**The Curse of Lethe**

by shiiki

**Summary**

Percy and Annabeth intended to retire and spend a quiet four years at college in New Rome. However, old enemies have other ideas, and one very determined attack leaves Percy poisoned and fighting for his life and Annabeth facing the difficult decision of giving him the only cure: water from the Lethe...and dealing with the heartbreaking side-effects. There is hope, though, but will Percy, Annabeth, and their friends have the courage to brave Tartarus again to retrieve Percy's memories from the edge of Chaos?

**Notes**

This was written for the PJOHOO Big Bang on tumblr. Thank you to the mods for running the Big Bang because this probably wouldn't have been written if it weren't for that! I also owe a huge thank you to my two beta readers, supernaturally-percyjackson and preciouschildrenofolympus for all their help in polishing up this fic. Their dedication to this fic over the months of writing it was phenomenal! And do check out the accompanying art that preciouschildrenofolympus has done! She has two illustrations for chapters 1 & 7 and a comic strip for chapter 10!

**Warnings:** This story is rated R (or M, if that's your system) for adult themes. Although no explicit material is covered, there is reference to some dark stuff in later chapters. Appropriate warnings will be given before each chapter.
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

An old enemy launches a determined attack on Percy and Annabeth, leaving them in a dire situation.

_If somebody had been waiting for Percy when he first woke up, if they'd convinced Percy that his name was Bob and he was a friend of the Titans and the giants...would Percy have believed it? Would he have felt betrayed once he found out his true identity?_

—The House of Hades, chpt 62

I

ANNABETH

When Percy first proposed the idea of living in New Rome to Annabeth, she had vehemently opposed it. However, after a year of college there, the place had definitely grown on her.

Inside the Pomerian Line was a cozy world of demigods living tucked away from the constant danger of monster attacks and vengeful deities. The university's architectural design programme was first-rate, as was to be expected in a city that was modelled after the original Greek and Roman ones. Her friends were often around: Reyna lived nearby, having recently retired from the legion and passed on her praetorship to Hazel. The latter Annabeth saw often as well, along with Frank, since they attended senate meetings regularly. Camp Half-Blood had finally established a regular exchange programme with Camp Jupiter, spearheaded by Jason and Piper, with a cross-country transportation service courtesy of Leo and Festus. Annabeth's half-brother Malcolm had been in the first wave of exchange heroes. She even got out into San Francisco occasionally to visit her dad, and while she missed Chiron dearly, there were always Iris messages and summers back on Long Island.

With all these perks, Annabeth had thought she'd be more than grateful for the peaceful, quiet life that New Rome offered. And she was—except she found herself getting restless sometimes. Maybe it was because as a demigod, fighting was in her blood.

After she and Percy got back from a summer visit to New York, where Chiron had joked about them getting rusty in their training, they began to crave action. They got into the chariot races at the Circus Maximus, which brought back fond memories of the first time they'd ever raced a chariot at Camp Half-Blood. They joined the weekly war games with the Twelfth Legion in the Field of Mars, to the delight of the Fifth Cohort.

And then they started venturing out into the world.

It became a weekly ritual. They would jog down the cobbled paths of New Rome, over the Via Praetoria and through the barracks. Once across the Little Tiber, it was a short sprint into Berkeley, where they would make straight for the coast. Percy would dive into the bay and keep pace with Annabeth as she loped down Eastshore State Park. It was a good ten-miler to start the day, and although New Rome was peppered with top-notch cafés, Annabeth became quite fond of finishing her run at Philz Coffee on Ninth Street before strolling back hand-in-hand with Percy into New
Rome for classes.

At first the Camp Jupiter sentries at the Caldecott Tunnel were aghast at their leaving the safety of the camp boundaries in such a blasé fashion, but after a few weeks of it, they got accustomed to seeing the two of them jog by in the morning and return without issue some time later.

Sure, they ran into the occasional monster—sea serpents, giant carnivorous seagulls, turtles with mouths full of sharp teeth—but after two wars and a trek through Tartarus, the odd monster that surfaced was no more than a minor irritation, easily dispatched before they continued their respective jog and swim. Annabeth grew to think of them more as disturbances that got in the way of her coffee time at Philz.

So when the crazy woman on a horse showed up, Annabeth barely batted an eyelid.

Unfortunately, she was about to pay for her hubris.

At first, Annabeth thought the steed that burst forth from the bay was a Hippocampus. As its lower half broke the surface in a ferocious leap, she glimpsed a fish tail and flippers where a horse would have legs. But then it landed on the concrete of Berkeley Pier with the definite solid thump of hooves. It stood before her, a slavering monster horse with sharp, glistening teeth and evil, glowing eyes. Its long, dark mane flowed fluidly down its coal-black coat.

On its back rode a muscular woman with hair the colour of algae. She seemed to be wearing a skin-tight outfit covered with loud prints, but then Annabeth realised that the only stitch of clothing on her were her green tights. Every inch of her bare upper body was inked with tattoos: a garish collection of multi-coloured designs with no real pattern to them. Symbols and shapes and pictures of underwater plants and creatures swirled together. Most prominent of the lot was an enormous heart splashed across her chest, with the words \textit{JB + H 4-EVA} inside. Annabeth had no idea what it was supposed to mean.

The tattooed woman's hands pulled sharply on the reins of her horse, which were the same fluid material as the creature's mane and led to the bridle that went through its mouth. The demon horse's nostrils flared as its rider held it steady.

Something about the combination struck Annabeth as odd. She'd never seen anything like this horse before, and the way it had seemed to have flippers and a tail when it first burst from the water…

'At last,' said Tattoo-woman, glaring at Annabeth. 'I have found you. And now you shall die.'

She spoke as though she knew Annabeth, but Annabeth was at a loss as to when she might have encountered this horseback version of a Hell's Angel before.

'I think you might have the wrong person,' she said, but she slipped the bracelet she always wore off her wrist. It had a number of charms on it and one of them, a wishbone, disguised her personal weapon. 'I don't think we've met.'

'Oh, we have not,' agreed Tattoo-woman. 'I don't expect you to recognise me. We Nereids never do get any attention. But I am Hipponoe, and you, Annabeth Chase, killed my lover.'

It was possible. Annabeth had killed plenty of monsters, though she wouldn't have imagined a Nereid to be dating one. She knew nothing of Hipponoe, except that the ancient Greek translated loosely into 'Temper of Horses'—pretty apt, given how she was currently spurring a bad-tempered horse to attack. The heart on her chest might be a clue, but Annabeth couldn't remember killing any monster with the initials 'J.B.' either.
Not that it really mattered. Whatever her reasons, Hipponoe was clearly out for vengeance, and that meant a fight. Annabeth rubbed her finger and thumb over the central curve of her wishbone charm. It elongated into the drakon-bone sword that she had acquired from the giant Damasen in Tartarus two years ago.

Before she could charge Hipponoe and her horse, though, a jet of water came blasting out of the bay and crashed into the Nereid. It nearly unseated her, but she kept a tight hold on the reins of her horse. A flash of bronze followed, a blade that would have stabbed into Hipponoe, except her steed moved out of the way with lightning-quick speed.

Percy landed on the pier next to Annabeth, his own sword, Riptide, in his hands. Though he'd been swimming, his black hair and college t-shirt were completely dry—just one of his many magical talents as a son of the sea god.

Percy's green eyes flashed with concern for Annabeth. 'You all right?'

'I had it under control,' Annabeth huffed, pushing a few stray curls that had escaped from her ponytail out of her face. Then her eyes widened and she shoved Percy aside. 'Look out!'

Hipponoe had regained control of her horse, but instead of charging, as Annabeth would have expected, the horse opened its mouth and spewed a mouthful of fire at them.

Percy shoved a column of water at the flames. 'You've gotta be kidding me,' he said. 'How can a water creature breathe fire?'

Something tugged at Annabeth's memory. 'It's not Greek,' she said. 'I mean, Hipponoe is, but I think her horse is…'

Before she could place which myth it was, Hipponoe and her horse came back for a second round.

'Great,' Percy grumbled. 'Do all the different legends have to come after us? I mean, first there were the Romans, and then the Egyptian stuff, and then that craziness with your cousin that I still don't understand. Now what?'

He fended off another fiery blast from the horse, sending up a wall of smoke as his water jets extinguished the fire.

Hipponoe let out a frustrated cry. 'You are in my way, son of Poseidon! Leave! I have no quarrel with you. It is this accursed murderess I have come to destroy!'

'You know, I've really got no clue what you're talking about,' Annabeth said. She swung her sword and it hit razor-sharp horse teeth with a metallic clang. The horse tried to clamp its teeth over the blade, but to Annabeth's confusion, Hipponoe yanked it back sharply.

The horse looked disappointed. It was almost as though it wanted the blade to slice into its mouth.

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'Do not deny it, daughter of Athena,' Hipponoe said. 'I have spent years tracing the death of Joe Bob. I divined it with certainty: it was you who stabbed him in the back!'

'Joe Bob?' Percy's eyes widened. 'Oh man, you're Babycakes?'

Annabeth had no idea what he was talking about.

'That was his name for me!' Hipponoe howled.
'The Canadian giants,' Percy said. 'Laistry-whatever-you-call-them. Back when I was at Meriwether Prep.'

A dim memory of flaming dodgeballs and explosions in a school gym crept into Annabeth's mind. 'I can't believe you still remember that,' she marvelled.

'Enough talk!' Hipponoe snarled. She yanked the reins, pulling tightly on the horse's bit, and suddenly it shifted its shape, becoming a hulking beast that seemed like a hurricane full of gnashing teeth. 'Perhaps you like my kelpie better in this form. Yes, I think this is better. I will have you ripped to shreds!'

'What is that thing?' Percy demanded.

At the word 'kelpie', Annabeth's brain finally made the connection. This creature wasn't Greek. And while her knowledge of myths beyond the Greek and Roman pantheon wasn't extensive, she'd investigated this one when she'd been helping her cousin Magnus. The kelpie...a fire-breathing, shape-shifting water horse.

Well, that seemed about right.

'I think it's from Scotland,' Annabeth said.

'Who cares where it's from!' Percy dragged her out of the way as the kelpie tore up the pier in front of them. 'How do we kill it?'

'I—I'm not sure! But we can't let it destroy Berkeley!'

'Right.' Percy grabbed her by the waist and leapt off the pier. Annabeth yelped as they hit the cold waters of San Francisco Bay.

Hipponoe and the hurricane-kelpie turned and tried to follow them in the water, but the gnashing whirlwind of teeth couldn't do any more than churn up violent waves on the water's surface. Percy made the waves rise up to pummel Hipponoe. Unfortunately, after the shock of the first attack, the Nereid gained control and the water splashed harmlessly back down into the bay.

'Fool! I come from the sea, son of Poseidon. You cannot fight me with water.' Her grip tightened on her reins. It was hard to tell in the black hurricane, but the lines seemed to cut a groove into it near the top. The whirling dissolved and the kelpie reformed in the shape of a Hippocampus with the original black coat and mane of its upper body. The kelpie tossed its head, straining against the sinuous bridle and the bit that ran through its mouth.

