm around the Leonis Caput, pinning Axel’s arms to his sides, like he was a child.

Somewhere inside the squirming Leonis Caput, Axel sobbed in relief.

Slowly, Prometheus withdrew his hand from Pax’s chest to scoop him up and against Prometheus’ other shoulder. Pax’s two daggers clattered to the deck, one must have been previously dislodged from his hand, the other slipped from Axel’s grip.

Now armed with two sobbing Pax children, their savior stood and turned towards the gods of war and love, Pax hoped, to give some justified ass-kicking.

“Talk ‘em to death, Prometheus!” Pax cheered him on through his tears.

Prometheus nodded to his two opponents. “Ah, with gods as brilliantly distinguished in intelligence as the likes of these two, it should not be difficult.”

Ares and Aphrodite exchanged a quick glance.

Ares spoke first, “Are you making fun of us, Fire Bringer?”

“No at all. I was merely opening the discussion. Now…” Prometheus took one giant stride over to the patio furniture. “I want to save you all the opportunities you’ll be missing if you have Axel kill Ajax Pax.”

Author’s note:

Thank you so much for reading and sticking with me through the full of Attrition of Peace. Despite all of its darkness and angst, this has been one of my favorite books to write. I would love to hear from those of you who got through this! Comments are really encouraging and I want to know what you think!

Has your favorite character changed? What was your favorite scene? What was your least? If you have a favorite shipping (including friendshippings) let me know! And if you don’t know what to say, just say hi! :D Book 4 has a bit more wiggle room in it, so if you have a favorite character or character combo, give a call out and I’ll try to incorporate them or their p.o.v. more! If I can kick some of this writer’s block, I’m aiming to start releasing the fourth installment in March!

Again, thank you so much for your support! And, as always, a special thanks to my editor, Mel. Even though she threatened to start a pillow war if I tried another ending like chapter 44. I’ll try not to do that again to you guys or to her. Bahahaha—just kidding, I totally will. Love you guys!

Footnote:

[1] Mel’s note at the beginning of this chapter, “I DON’T CARE WHAT DEUS EX MACHINA YOU USE! HE BETTER NOT FUCKING DIE!” And, voila. Prometheus Ex Machina.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!