'The bridle!' Annabeth's eyes widened. 'Percy, we can't kill it, but whoever holds the bridle controls it.' If they could just unseat Hipponoe... 'Give me a boost!'

Percy understood immediately. The water that was churning beneath her seemed to solidify. Annabeth kicked hard against it and Percy gave her another little push into the air. She leapt and soared through the air as Hipponoe and the kelpie bore down on them. Her feet slammed into Hipponoe from behind, knocking the Nereid sideways. Annabeth sliced downwards with her sword and cut the reins away from Hipponoe's hands.

With a howl of outrage, Hipponoe tumbled from the kelpie's back into the water. Percy immediately swam up and held Riptide to her throat.

Freed from Hipponoe's control, the kelpie went wild. Annabeth's heart leapt into her mouth as it plunged into the water with a thunderous noise, taking her with it. She remembered another snatch of
the paragraph she'd read about kelpies: *they drown humans by submerging with them into deep waters.*

*Oh no, you don't,* Annabeth thought firmly. She could see the reins flowing back from the kelpie's head, not quite tangled yet. She reached for them and felt her hands close over the sinewy strands. The kelpie jerked, halted in its downward dive. It bucked beneath Annabeth, struggling against her, but she grappled for control. Finally, when her lungs were just about ready to burst, the kelpie's body slacked as though resigned.

Annabeth tugged on the reins and they rose, charging up to the surface. The kelpie burst out of the water and landed back on Berkeley Pier—what was left of it, anyway—its lower half shifting from fish back to horse.

'I'm okay!' Annabeth yelled, out of breath. 'I got the kelpie!'

Percy and Hipponoe bobbed in the bay twenty feet away. He swam her over at sword point and yanked her up onto the pier.

'Look,' he said, 'we don't want to kill you. But you can't come threatening my girlfriend, okay? We're sorry about Joe Bob, but he did try to kill me, you know.'

Hipponoe glared at him. 'No excuses, son of Poseidon.' She extracted a vial from a hidden pocket in her tights. It glowed with green light, like Greek fire. 'One way or another, the girl must die!'

She flung the vial towards Annabeth and the kelpie.

Percy intercepted it with a swipe of Riptide. 'Over my dead body,' he told Hipponoe.

The vial exploded.

Annabeth screamed, but it wasn't Greek fire. A splash of electric-green liquid washed over Percy. Hipponoe rolled out of the way.

'You fool!' she screeched.

For a moment, Percy just stood there, covered with what looked like bright green slime. Then he collapsed on the ground, flopping like a fish.

Annabeth screamed again.

'What did you do to him?'

Hipponoe's look of outrage gave way to laughter. She pushed herself to her feet and smirked at Annabeth.

'Poison,' she said smugly. 'I spent a long time preparing for our meeting, you know. I planned for every contingency. I sourced the most insidious venom, the strongest toxins, to create this. There is no earthly cure. It was meant for you, Annabeth Chase. But perhaps this is a more fitting punishment after all. You will suffer as I did, with the pain of losing the one you loved.'

Percy stopped convulsing and lay perfectly still on the concrete. A frost of fear spread icy tendrils through Annabeth's veins.

'No!' Without thinking, she spurred the kelpie forward and nudged Percy off the pier, into the water. She prayed it would work—as the son of Poseidon, water rejuvenated Percy, sometimes better than
nectar and ambrosia. At any rate, it was the only thing she had on hand to try. If anything, it should at least slow or dull the effects of Hipponoe's poison, buying him time until she could get help.

And then she turned to Hipponoe. The Nereid seemed resigned to defeat now. Even as Annabeth bore down on her, she smiled in satisfaction.

'Even better, Annabeth Chase. You have hastened your boyfriend's demise. The water will only help the poison spread faster. And I—I will find my Joe Bob now.'

She crumbled into dust beneath the kelpie's hooves.

'No,' Annabeth repeated frantically, hoping that Hipponoe had been lying. At her command, the kelpie dove into the water.

She found Percy easily—there was an unearthly glow around his head that seemed to intensify with every passing second. Annabeth hauled his limp body onto the back of the kelpie and they surfaced together.

'Percy,' she whispered. 'Oh gods, why?' He'd gotten in the way of poison meant for her, and she'd gone and made it worse by shoving him into the water.

But she couldn't collapse in despair now. Percy's breathing was rapid and shallow and his pulse was faint, but he was still hanging on to life. She had to get him back to Camp Jupiter, find a medic… there had to be a way to save him. She wasn't going to let a stupid, bitter Nereid take him from her.

Annabeth wrapped her arms around Percy and tightened her grip on the kelpie's reins.

'Camp Jupiter,' she told it. 'Hurry.'

OoOoO

The guards on duty at the Caldecott Tunnel door just about had a heart attack when Annabeth charged up on a black demon horse with an evil glare.

Or, more accurately, her friend Will did. The other guard, Clovis, was snoozing on duty, and didn't notice until the kelpie snorted in his face and he awoke with a yelp, his droopy, calf-like eyes uncharacteristically wide. Then he nearly had a coronary.

Both boys were on their exchange year from Camp Half-Blood, and Annabeth was glad to see them. Percy definitely needed the gift of healing that Will, the sunny-haired son of Apollo, had inherited. And Clovis might spend most of his time sleeping, but when he did wake up, the son of Hypnos had some pretty useful powers as well.

'Where in Hades did you get that beast?' Will said. 'Uh—it's not actually from the Underworld, is it?'

'No,' said another voice. Lounging by the tunnel entrance was another demigod Annabeth hadn't noticed at first, probably because Nico di Angelo tended to blend neatly into the shadows around him. He also hadn't jumped ten feet into the air upon seeing the kelpie.

'What's wrong with Percy?' he asked.

'Poison,' Annabeth said, fighting to keep her voice steady. 'Will, can you—'

'Yeah. Um, what are you going to do about the horse—?'

In its current form, the kelpie wouldn't fit through the tunnel door, but somehow Annabeth knew
what to do. She jerked twice on its reins and it morphed into a pug with the same evil eyes. The bridle turned into a collar that still extended into its mouth. Annabeth handed the dog to Nico and placed his free hand firmly on the collar.

'Take that to Hazel,' she said, figuring that Nico's sister, a daughter of the Underworld with a fondness for fierce, fast horses, would probably know best what to do with the kelpie. 'Don't let go of the bridle—er, collar.'

While Nico took the pug-kelpie off to Hazel, Will and Clovis lifted Percy between them. Together, they made their way to the infirmary in the legion barracks.

Annabeth clenched her fists as she watched Will assess Percy. At the age of ten, Will had already been Camp Half-Blood's best healer; in the eight years since, his healing magic had grown much more powerful. So when Will's face went pale after he put his hands over Percy, feeling for the damage, Annabeth's heart sank.

'It's his head,' Will said. 'His body's actually fine, but his brain—there's too many toxins. Water hemlock and mercury to start with, and that's a fatal mixture already, but there's other stuff as well that I don't even recognise. Ambrosia and nectar won't be enough. I can't treat this, not without knowing—'

'You have to!'

'I could…' Will rubbed his forehead. 'Clovis, can you—?'

The son of Hypnos nodded and snapped his fingers, murmuring a snatch of song in an ancient tongue. Percy's breathing slowed.

'What did you do?'

'He's in an induced coma,' Will said. His expression was grim. 'It'll buy us some time, but he'll still be brain dead if we don't come up with something.'

'How long do we have?'

'Best guess? Half a day.' Will must have noticed Annabeth's stricken expression, because he added gently, 'It's better than nothing. He would have been gone in five minutes if Clovis hadn't put him to sleep. If I can just figure out what the unknown poisons are, maybe we can come up with a solution —'

'Tartarus,' said a voice from the doorway. Nico stepped into the infirmary. He looked at Annabeth. 'Can't you sense it? The aura around him. He's been poisoned by something from deep in Tartarus. No cure on earth exists for that.'

Annabeth choked back a sob, remembering what Hipponoe had said: *I sourced the most insidious venom, the strongest toxins to create this. There is no earthly cure.* 'No. There has to be a way.'

Will frowned. 'What about the Golden Fleece? Remember when Thalia's tree was poisoned with venom from Tartarus? The Fleece cured that.'

'We could bring it here! But even as she said it, despair hollowed out her insides. The Golden Fleece was on the other side of the country. Even if someone set out with it at this very moment, it wasn't likely to arrive in time.'

'I'm not sure it'll work,' Clovis said. He looked at Will. 'You said it's his brain, right? The mind's a lot
trickier to heal than the body.'

'Unless…' Nico exchanged a significant look with Clovis, who suddenly looked more awake than Annabeth had ever seen him.

'No way,' he said. 'You don't mean…?'

Nico nodded.

'What?' Annabeth asked.

'The Lethe,' Clovis said.

'Seriously?' Will said. 'I've never heard—'

'You're a child of the upper world,' Nico said. 'Underworld magic is different. The Underworld rivers—well, they have some healing properties.'

'Like the Phlegethon,' Annabeth said with a shiver. When she and Percy had been in Tartarus, they'd drunk from the River of Fire. While it had been excruciating, it had also kept them alive.

'Yes,' Nico said. 'The Lethe…well, it's waters specifically target the mind, right? It has to—it cleanses it, wipes away everything, so…'

'You think it could wipe the poison out?' Will asked.

'Nico's right,' Clovis said. 'It's a good idea.'

Annabeth gulped. It made sense that the Lethe could be as powerful as the Phlegethon in healing. But—the Lethe. Percy would…

'Um,' Will said, 'you guys do see the obvious problem with this, don't you?'

Nico and Clovis looked at each other and then at Annabeth, as though leaving the decision to her. Her throat burned when she swallowed, as if she'd ingested a mouthful of Phlegethon water.

The Lethe was where souls went to wipe their memories before rebirth. A single drop could cause severe memory loss. Getting dipped in it…well, Percy had once done that to the Titan Iapetus and made him forget his entire identity.

But they had no other solutions. And Percy was going to die in hours if they didn't come up with anything else.

If this was the only way to save him…well, even if it meant he would forget everything, forget her, she couldn't let him die.

'We have to try,' she said. Her voice sounded hollow in her ears. 'Where are we going to get liquid Lethe, though? Clovis?'

He shook his head. 'I don't have a handy source here. Back in cabin sixteen…well, that's as far away as the Fleece.'

'I can get it,' Nico said. 'I can go to the Underworld. I—it's not as hard for me.'

'Can you get there and back in a few hours?' Annabeth asked.
'Sure,' Nico said. Will narrowed his eyes, but Nico shrugged. 'I'm going alone, it won't take that much energy.'

'Fine,' said Will. 'But be careful.'

'It's the Underworld. I know my way around.' Nico took Will's hand and squeezed it. Then he turned to Annabeth. To her surprise, he put a hand on her shoulder. 'Maybe there's a chance it won't be permanent,' he said. 'Alecto wiped Bianca and my memories in the river of forgetfulness before she took us to the Lotus Casino, but now I remember things from my life before. And—well, Percy told me about Bob.'

Annabeth's chest constricted as it always did when she remembered Bob the Titan, who had died for them in Tartarus. But this time the memory lifted her spirits a little. Bob's memories of his life as Iapetus, before Percy had wiped them, had returned to him eventually, even if he had later chosen to affirm himself as Bob in spite of them.

Nico was right. There was hope.

Annabeth nodded. 'Just save him.'

'That's the plan,' Nico said. And he stepped into the shadow of the door and disappeared into it.
II

NICO

Nico was used to the Underworld. The first time he had entered it had been from the Labyrinth, while running from Camp Half-Blood after his sister Bianca had died. The dark caverns and twisting tunnels had seemed scary to him at the time, but he'd since grown accustomed to navigating his way around them. He knew what paths to take—and more importantly, which to avoid. Even as the son of Hades, there were places in the Underworld where he wasn't meant to go. He'd learned that the hard way.

Over time, he'd also learned of the various entrances from the mortal world: Charon's passage in Los Angeles, Orpheus's door in New York's Central Park, the roving Doors of Death that Thanatos used as his personal gateway. Nico didn't need any of them now, though. Shadow travel was convenient that way. He simply melted into darkness and was transported like a speeding bullet through cold, empty space until he popped out at his destination.

Just one of the perks of being a child of the Underworld.

The only problem was, hitting a precise location in the Underworld was always a tricky business. Although Nico could manage a shadow-jump into the Underworld from anywhere in the upper world, he couldn't always pinpoint where he'd end up when he arrived.

This time, he found himself on the banks of the River Styx. He could hear the deep baritone of Charon the ferryman drifting along upriver, humming that god-awful easy listening music he favoured. The barge was approaching, probably with a full load of newly-dead souls. Nico could feel their presence closing in, clamouring for attention. The recently-deceased tended to be like that: terrified and hungry for reassurance, still clinging to the identities they had held in life. If he listened hard, Nico could sense each one of them—the octogenarian who had passed away in his sleep, the car crash victim whose life support had been turned off, the teenager who had ingested a full bottle of Valium, and many others.

Percy wasn't among them—yet, Nico reminded himself. He turned away from the river and made his way up the shore of black sand, climbing the familiar winding path to the gates of Erebus. The checkpoints were running smoothly today, with the regular lanes moving along almost as quickly as the EZ Death line that went straight to Asphodel. Cerberus gave Nico a hopeful look when he passed through, but Nico shook his head at the enormous, three-headed Rottweiler.

'Not today, old friend,' he said. 'I'm in a hurry.'
He sped up through the Fields of Asphodel, which was easy since the vacuous, chittering spirits there parted before him as always. He usually took the path straight to his father's palace on the south-eastern edge, but this time he turned off towards the left, cutting a trail between the Fields of Punishment and the gated community of Elysium.

The first time he'd ever visited the River Lethe, he'd trudged all the way through the Fields of Punishment to where it was a rushing river gorge cutting through the upper rim of his father's kingdom. Fortunately, he knew enough of the Underworld geography now that he could take a more direct route to where the Lethe snaked down past the Cave of Hypnos to flow more sluggishly across the outskirts of Elysium. It would probably have been a nicer stroll through Elysium to get here, but Nico didn't have time to submit to the stringent security checks at the gates. Even the son of Hades was subject to a thorough frisking at the gates of the most secure community in the Underworld.

Near the river's source in the volcanic mountains, the Lethe was a cascade of violent black water bubbling up from Tartarus, but here on the lower marshes, its colour lightened considerably to a dull grey. Outside the eastern gate of Elysium, a group of souls formed a line along the river to get their drink before reincarnation. One by one they knelt on the river bank and plunged their heads into the lazy river. When they emerged, their ghostly faces looked perfectly serene. The cleansed spirits flickered in the dim light of the Underworld caverns and then disappeared, presumably sent to be reborn into their new mortal lives.

Nico picked a spot a short way upriver from the queueing souls. He approached the banks and then he realised the snag in his plan. He had no jug or goblet or canister with him. In his haste to get here, he had completely forgotten about how he was going to transport the stuff back to the mortal world.

He let out a groan. It seemed he would have to visit his father's palace after all. Did his father even have containers in his palace? Nico wasn't sure. For obvious reasons, he never actually ate or drank anything when he visited.

Nico was about to turn and follow the path back to the palace when a voice hailed him.

'Di Angelo!'

He spun around. A girl with short, spiky black hair and a glowing silver bow slung over her back was walking up to him. There was a delicate silver circlet on her head that clashed badly with the rest of her outfit: a leather jacket adorned with rock band buttons, frayed black jeans, heavy boots, and a black t-shirt with the outline of a deer in the centre. She looked around his age—fifteen or sixteen—but Nico knew she was in fact much older than that. Thalia, the daughter of Zeus, had been that age when he'd first met her five years ago.

In her hands, she carried a bronze stamnos—a squat, circular Greek jar with two stubby handles high up on its sides. It was about half a foot in diameter and just as tall.

'Needing one of these?' said Thalia.

'What are you doing here?'

Thalia raised an eyebrow. 'Annabeth sent an Iris-message. I came to help.'

Nico scowled. 'I don't need help,' he muttered, even though her appearance with the stamnos was fortuitous. He had nothing specifically against Thalia—he didn't even know her all that well—but she led the Hunters of Artemis. He still found it hard not to hold a grudge against the band of immortal girls who had stolen his sister from him and then gotten her killed.
Yeah, okay, so it had been five years ago. But he was a son of Hades. Bearing grudges was his birthright.

'Aren't you forbidden to help boys, anyway?'

Thalia set the stamnos on the bank. 'Percy's a special case,' she admitted. 'Even Artemis has a soft spot for him. And I can see just how much help you don't need,' she added dryly. 'I'm sure your bare hands would have been the perfect vessel to bring back some liquid Lethe. Super plan, down to the part where you'd definitely remember where you wanted to bring it.'

Nico ignored her sarcasm. 'How did you get here anyway?'

'You think you're the only one who knows about the door in Central Park? And I've been to the Underworld before, you know. It's not even my first time at the Lethe.'

Nico had almost forgotten that Thalia had been with him and Percy on that quest. They'd fought a Titan several miles upriver from this spot and ended up wiping his memories in the Lethe.

Maybe Thalia was thinking about that, too, because she asked, quietly, 'Are you sure about this, Nico?'

'No,' he admitted. 'But it's the only answer I have.'

'Well, let's get ourselves some Lethe water, then.'

Thalia took one handle of the stamnos and motioned for Nico to take the other. Nico was a bit disgruntled at how bossy she was, but it also reminded him slightly of Bianca. Together, they picked up the stamnos and tilted it to scoop up some river water.

'Just what do the two of you think you're doing?'

Nico and Thalia almost dropped the stamnos. They staggered back from the river bank as the ghostly form of a svelte young woman rose out of the water and hovered inches above its surface.

Nico thought at first she was an Underworld soul, one of the group from Elysium heading for rebirth, but she grew more solid as she surveyed them with her arms crossed. Her skin was milky white, which made her look like a marble statue not unlike the sculptures that sprung up every ten feet along the main avenue of New Rome. Except that the contours of her body remained undefined, as if she hadn't finished forming from smoke. Her black dress rippled like waves were moving across its folds. Dark, misty images flashed across the fabric and were absorbed into the creases. Somehow, Nico knew they were all memories, millions of them submerging into the water.

'You're—'

'The goddess Lethe, of course,' she said, looking put out. 'You're taking my waters and you don't even think to ask?'

'We didn't think—' Thalia stammered. 'I mean, we didn't know you—'

'Everyone forgets about me!' Lethe pouted. 'Just because I'm not as fiery as Phlegethon, or as whiny as Cocytus. Is that why? I'm just as powerful as them! More, even—none of them have the power to cleanse the mind of everything.'

'Um, maybe it's because you're the river of forgetfulness,' Thalia ventured. 'That might be why people—er—forget.'
Lethe nodded. 'I am, aren't I?' She trailed the hazy edge of her dress along the water's surface. When she looked up again, her brow was furrowed. 'What was I saying again?'

'You were giving us some water,' Nico said quickly.

Lethe stared at the stamnos. 'Was I?'

'Sure you were!' Thalia said. 'We're just going to get it and be on our way…'

'I don't know,' said Lethe. 'That's high irregular. In fact, I think drinks have to be consumed in-house. I don't do to-go. At least,' she pondered this for a while, 'I don't think I do?'

'Oh, but it'd be great for business,' Thalia said. 'I mean, all the best restaurants have take-away. How else would you make sure people remember you if they don't get to try your products?'

Lethe tapped her chin. 'It's true, I hardly get up to the mortal world. Acheron totally has a monopoly on those streams…and really, I am more powerful, you know. What's Acheron got? Only pain. That's so overdone. Tell me, what other rivers have the power to erase everything? To cleanse the mind and soul completely? Pain, suffering, despair—bah! I can erase all of that!'

Nico leaned forward eagerly. 'Can you heal the mind, then? I mean, if your waters can take away pain and suffering…'

'Of course! What bit of cleansing the mind don't you understand?'

Nico looked at Thalia. This seemed like confirmation that they had hit on the right solution. All they needed now was to actually get the water.

'Wait.' Lethe looked at Nico suspiciously. 'You've been here before, haven't you? You've tried the Lethe treatment?'

'Um, sort of,' Thalia said. 'We've been here. But you didn't appear to us. And we definitely didn't touch the water.'

'Well, maybe not you,' Lethe said. 'But you.' She looked directly at Nico and frowned. 'Ugh, why can't I remember?' She stamped her foot. Nico and Thalia had to jump back to avoid being splashed. 'Hmph. Well, maybe I can't remember, but I can feel it.' She sniffed at Nico. 'You have my mark. The Curse of Lethe.'

'Nico, what's she talking about?'

'It was…before,' Nico muttered. 'Before the Lotus Casino. My father had Bianca and me dunked in the Lethe after our mom died.'

Thalia looked confused. 'But Bianca…she remembered stuff—'

Lethe interrupted. 'I knew it! Though I suppose if you only got dunked…it's not as effective if you don't actually drink, you know. Oh, the memory loss is powerful, of course, but the mind isn't cleaned out. The memories aren't actually dissolved. They can come back, given the right…well, prodding, I suppose.' Lethe scratched her head. 'Hmm. Why am I telling you this again?'

The conversation was making Nico's head spin a little. 'Never mind why. You were saying—it's different if you drink?'

'Well, yes. Souls have to drink. That's the rule—no drink, no rebirth. Can't have people bringing any
part of their old lives with them, after all. Drinking cleanses everything: mind and soul. Memories aren't just in the mind, after all. The most important ones, they live in the soul. And I have the power to absorb that—dissolve the core of someone's identity.'

'Is it all in the water, then?' Thalia asked, looking into the murky depths of the river with interest. 'Is that how you get it back?'

Lethe threw her an irritated glance. 'Haven't you been listening, girl? If you drink, there's no getting them back. My waters flow all the way to Tartarus, and beyond that, into the depths of Chaos. That's where everything that is lost goes, in the end. And good luck retrieving anything from that pit.'

'But if you don't drink—say, you just…took a dip,' Nico pressed.

'Ah, like you did, I suppose? You'll still lose your memories. But like I said…hm, or did I? Anyway, you'd forget everything, but your soul would be intact. You could restore your memories, but it's extremely hard.'

'But not impossible,' Thalia said, looking relieved. 'That's great.'

'Not if he has to drink the water to be cured,' Nico reminded her.

'So…what was it you wanted again? Are you after getting your memory back? There's someone else who does that…starts with an "M"…' Lethe rolled her eyes Olympus-ward and stamped her foot again. 'Ugh, why can't I remember?'

'Mnemosyne?' Thalia supplied.

'Maybe. Why do you ask, anyway?'

This conversation was going round in circles. Nico cut in. 'Look, we just need to fill this jar so we can save a life. That okay with you?'

Lethe shrugged. 'Why didn't you say so in the first place?'

She held out her hands for the stamnos. Thalia looked like she was trying not to roll her eyes as they hefted the jar into Lethe's arms.

The murky grey water turned milky white when Lethe scooped it up. She set the filled stamnos down on the river bank. Thalia produced a lid from her pocket and capped it. Nico plucked a leaf from a random plant and carefully wiped off the stray droplets rolling down the side of the jar.

'Easy peasy,' Lethe said. 'Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to…hm, I've forgotten.'

Nico and Thalia didn't wait for her to continue. Lifting the stamnos between them, they hurried off before Lethe could start questioning them again.

'Thanks for the jar,' Nico said when they reached the main path, which was lined with towering oaks that cast long shadows across the ground. One thing about the Underworld—there was never a shortage of shadows. 'I'm going to shadow travel back, so—'

'Can you take me along?' Thalia asked.

Nico had kind of imagined Thalia would leave the same way she'd come, probably going back to New York or wherever the Hunters were right now. He didn't really know what the rules were with them. He always avoided anything to do with the whole group as much as possible.
But Thalia was Percy's friend, too.

'Hold the jar,' he told her. 'Make sure that lid's really tight.'

He took her arm and they slipped into darkness.

OoOoO

Nico stumbled when he landed himself and Thalia back in the infirmary of Camp Jupiter. The *stamnmos* landed on the ground with a loud thud, but fortunately Thalia's grip on the lid was firm. The liquid Lethe stayed safely inside.

'Huh—what—I'm awake, sir!' Clovis, who must have been snoozing again, leapt out of his chair and smacked his head against the elbow of a tall, broad-shouldered Chinese dude.

In the time Nico had been gone, two more demigods had joined the worried circle around Percy, making the infirmary seem a lot more crowded. Or maybe it was just that one of them was Frank Zhang, the bulky Praetor of the Twelfth Legion, who was big enough for two people.

The other was Nico's sister Hazel, who must have sorted out the shape-shifting demon horse that Annabeth had handed off to them. She and Frank were holding hands—hers was so tiny, it disappeared completely in his grasp.

Thalia went straight to Annabeth and hugged her tightly. Annabeth returned the hug in a distracted sort of way. She had been sitting by Percy's bedside with a book open in her lap, gently stroking his hair. There were tear streaks on her cheeks that she hadn't bothered to wipe off. Nico wasn't sure she was even aware of them.

Will caught Nico's eye and mouthed, *Gatorade.*

*I'm fine,* Nico mouthed back, although his legs felt a little shaky after his second shadow travel.

Will gave him a stern look and jerked his head towards a side table where he'd already laid out the sports drink.

Nico rolled his eyes, but a secret part of him sort of enjoyed Will's fussing. Not that he'd ever admit it.

At least his boyfriend wasn't being obtrusive about it. Nico drank the Gatorade and felt the energy trickle back into his limbs.

'How does this go, then?' Hazel asked. She eyed the *stamnmos* warily, as if it were another demon horse that might change shape and start spewing its contents at them. 'He has to drink it?'

Thalia looked at Annabeth sadly. 'The healing power comes from drinking. But the memory loss is irreversible.'

'Actually,' Will gestured at the book on Annabeth's lap, 'we were doing some research while you guys were gone.'

Annabeth held up the book and nodded. 'I asked Reyna and she found me this from the Senate library. Turns out the Lethe has been used in potions before: the nepenthe.'

'The drug of forgetfulness,' Will translated. 'Helen of Troy gave it to Odysseus's son to ease his suffering. We just need to add a drop of Lethe to a cup of nectar.'
Hazel looked at them dubiously. 'How is that different? It's still the Lethe. Does diluting it even help?'

'And will it be strong enough?' Frank added. 'I mean, that's a pretty big nectar to Lethe ratio. How much Lethe does he actually have to ingest? There's probably a limit to how much nectar he can take, right?'

'I don't know,' said Annabeth. 'But the records mention that the drinkers had temporary memory loss after drinking. We thought…well, we hoped it would at least give him a chance.'

'A chance is better than nothing,' Thalia said firmly.

Will nodded. 'I think our best shot is to start with the base recipe and monitor him. I can slowly up the concentration of Lethe if it doesn't seem to be working.'

'Can he even drink? Or do you have to, like, IV-it into him?' Frank asked.

They all looked at Percy's comatose form. Will frowned and scratched his head.

'IV is probably the way to go,' he admitted. 'Do you guys have anything for that set up?'

Frank got to his feet. 'The university will have something. I'll go.'

'Hurry back,' Will warned. 'I feel…well, I don't think he has much time.' He gave Nico a significant look.

Nico knew what he meant. He'd always been able to sense when death was imminent, and he could feel that aura thickening around Percy, a cloying layer of smog that was almost tangible. Soon it would start to vibrate with the buzz that alerted the god of death that there was a soul to be collected. Nico didn't think Will had the same ability, but he was probably getting a corresponding message through his healer senses.

Hazel put her hand on Frank's arm. 'Let me go, then,' she said. 'I'll be faster.'

Nico raised an eyebrow when he realised what she was intending to do. 'Are you sure? I could—'

Will shot him a look that said don't even think about it.

'I've practised a couple of times,' Hazel said. 'Besides, it's just across the Field of Mars.'

She took a deep breath and slipped into the shadow of the infirmary door. Watching his sister disappear was disconcerting. Did Nico look like that too when he shadow-travelled—just melting into nothingness? No wonder Will always worried about him.

Annabeth made a strangled noise like a half-stifled sob and took Percy's hand in hers. Thalia patted her on the back.

'It'll be okay,' she said. 'We'll get him back and then you can kill him.'

Annabeth's sob turned into a slightly hysterical laugh. She squared her shoulders and looked at the stamnos. 'We should—we should brew the nepenthe.'

Will was already on it, pulling nectar from the cupboards and carefully measuring out a cup. He brought out a plastic dropper and hesitated. 'We'll need to add a drop of Lethe for now, but someone's going to have to add more at intervals.'
Annabeth uncovered the *stamnos*. Although her face was resolute, her expression carefully controlled, her hands were shaking so badly Nico thought for sure she would just end up spilling liquid Lethe all over herself.

Clovis, who had surprisingly not dozed off again, grabbed her wrist.

'I'll do it. I'm more familiar with the stuff than all of you. Plus…well, I spend most of my time in dreamland, anyway.' He shrugged. 'There's not much for me to forget.'

Clovis dipped the dropper into the *stamnos* and came up with it full of milky Lethe. With a steady hand, he added precisely one drop to the cup of nectar. The golden liquid barely changed shade. Nico thought it looked a little paler, but only just.

Hazel sprung out of the shadow of the *stamnos* right between Will and Clovis. The latter jumped and nearly knocked the whole jug over.

'Geez, just startle us into spilling mind-wiping water everywhere, why don't you?' Thalia sniped.

'Sorry!' Hazel gasped. She held out a rectangular kit to Will, who took it and began assembling the IV bag and needles inside. Hazel lurched away unsteadily. Frank caught her around the waist.

'You okay?'

'Sure. Piece of cake,' Hazel said breathlessly.

Nico held out the Gatorade. She gave him a rueful smile.

'You did fine,' Nico reassured her.

'Clovis,' Will said, 'I'm going to hook Percy up now. I'll need you to add a drop when I say so.'

'Gotcha.' Clovis squared his shoulders and held the dropper like it was a gun he was preparing to shoot.

They all held their breaths as Will inserted the needle into Percy's arm. The pale gold nepenthe ran through the tubes, travelling up his veins.

Nothing seemed to happen.

'Add a drop,' Will said.

Bit by bit, Clovis added Lethe to the potion, which turned gradually milkier. The room was so silent, Nico could practically hear the flow of nepenthe into Percy's veins. He wasn't sure what the Lethe-to-nectar ratio was at this point. Half the cup was already gone.

And then he sensed it.

There was no visible change. Percy's face remained peaceful and blank. His body was still. But Nico felt the sense of imminent death back off a bit.

'It's working,' he said.

The room seemed to let out a collective breath.

'Should we keep this dose, then?' Will asked.
Nico shook his head, though he couldn't say how he knew this. 'Keep going,' he told Clovis.

Clovis refilled the dropper and continued to add Lethe to the nepenthe.

Will put his hands out in front of him, palms towards Percy. 'That's amazing,' he murmured. 'I've never seen anything like it.'

With only a quarter cup left to go, the physical changes began to be visible. Percy's pallor faded. His face twitched. The corners of his mouth quirked upwards and then his lips parted and he drew in a deep, shaky breath like he was cleansing his lungs.

Nico grinned. This was really working.

Then it started to go wrong. The colour in Percy's cheeks, which had come back with the nepenthe treatment, began to fade again. And it wasn't just his face. His entire form seemed to be fading, as though something was leeching his essence away.

'Stop!' Will told Clovis, who withdrew the dropper so quickly, it slipped from his fingers and fell into the *stamnos*.

It was too late, though. Percy's body became translucent and insubstantial, just like a ghost.

Nico shuddered. A memory flitted into his mind, of another demigod whose physical body had turned to smoke. Whose body *Nico* had converted into smoke.

But this wasn't quite like Bryce Lawrence, the treacherous Roman demigod whom Nico had ghostified during the Giant War. Bryce had gone black and smoky and sunk straight into the earth. Percy was dissolving into air itself. It was clearly a different thing. Yet Nico felt certain he'd seen it happen before.

The controlled stoicism on Annabeth's face melted into horror. She lunged forward to grab Percy, but her fingers swiped straight through him as his body evaporated completely.

Annabeth spun round to face Nico. 'Where did he go?' she shrieked. 'What happened to him?'

Nico rubbed his forehead guiltily. He'd told Clovis to keep going. But he still felt certain it was the right call. The veil of death wouldn't have lifted otherwise. This was something else, something they hadn't foreseen…

'I don't know…' He knit his eyebrows, trying to send his senses underground, but it was just as he'd ascertained before. Death no longer hovered over Percy. He wasn't in the Underworld.

Then he thought of the souls he had seen on the banks of the Lethe, disappearing after they drank. Ghosts, dissolving into their newborn lives. He thought of Bianca, how he'd lost any ability to track her once she'd chosen that path.

Oh, Hades.

'What?' Annabeth said, seeing the realisation dawning on his face. 'You *do* know.'

'I think…' Nico gulped. He had to force himself to meet her desperate, stormy eyes. 'I think Percy's been reborn.'
The *nepenthe* is referenced in the Odyssey as a potion that is supposed to quell all sorrows with forgetfulness. But the actual recipe is my own interpretation, of course!
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Percy struggles to figure out what's going on, where he is, and most importantly, who he is.

Chapter Notes

This is the chapter that refused to end (and is partly responsible for how long the story became). It started in my outline as a single chapter that morphed into three, and then the first of those became another three ... yeah. Hopefully the expansion was worth it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

III
PERCY

The first thing he knew was pain.

He wasn't sure which was worse: the suffocating tightness, like someone was attempting to squeeze him into a body that was way too small, or the ripping sensation, as though he was being peeled out of his own skin. He felt like a stubborn zit someone was pinching, trying to pop it while simultaneously scratching it apart.

The pain intensified with every passing second.

He was going to die; he was sure of it. He just didn't know if it would be from being crushed or torn apart.

'Just what do you think you're doing?' The shrill voice cut sharply across his fractured consciousness.

Everything halted. The pain didn't exactly recede, but it stopped increasing, and that was respite enough.

'Hey, Eileithyia,' rumbled a second voice. 'What's up? How's the delivery going?'

'The delivery,' hissed Eileithyia, 'is getting messed up because of you.'

'What do you mean? I'm just doing my job, like always.'

A quick flare of pain burst across his senses, red-hot and sudden, like a determined shove from a razor-clawed hand.

'Stop that!'

The pressure around him loosened slightly as the giant hand trying to force him into a too-tiny space relaxed its grip. His skin felt less like an exposed blister. He managed to draw one shaky, shuddering
breath into lungs that stubbornly resisted expansion. The flow of air through his trachea stung like it was scraping against a raw wound. Red spots danced before his eyes. Through them, he could make out two vague figures: a pair of heads leaning over him.

He got the impression that the two were arguing over him and his life hung in the balance between them.

He had no idea who they were—heck, he didn't even have a clue who he was, though he hoped that was because his head was too clouded with pain at the moment—but he hoped the girl, Eileithyia, would win, if only because his agony abated when she told the other guy to back off.

'You're not putting this soul into my birth, Attis,' Eileithyia said crossly. 'He's not clean!'

He blinked. Was she talking about him? What did she mean, clean?

'Of course it's clean,' Attis protested. 'Straight from Lethe—'

Eileithyia snorted. 'Don't pretend you're not having trouble with the insertion. He's resisting—oh yes, I can tell it's a he. You didn't do your work properly, Attis.'

'Hey, don't look at me! You know full well that I don't do the cleaning. I just bring 'em to you. S'not my fault if someone screwed up down there. Bet it was Lethe. You know how forgetful she is.'

'I don't care who screwed up. Take him back to the Underworld.'

The forms of the two speakers grew clearer. Eileithyia, a round, matronly-looking woman, had her hands-on her hips as she faced down Attis, a skinny dude whose face was dominated by a curly moustache. Nothing about their conversation made any sense, though. Lethe? The Underworld? Was he supposed to know what they were? He had a feeling he ought to, but the words were practically gibberish to him.

At least the paradoxical pain of being simultaneously squashed and torn in half was definitely easing up.

'Oh come on, can't you just let it be? I don't wanna mess up my schedule. I've got a long list of souls waiting, you know. Rebirth's the new "in" thing down under.'

Eileithyia sniffed. 'That's not my problem. I've got my reputation to keep as the goddess of childbirth.'

Rebirth, he thought with a stab of panic. Did that mean he was dead, then? Dead and about to be reincarnated?

Except Eileithyia was refusing to allow it, so, what—was he going to go back to being dead? And why did it have to hurt so much? Wasn't the point of death that everything was supposed to stop, pain included?

Unless this was his eternal punishment or something. Oh crap.

'...and I'm not going to be held responsible for a birth with a spirit that's still hanging on to who he is,' Eileithyia continued. 'I mean, I can see his identity, clear as Hemera. It's still written on him! Are you sure he was even dead to begin with?'

Attis sighed. 'Look, I don't know. I just take the spirits. Fine. So you won't take him. What am I gonna do, then?' He sounded defeated.
Eileithyia's tone softened. 'Okay, look, I have to finish this delivery first. Poor woman's been labouring long enough. But I'll think of something. Just hang on—and don't even think of trying to sneak this soul past me!'

She vanished. His pain dissipated like she'd taken it away with her. He no longer felt like he was being impossibly compacted or quartered. There was an odd lightness instead, like he was floating, or maybe made of mist.

Attis sat on the ground next to him and rubbed a weary hand over his face.

"'Be the god of rebirth and reincarnations,'" he muttered darkly. '"It'll be fun," they said. "Magical." Hmph. It's all fun and games until somebody screws up a soul wash.'

There were two soft pops. Eileithyia reappeared, accompanied by a lean, well-built man with curly salt-and-pepper hair.

'Sure,' the new guy said to her, 'I owe you for helping out with Melissa.'

Attis sprung to his feet. 'Lord Hermes!'

'Attis is in a bit of a bind,' Eileithyia explained. 'He's made a mistake.'

'I didn't make the mistake!'

'He tried to rebirth a soul that hasn't been cleansed of his identity,' Eileithyia continued smoothly, as though Attis hadn't spoken. 'I thought since you're an Underworld guide sometimes—'

Hermes snorted. 'You need to keep up with the times, Ellie. I haven't done it in millennia. You realise Thanatos is probably better suited to dealing with something like this? Collecting souls is his business now, after all.'

Eileithyia pouted. 'Don't be like that. You know I don't get along with old Death.'

'Plus he's so unbearably smug all the time,' Attis muttered. 'Just 'cos he got the good looks in the family…'

'True, that,' Hermes said. 'So—er, this spirit here—'

'Attis didn't wipe his slate clean. The identity's faded, sure, but I can still read who he was—who he is. Perseus Jackson.'

Perseus? Was that his name?

If it were, surely he should feel some recognition, some connection to it. He realised with a panic that he was still drawing a blank on who he was.

'How many times do I have to tell you,' Attis snapped, 'I don't do the washing—'

'Wait,' Hermes cut in. 'Did you say Perseus? As in Percy Jackson?'

'Uh huh.' Eileithyia squinted at him. He could see her eyes, wide and round and a piercing blue-grey. It occurred to him suddenly that he wasn't even sure what form he had for her to examine. His body still felt smoky and insubstantial, as ghostly as the spirit they kept calling him. But it was unmistakably him they were discussing.

Sure, why not? It wasn't like any other name was coming forth to claim him.

Hermes's handsome face went pale. 'He's not supposed to be dead. Or did I miss something?'

Well, that was a relief. Now if they could just get to the part where he could get back to the life he was supposed to have—preferably one where he actually knew who he was—that would be great.

'That's what I told Attis! He's not a reborn soul!'

'You did not say that. You're just as clueless about what went wrong.'

'At least I guessed that—'

'Can it, you two,' Hermes said sharply. Eileithyia and Attis fell silent as though he'd sewn their mouths shut. 'We have a serious problem.'

There was a long silence. Then Attis said timidly, 'Can't you fix it, Lord Hermes?'

'I wish I could.' Hermes's voice was pained. 'There are rules—limits to our interference. But maybe…if I hide him well enough… Yeah, I think I could sneak past Dad. First, though…'

A light, feathery touch flitted over Percy's eyes. They shut, and his world went black.

OoOoO

The darkness was heavy and sticky, like it was made of cloying black sludge. It smelt like burnt sugar and smoking rubber. Hot, oozing tendrils curled around him in a viscous embrace even though he didn't seem to have a physical form for them to encircle.

In the blackness, someone laughed, a deep rumble that seemed to shake all around him.

'Who's there?' Percy demanded. His formless fingers opened and closed compulsively, searching for a handle to grip. 'Show yourself!'

'But I am everywhere.' He felt rather than heard the voice reverberating in every atom of his being. 'I am all things and everything.'

'Who are you?'

'I think the real question is, who are you?'

Percy hated to admit it, but the voice was right. He didn't know who he was. Heck, he wasn't even certain about his own name.

Laughter again. The solid black around him lightened to a smoky grey. Wispy clouds of white swirled past him. He caught glimpses inside them here and there: faces, places, all moving too fast for him to get a clear look. Did they belong to him? Were they the memories that eluded him?

Percy tried to reach out and grab hold of one, but his arms were as insubstantial as the images. The darkness thickened again.

'I am where all that is lost resides. Everything begins and ends…in chaos. Come, Perseus Jackson. Come and I will swallow you, too.'

Percy stumbled back. His foot met a ledge, and then he was falling through endless darkness as taunting laughter echoed in his head.
Then he felt a tug. Like a string connected to his abdomen, it pulled him up through the small of his back. He stopped falling and floated instead, drifting through space.

He heard a girl's voice, thick and husky, cracking with emotion but filled with determination all the same: 'I didn't give up on him then and I won't now!' It wrapped around him and he imagined it as the cord holding him fast, drawing him out of the darkness.

Someone was looking for him. All he had to do was find her.

His mind remained a complete blank, so he focused on the echo of her voice, trying to soak it into his skin.

The words that came to him seemed to travel up through the nerves of his spinal cord. They weren't quite a thought, more a sensation, the last thing to touch him before unconsciousness overtook him.

But they made no sense at all.

*Princess curls.*

OoOoO


Percy's head hurt.

He opened his eyes groggily. He was in the back of a truck, speeding along under an open sky. The sun glared down so intensely that he had to squint against the brightness. Stacked around him were crates of different sizes—some wooden, some metal, others made of a curvy white material that he really hoped wasn't bones. A few of them thumped threateningly at intervals, making him wonder just what was in there. The crates had labels painted on them, but the alphabets swam before his eyes so that he couldn't read what the contents were. The few he managed to make out didn't put him at ease: *DANGER, THIS SIDE UP, MAY EXPLODE.*

What was this, some smuggling operation?

In the cab up front, he could hear the driver talking on the phone as he drove.

'Yeah, I've got him in back—of course he's safe enough back there! Look, I can't very well disguise him as cargo if he's sitting up front with me, can I?'

A raspy, reptilian voice interrupted the driver, although Percy couldn't see anyone else in the cab: 'Your brother's on line omicron.'

The driver must have switched lines, because he growled into the phone, 'What do you want?'

There was a pause as he listened to the new caller on the other end. Then—'Great Zeus, Ares, I'm taking care of an important delivery—wow. Blackmail, really?' The driver threw a quick, furtive glance towards the back of the truck, giving Percy a glimpse of his slyly handsome face. It was Hermes, the guy from his dream. The one who'd called him *Percy Jackson.*

And from the sound of things, whatever Percy was doing in the back of his truck, it didn't sound legal.

'Oh, all right. You're lucky Phoenix is en route.' The truck made a sharp left and Percy swayed right, bumping painfully into the skeletal crate. Something inside whined. He quickly pushed himself away
A shadow fell over him and he looked up. He blinked in amazement. Where a moment ago there had been open skies and desert terrain, there was now a landscape of haphazardly-spaced buildings. Some were low, flat structures, others towered to skyscraper height.

How had they gotten into the middle of a city so quickly?

He crawled to the side of the truck to get a better look at his surroundings. They passed a tall beige stone building, a bunch of skyscrapers with mirror-like walls that reflected the cloudless blue sky, then turned down a boulevard lined with palm trees. At the next junction, Hermes took a sudden right and braked hard to avoid slamming into an illegally parked van on the roadside. Thrown off balance, Percy tipped over the side of the truck.

He toppled out onto the asphalt, slamming his head hard against a sign post. His vision exploded into stars. By the time it cleared enough for him to get his bearings, the truck was already moving off, swerving out from behind the double-parked van.

'Hey, wait!' Percy croaked. Maybe it wasn't the smartest idea to call after someone who could have been kidnapping him, for all he knew. But Hermes might be the only person who could offer him an explanation as to who he was and what he was doing here.

Unfortunately, the truck zoomed off with Hermes oblivious to the fact that he'd just lost his cargo.

Percy groaned and sat up, trying to make sense of his surroundings. The building on the opposite side of the street looked like an ancient temple, with a set of stone steps leading up to a doorway framed with two round columns on either side, and a triangular roof. Inscribed in the archway over the doors were the words *DUMMIES TARTS AND SEANCES*.

He frowned, sure that couldn't be right. After squinting at it for a minute, he decided it probably said *DOMESTIC ARTS AND SCIENCES*. Some kind of school, maybe.

The sidewalks were teeming with people—probably students, judging from the books they were toting around—but none of them paid him any attention. It was like they'd completely missed the fact that a guy had just fallen out of a moving vehicle right in front of them. In fact, the eyes of the nearest passers-by skipped over him as if he wasn't there.

Disconcerted, Percy got up and headed down the street. He wasn't sure where he was going, only that moving felt better than sitting invisible on the sidewalk with no memory and no plan.

The air in the city was dry and scorching. Heat radiated off the concrete around him, giving him the sensation of being baked in an oven. He hadn't gone five minutes down the street before his throat begged for an icy can of soda.

'You lost, sugar?'

Finally, someone had noticed him. He turned around gratefully and his jaw dropped when he saw who was addressing him.

Sashaying out of a side alley, her hips swaying sensually, was a drop-dead gorgeous redhead with caramel-coloured skin. She gave him a coy smile and beckoned him closer.

Goosebumps erupted along his arms. A shiver ran down his back in spite of the heat. Percy swallowed hard. 'I, um—'
Suddenly, the woman was right in front of him, so close he could smell her thick perfume: a strange combination of vanilla and freshly mown grass. The heat must be addling his brain. He had to have spaced out momentarily—there was no way she could have moved that quickly.

'Um,' he said again. He swayed a little, suddenly dizzy. The woman's face swam before him. She caught him as he collapsed, finally overcome by the heat.

'Well, now,' she cooed, 'isn't this my lucky day? Aren't you a gift from the gods, sugar? Weak, lost, and alone!'

'There you are, Dilys!' Another female voice rang out. 'And you've found us a man…excellent!'

'Shove off, Marcy. He appeared to me. I call dibs!'

'Oh no, you called dibs on the last one—I get to kill this one!'

Panic flooded through him. Were these ladies, like, literal man-eaters? He tried to crawl away from Dilys, but his limbs felt like jelly. His vision was completely blurry. Sun spots popped before his eyes.

'No! Stop it, both of you. I sense something special about this one. What if he's the one—'

'Enough about the one,' snapped Dilys. 'You lost us our last two victims with your stupid gamble. We don't even know if that old myth is real.'

'And I'm hungry,' Marcy complained. 'We haven't had a man in weeks.'

'I said no!'

'Who made you the boss?'

There was a loud, screeching clang, like the clash of two steel blades. A metallic ripping noise followed, like a machine being torn apart. The air filled with the tang of rust and sulphur. In a few short seconds, the arguing ceased, leaving only the sound of someone panting heavily, as though they had just emerged from a rough fistfight.

A shadow loomed over him. Outlined against the bright desert sun, it looked like a monster with ferocious fangs and misshapen legs. Then he blinked and it resolved into the vague form of a slender girl.

'Hey,' she said, holding her hand out to him. 'Thank Hecate I found you.'

Percy let her pull him to his feet. She handed him a bottle of water, which he downed gratefully. A million questions flew through his mind: What just happened? Where am I? Who are you? Do you know me? But the one that actually came out of his mouth was, 'Who am I?'

A strange flurry of emotions danced through the girl's eyes, which seemed to change colour with her expressions. For a second, Percy even imagined that they glowed red, but he blinked again and it was gone.

It was probably a trick of the light. Or some leftover hallucinatory effect from all the weird dreams he'd been having. If he closed his eyes, he could still see red spots dancing behind his eyelids.

She pursed her lips at last and said, 'Let's not talk about it in the open. Come on.'

He followed the girl through dusty streets, past more towering buildings, palm trees, car parks, and
through a fenced park. Sweat trickled down his forehead as the sun beat down on them. As they walked (or in his case, limped), he tried to place his surroundings. Did he know this city?

The best answer he could come up with was *maybe*. The feel of the dry air tugged at the corners of his brain, but he couldn't identify any of the places he was seeing.

They finally arrived at a run-down building made of red brick. They climbed five flights of steps to the top floor, where there was only one door. His new companion unlocked it and ushered him in.

'Okay,' she said, bolting the door behind her. 'You'll be safe here.'

'Er, thanks, I guess?'

He looked around. It was one of those studio apartments: a single room with only one partition for a bathroom. The walls were a drab grey. The only splash of colour in the room came from a set of velvety curtains drawn across a tiny square of a window. They were a deep red that gave the place a slightly sinister glow when backlit by the sun.

The room was probably decent-sized, but Percy couldn't help thinking of it as cramped when it had a queen bed, dresser, closet, couch, and coffee table, as well as a kitchenette with a dining table all squeezed inside. Add to that a weird collection of shiny prosthetic limbs lying scattered about and there was hardly space to swing a club.

Something about that seemed familiar.

Well, maybe not the prosthetics. He turned to the girl, wondering if she was maybe a medical student or something, and found her studying him intently.

'What?' he asked.

She waved her hand in front of her face like she was fanning herself. A wave of vertigo overtook Percy without warning. The room tilted alarmingly. The air thinned like it was being vacuumed out. He lurched forward and she caught him.

'Perseus!' she said in alarm.

*She knows me,* he thought hazily.

Then the room righted itself again, but he had the strangest feeling that his surroundings had been completely replaced, even though it was still the same room with the cluttered furniture and weird fake-body-part décor.

He concentrated on the girl. Did she look different? Her eyes were a warm, honeyed amber. Her thick brown hair fell about her shoulders in curly ringlets that gave her a regal appearance.

*Princess curls.*

A shiver ran along his spine and lodged itself in the small of his back.

'I know you, don't I?' he ventured.

A slow, hopeful smile spread across her face. She nodded encouragingly.

Her name was on the tip of his tongue now. He scrunched his eyebrows, thinking so hard it felt like an army of woodpeckers was trying to drill information into the inside of his skull. Were memories supposed to feel like this?
In contrast to the dreams he'd had, the thoughts slipping into his head were devoid of any sort of emotional attachment, like a list of plain facts he might have memorised from a school book about some boring historical figure's life: Perseus Jackson, age 20, lived in Phoenix, Arizona.

Shouldn't he feel some sort of connection to his name, his life? He wasn't entirely certain what some of the things he was now remembering even meant. He was attacked by dangerous demigods in an alleyway and rescued by—

'Beth?' The name rolled off his tongue. He knew it was quite right, though.

The girl's smile faltered. 'Bella,' she corrected him. 'I'm your girlfriend.'

Her voice did sound more familiar now, deeper and warmer than his first impression of it. Or had it been like this all along? She did sound like the voice he'd dreamed of, the one searching for him. That kind of made sense.

Besides, why would a girl who looked as hot as she did claim to be his girlfriend if it wasn't true?

'Oh,' he said. 'Sorry, I—I guess I hit my head real hard or something when I was…I was attacked, right? Some of it's coming back to me, I think, but my memory's kinda like a big black hole.'

Bella nodded. 'It was horrible! The demigods ganged up on you, the monsters.'

'Demigods.'

'Half mortal children of the gods. They're our enemies. Always have been.' She said it like the two of them were something else not quite human either.'

'And we're…'

'Well, I'm an empousa. A servant of the goddess Hecate, brought into the world with the first woman. But unlike mere women, we are blessed with unsurpassable beauty and the powers of our mother goddess. As for you—well, you're special—only one in a million mortals can know who we are and accept that we mean no harm. Most people are scared of our magic. They don't even try to understand.' She stepped closer to him. 'That's what I love about you, Perseus. You're so non-judgemental.'

Gods. Mortals. Her words sounded far-fetched, yet there was something convincing about them. Percy had a hazy memory of three beings arguing over him—wait, had that happened twice?—and there had been a ride in a truck, right? It was all so fuzzy, like half-formed sketches of someone else's life. He wasn't sure any of it was real.

A fight, though. That sounded right. His mind supplied images of fearsome men and women looming over him, wielding spears and swords. He didn't know why the demigods wanted to kill him and Bella, but he believed they did. It made sense somehow, like he'd clicked two puzzle pieces together, even though he still didn't have a clue where they fit in the context of the whole jigsaw.

If he managed to match enough pieces, maybe the full puzzle might start to come together. So far he had his name and age, a vague idea about his enemies, and a girl with princess curls who was probably Bella. That last combination felt slightly off, like two pieces whose edges had been forced together, except after you made them fit, it felt more and more like they should be a match.

'Right. Okay.' He ground his teeth. Nothing else was coming into his head, factual or otherwise. 'Man, this sucks, not being able to remember stuff.'
Bella patted his hand. 'You've got me,' she said. 'I'll help you out.' She crossed over to the kitchenette and pulled a glass from a cabinet. 'You must be thirsty after our walk. Here, I've got just the thing.'

Now that she mentioned it, his mouth did feel dry. He took the glass, filled with a clear, sweet-smelling liquid, and brought it to his lips. It was disgustingly lukewarm, but once it hit his belly, he was filled with a comforting sense of ease. It didn't seem to matter quite as much that he had gaping holes in his memory. After all, he had Bella. Right?

Bella leaned in close to him. 'I'm so glad they didn't take you away from me.'

Her face was inches from his.

Percy swallowed. He wondered if he should feel some kind of thrill. Excitement, maybe. A gorgeous girl—his girlfriend—was closing in on him, her lips tantalisingly close, and the only response he was getting from his body was confusion.

He drew away. Bella pulled back, disappointment in her eyes. 'What's wrong?'

'Sorry,' he said. 'I just—everything's kinda overwhelming right now.'

She sighed. 'Of course. Um, I guess you want to clean yourself up?'

'Yeah, sounds great.'

Bella nodded and pointed to the left. 'Bathroom's that way.'

In the bathroom, Percy splashed his face with water and stared at the reflection in the mirror. The face in it looked completely unfamiliar: glassy green eyes peering out from under a shock of messy black hair, thin cheeks sloping down from high cheekbones that framed a pointed nose. Around his neck was a leather cord with a bunch of painted beads, like some Native American fashion statement. His shirt was tattered, the letters faded so that he couldn't make out what they spelt—there was an 'N' and an 'M' in the first line and a couple of vowels in the second, but that was all he could decipher. His jeans weren't in much better condition. He reached into his pockets, thinking he might have some change, but all there was in them was a capped pen.

He ran his fingers along his arms and noticed something really strange. Tattooed on the underside of his left arm was a picture of a three-pronged fork, one vertical line, and the letters \textit{SPQR}. He traced them slowly, trying to imagine what they might stand for.

After a while, he gave up. Nothing he could see provided him with any clues.

He was just going to have to hope his memory would return on its own.

\textbf{Chapter End Notes}

\textit{Supernaturally-percyjackson} totally gets the credit for \textit{TARTS}. If you enjoyed that bit, kudos goes to her!

\textit{Eileithyia} is the goddess of childbirth, and \textit{Attis} is the closest I could find to a god of rebirth. Ain't the Greek pantheon fun?
Chapter Summary

A curious dream sends Percy searching for clues about his past, and leads him to find more than he bargained for.

IV

PERCY

Over the next few days, Bella filled Percy in slowly with more details about the life he couldn't remember. No, he'd never known his parents; they'd died when he was a little kid. He'd met her a few years ago—him a street kid and her a high school sophomore trying to get into college. Now he mostly bummed around her house while she majored in kinesiology at Arizona State. She talked about using her magical powers to help people in physical therapy, which at least explained the collection of prosthetics cluttering up her apartment.

'The demigods won't believe we could do good, though,' Bella said bitterly. 'They just want to drive us extinct.'

The tattoo was a result of something the demigods had done to him when he'd first gotten drawn into Bella's world. Bella wasn't sure why they'd marked him, but she speculated that it was so they could identify him as an enemy.

Percy traced the thin letters curiously. 'Why didn't they just kill me?'

'I guess they didn't realise then that you weren't going to leave me,' Bella said. Her voice grew soft and inviting. 'They thought you'd fall in with them, but you stuck by me. You're so good, Perseus.'

She lingered over his name like it was a piece of candy she was savouring in her mouth. And it was always Perseus she called him—maybe 'Percy' just didn't have the same sweetness. He wasn't actually sure where he'd picked up the nickname. Had he heard it somewhere?

Bella's eyes locked on his. It was like drowning in a pool of gold. All the questions he had about his background faded into it. His thoughts clouded over. He forgot what he had been asking.

Bella lay her head against his shoulder. Her hair smelt like the outdoors: grassy and pine-fresh. It jolted his brain with something he'd meant to bring up.

'I was thinking,' he said, 'maybe I should go out today. You know, go round the city and see if anything jogs my memory.'

Bella's head snapped up.

'No!' The vehemence in her tone made him jump. She took a deep breath and then continued in a more modulated tone, 'You're safe indoors, Perseus. The demigods are still out there, remember? They already got you once. I would just die if they finished the job.'

'Yeah, but…'
Bella shuddered. 'Don't even think about it.' She handed him a glass. 'Drink your water.'

He sipped obediently at it. The taste was starting to grow on him. He'd disliked the warmth of it at first—why she couldn't add ice, with the weather this hot, he didn't know—but it did go well with the soothing calm that always seemed to spread through him while drinking. After he drained the glass, the only thought left in his head was how lucky he and Bella were to have each other.

That night, he had another strange dream. He was standing on the banks of a river that flowed sluggishly towards a setting sun. Although the riverbed was wide, the river itself cut a narrow course down the middle, so that its dry banks extended out a good fifty feet on either side. The ground beneath his feet looked like it might once have been flooded over, but over time, it had forgotten its life as wet marsh and turned into cracked, hardened mud.

On the other side of the dwindling river, a dark-haired man lounged in a blue and white striped deck chair. Next to him, a long fishing pole was planted firmly in a crack in the hard ground. Its line extended into the water, drifting loosely in the current.

The fisherman raised his hand in greeting to Percy.

'Is there even anything in there to catch?' Percy asked. The river looked dangerously close to the end of its life. The scent of salt hung in the air, so thick he could practically taste it on his lips.

The fisherman scrutinised his line. 'Maybe not any more,' he said. He got up, took his fishing rod, and started to walk towards Percy. When he stepped into the water, the river expanded, rising over the banks and filling its bed.

Percy took a wary step back from the water's edge as it lapped towards him like the waves of the sea. The fisherman kept coming closer, wading through the water, which rose only to his waist, as though it was nothing more than a field of wheat. Finally, he reached Percy's side. Up close, the weather-beaten contours of his face stood out sharply. They fell in kindly wrinkles about his mouth and eyes. Eyes that were the same shifting green of the sunlight-dappled water.

The same shade as Percy's own eyes.

'This river won't harm you, son,' the fisherman said, looking at where Percy stood, hanging back from the water's edge. 'The Salt River is kind to those who carry the Curse of Lethe. It runs under the city of rebirth, after all.'

He handed Percy the fishing rod, and then with a warm, fatherly smile, he glowed so brightly that Percy had to avert his eyes to avoid the blinding light. When he looked back again, the fisherman was gone. The river was retreating as well, shrinking back into its narrow path in the centre of the channel.

There was a tug on the fishing line. Percy started to wind it up, but the bite on the other end was so strong, it dragged him forward towards the dwindling river. As though he was the one being reeled in, the line pulled him straight into the salty water.

It was deeper than should have been possible, given that it had only come up to the fisherman's waist. Percy gasped as the waters closed over his head and he kept going down and down. To his surprise, no water filled his lungs—he was breathing as easily as he did on land. The water seemed to clear his head and heighten his senses. His body felt fresh and ready for action.

The currents continued to carry him along underground. Little golden bubbles floated up to him here and there, bearing disjointed images inside them: a grey stone cabin with seashells embedded in its
walls; two tiny figures locked in a tight, underwater embrace; a stone statue of a bearded man with a trident, who looked uncannily like the fisherman in the river.

Then he heard Bella's voice calling to him, 'Where are you?'

'The Salt River,' he called back, though he wasn't sure how he knew this.

'I'll find you!' Her voice sounded a long way off. 'I'll find you, Pers—'

The rushing of the water drowned her out. Percy woke up, feeling like he'd just emerged from a long, dark tunnel.

'Where's the Salt River?' he asked Bella the next morning.

Bella frowned. 'It runs south of the city. Well, used to. It's really just a dried-up riverbed now. Why do you ask?'

When he told Bella about his dream, she went so pale, he was afraid she might faint.

'What's wrong?' he asked.

'Demigods,' she whispered. 'Oh Hecate, they're getting to you. Perseus, you need to try and block the dreams. That's how they track you. Oh, I should have guessed they'd try it. I'm so sorry I didn't warn you before.'

'It's okay,' he said. But he couldn't shake the sense that the dream was trying to give him a hint.

The next day, when Bella was in class, he snuck out of the apartment.

Bella had locked the door from the outside, but Percy managed to squeeze out of the tiny window and lower himself onto the fire escape of the apartment below. He felt a bit guilty, sneaking out when Bella had gone to such great lengths to protect him, but he had to know if the clues in his dream were worth following.

Phoenix wasn't the easiest city to navigate; every other block looked like the one before. Percy struggled to keep track of how many turns he'd made so that he could find his way back again. The weather was as hot as ever, and he found himself longing for Bella's water. He was starting to feel a little silly, coming out here. He didn't even have any real idea where he was meant to start looking.

It must have been around noon when he finally realised that the dry, cracked stretch of land he'd just hiked across actually was the Salt River. Unlike in his dream, not even the thin channel of water in the centre remained.

His mouth tasted of dusty disappointment. There wasn't anything to find here after all. For a while he sat by the freeway, wondering if maybe the river was running underground beneath the concrete city. He didn't know why the idea made him feel better. It wasn't like he had the means to find an underground river. But the thought of the river not existing at all had a bitter tang to it.

Finally he got up and headed back into the city.

He stopped to get a drink from a public fountain at a cluster of orange buildings on a street lined with palm trees. There was a stone statue next to it, a carving of some dude with a long beard and a stick in his hand.

No, not a stick. It had three prongs at the upper end.
Percy's eyes widened. He'd seen this statue in his dreams: one of the images in the golden bubbles—the fisherman with a trident.

He didn't have time to look more closely, though. No sooner had he recognised the statue did someone yell at him from across a parking lot.

'Hey you! Punk!' The girl yelling at him would have fit in well with a biker gang. She was practically twice his size, with biceps like tree trunks and a nasty scowl on her face. Her expression said clearly: *I'm gonna pulverise you.*

Percy didn't hang around to find out if she really meant to. He took off at a sprint in the opposite direction.

'Wait! Get back here, punk! Percy!'

The use of his name filled him with dread. The biker girl was probably a demigod, one of those Bella had warned him about, who were out for his blood. He turned randomly down side streets, trying to throw her off.

Several twists and turns later, the sound of her footsteps pounding the pavement behind him faded away. He slowed to a jog and chanced a look over his shoulder.

She didn't seem to be chasing him any more. That was the good part.

The bad part: he had no clue where he'd ended up.

And unfortunately, the demigod girl must have known the city a lot better. She appeared out of nowhere, leaping a fence and tackling him from above. Percy hit the ground hard, pinned under her massive bulk.

'Gotcha!'

Percy flailed, trying to buck the demigod off his back. She was obviously an experienced wrestler—her thighs and knees kept his body pinned expertly while she twisted his arms into a painful lock behind his back. With one free hand, she tossed a gold coin into a puddle inches from Percy's head. It landed in a rainbow spill of oil.

'Iris, accept my offering!' Percy had no idea who Iris was. Probably back-up. He wriggled harder against the demigod's iron grip.

'Hold still, punk!' She pressed his head down against the ground so that all he could see was gravel. 'Annabeth Chase, at Camp Jupiter.'

'Clarisse, what—oh my gods, you found him!'

The voice coming from the puddle sounded so much like Bella's, Percy stopped struggling for a second. No, it couldn't be. There was no way Bella would be in league with a demigod who wanted to kill him.

'Yeah, he keeps trying to run from—OOF!'

The weight lifted from his back. Someone had barrelled straight into the demigod girl, knocking her
off. Perseus scrambled to his feet, fists balled. It took him a moment to recognise Bella, who was moving so quickly she was a brown-haired blur, attacking the demigod with one of the prosthetic legs from her collection.

The demigod was quicker than he expected. She met Bella's blow with a spear. The air crackled when it connected with the metal leg. Bella shrieked and flew backwards into Percy. He caught her before she could hit the ground. Her skin prickled with static.

The damn spear was electric.

"That's not fair!" Percy growled, though it was probably pointless to expect an enemy to play fair when they were out to kill you. He grabbed the prosthetic from Bella and ran at the demigod. Surprisingly, she didn't charge at him with her spear.

"What the hell, punk!" she said, dodging his swing. It caught the end of the spear instead and smacked it out of her hands.

"Oh no, not again!" hissed the demigod as she dived for it.

Bella grabbed his arm. "Percy, RUN!"

He didn't need telling twice. Taking advantage of the demigod's momentary distraction, he followed Bella's lead, once again sprinting away from his demigod pursuer. Either the demigod was tired now—or maybe more hesitant to chase after prey that outnumbered her—or Bella just knew the city and which alleys to take. This time they managed to lose her for real.

They finally collapsed, totally winded, at the entrance to a dead-end alley lined with pipes that ran along both sides of the walls.

"You were right," Percy gasped. "The demigod girl, she recognised me—"

Bella flung her arms around him. "I can't lose you now, Perseus," she whispered in his ear. "You're a part of me."

She kissed him, and this time he didn't fight it. His adrenaline-filled body responded, inviting her in and kissing her back.

It was like taking a gulp of fiery whisky. His legs trembled and threatened to buckle under him. Bella pushed him against the wall, her lips sucking fervently on his as if she were breathing in his essence. The burning intensity of their kiss had an overwhelming gravitational pull. He couldn't break away from it even if he wanted to.

Why had he been fighting this again? It felt good to be a part of her, like they could fuse their very souls together…

"Get off him, empousa!"

It was Bella's voice, but it wasn't coming from her. Bella herself snarled and whirled around to face the intruders, breaking off their kiss. Percy pressed his palms against the wall to steady himself.

Three figures had simply melted right out of the shadows. There was simply no other way they could have appeared there in the dead end of the alley. Two were shorter: a goth-looking dude with olive skin who was holding hands with a buxom African-American girl with wild, cinnamon-brown hair.

The last one…
Percy did a double-take when he saw her. It was like looking at a replica of Bella, if Bella had blond hair and grey eyes that flashed angrily with the threat of storms.

Bella's fingers clamped around his wrist. 'Get back,' she spat at the intruders.

'Get away from him!' repeated her look-alike. The girl drew a sword that looked like it had been made of sharpened bone. Her two companions unsheathed their weapons as well. Goth-boy's sword had a blade as black as night. The African-American girl's was longer, made of silver, and dead straight.

'He's mine,' Bella said. Her arm curved around his neck.

The African-American girl snapped her fingers. 'Show yourself!' she commanded.

The air in front of him wavered like a shimmer of heat. Bella shrieked and released him, hissing angrily at the African-American girl. Percy yelped when he turned to look at her.

Bella's entire form changed. Her brown hair sizzled with orange flames, lighting her eyes a demonic red. Her teeth elongated into sharp fangs and her nails grew out into pointed claws. Her shapely legs gave way to a pair of mismatched limbs: one a shiny bronze prosthetic like the ones littered about her apartment, the other furry and crooked at the knee, ending in a cloven hoof.

'How dare you use the magic of mother Hecate against me?' Bella screeched.

'Please,' said the African-American girl dismissively. 'Hecate taught me to manipulate the Mist herself.'

'What did you do to her?' Percy demanded. 'Turn her back!'

'Percy,' cried Bella's look-alike. 'She's an empousa! She's trying to kill you.'

'Nice try,' he said. 'You realise you're the ones attacking us with swords?'

Bella laughed. 'You see, demigods? This one is mine. I already have his soul.'

Percy stared at her. What was she saying? Was she trying to confuse the demigods? Trick them so that she and Percy could escape?

'You're lying,' said Bella's look-alike.

'Oh no,' Bella assured her. 'I have waited to find the right soul for a long time, the one that can fulfil the legendary promise to my kind. A soul of a true hero…and this one Lethe-clean to boot! Once I finish binding his soul to me, I will be immortal!'

'She's telling the truth,' said Goth-boy. 'I can sense it. But you haven't finished. And we won't let you.'

Bella grabbed Percy's neck again. 'Try and stop me,' she hissed at the demigods.

'Bella, what—'

'Hush,' she told him. 'Trust me.'

'Wait,' said her look-alike. 'We can trade. You can have me instead.'

Bella laughed. 'Even if I were to believe that, you're a useless girl. No empousa would spare you a
glance—except to kill you like the pesky demigod you are.’

Percy's head was ready to explode. Bella wasn't making sense. Nothing about this exchange was making any sense, and it definitely wasn't just because he couldn't remember his past.

The pressure of his confusion built up in him, like boiling water confined in a covered pot. At any moment, he was going to spill over. It twisted sharply, deep in his gut.

Then the pipes along the walls exploded, drenching them in a warm shower that reeked of sewage. They had to duck as metal debris rained down. When he looked up again, Bella's look-alike had vanished. Only Goth-boy and the African-American girl remained, advancing on them.

Percy grabbed the top of a trash can and held it up like a shield. Not that it would do much good against two demigods with swords and magic that could mutate people and make things explode. But he wasn't about to go down without a fight.

Beside him, Bella let out a sharp gasp. Percy turned and watched in horror as the point of the missing demigod girl's sword emerged from her midriff.

'No—Perseus—my soul—' she breathed. Her hands, now scaly claws thanks to the African-American girl's dirty magic trick, stretched out towards him. Percy reached for them.

His hands swiped through air as Bella disintegrated before his eyes into a shower of fine ash. For a moment, it looked like she was returning to her proper appearance. Then he realised it was her look-alike, standing where Bella had been, the sword with which she'd impaled Bella in one hand, a baseball cap in the other.

He heard Bella's last whisper: 'I will find you, Perseus.' Then a stabbing pain erupted in the small of his back. He fell to his knees in Bella's ashes, at the feet of her look-alike. Her murderer. His hands hit the ground and his fingers closed around a small, hard object.

Bella's murderer grabbed his shoulders, supporting him.

'Percy,' she whispered.

Red hot needles radiated up his spine from his lower back. One of his other two assailants must have gotten him. He was going to die here after all, killed by the demigods just as Bella had warned. And he'd gotten her killed, too.

Well, he wasn't going to die in the arms of her murderer if he could help it. Percy grabbed the demigod's arms and twisted them away from him. Then he drew back his fist and punched her in the face—the only revenge he could exact for Bella.

Strong hands pulled him away and held him down. Something hard slammed into the side of his head.

The last thing he saw before he blacked out was the shocked grey eyes of the girl who looked like Bella.

OoOoO

Bella was speaking to someone in a soft, low voice.

'Vere almost too late. Will checked him out—he was being drugged the whole time, and she probably twisted the Mist, too. She almost got him. We nearly delivered him straight to her.’
A dream, he thought in relief. Then, more guiltily, I was supposed to block them.

He opened his eyes. He was lying in a soft bed with light blue sheets that smelt of lemons. The room was windowless, lit only by a standing lamp next to his bed, so he couldn't tell what time of the day it was.

Behind the closed door, the two voices were still speaking.

'It was all my fault,’ Bella said. ‘The whole reason he's in this state—I got overconfident and he got hurt. And then—'

'Stop,' said another voice, this one male. 'Annabeth, you can't blame yourself.'

Annabeth. Not Bella.

Because Bella was dead.

Percy rubbed his forehead. So it wasn't a dream. There really had been that chase through Phoenix, and Bella’s fierce, desperate kiss, interrupted by three demigods…

Bella acting like she wanted to kill him, too.

Pipes exploding. Bella with a sword through her middle, dissolving into ashes.

Why wasn't he dead, though? The demigods had caught him. He definitely remembered their swords pointed at him.

He looked around the room, as if figuring out his surroundings might help make sense of the insanity that was his life. Unfortunately, everything in it was as conflicting as his memories. The closet on his right had one door open to reveal jeans and t-shirts hanging untidily off hangers, with a small pile of clothes accumulated at the bottom. At the far end of the room, an overturned skateboard lay under a table. However, a lacy sweater draped over a chair next to it looked like it might belong to a girl. And stacked in the corner between the table and the door was an assortment of battle gear: scuffed bronze breastplates and shin guards, a gold helmet with a blue feather sticking out at an angle, and several other mismatched pieces of weaponry and armour.

Above the table was a corkboard to which a number of pictures were tacked. Percy got out of bed to have a closer look. Many of them were crayon scrawls—squiggly lines that barely connected and made no pattern that he could decipher. Several were polaroid strips featuring different groups of people. He recognised his own face in some of them, but none of the others were familiar: a sweet-faced middle-aged lady holding a chubby baby with wispy brown hair; a grinning teenager with bad acne, a goatee, and a colourful rasta cap on his head; a freckled redhead sticking her tongue out at the camera; an entire group of friends with their arms slung around each other's shoulders.

If that was indeed him in the photos with these people, he couldn't remember any of it.

Or maybe this was all another elaborate hoax.

In the centre of the table was a large framed photo. Percy picked it up and studied the two people in it. He was obviously one of them, dressed in the armour that stood in the corner of this room. He was leaning towards his companion, who also wore armour, but looked far more attractive in it. Her sun-bleached hair was pulled back into a poofy ponytail under a bandanna. She carried her own helmet under one arm. She wasn't looking at the camera but towards him, her free hand reaching for the plume on his helmet. The expression on her face was a mixture of exasperation and fondness.
She was the same girl who had attacked him and Bella in the alleyway. The one who looked like Bella.

The one who had run her through with a sword.

The photo frame slipped from his fingers and clattered to the floor, creating a jagged split in the glass between him and the girl in the picture.

The conversation in the other room stopped abruptly.

'I think Percy's awake,' the girl, Annabeth, said. 'I'd better go. Thanks for Iris-messaging, Jason.'

'Good luck,' Jason said. 'And remember, break it to him easy.'

A knock came at the door seconds later. 'Percy'? Are you awake?'

When he didn't reply, the door opened anyway. The curly-haired blonde in the picture entered. He was once again struck by her resemblance to Bella—just like a twin with dyed hair.

Except for the eyes. They were unfathomably deep, like staring straight into the eye of a hurricane.

They darted now to the fallen picture frame. Annabeth swallowed hard, but didn't comment on it.

'How are you feeling?'

'Why didn't you kill me yet?' he blurted out.

Annabeth's eyes widened. 'Percy…' She put a hand to her temple. 'Oh gods.'

'You're a demigod,' he said.

'Yes…'

'You're dangerous—you…' He tried to recall all of Bella's warnings about them. His head buzzed uncomfortably.

'Percy, you are a demigod.'

She didn't say it with any vitriol, but it hit him like an accusation. The words crashed over him in a roaring wave. It was as though the fisherman's line in his dream was pulling him beneath the water's surface again, only now he was drowning in a river of everything he thought he knew about himself. Except the facts that he'd accrued over the past week were slipping away from him like he'd tilted his head and poured them out into the current. Panic pooled in his gut as he tried to scoop them back in.

What had Bella told him again? Who was he?

Annabeth was still talking, but his ears were ringing so badly, he could only make out one word in ten—son, Poseidon, camp, monsters…

She kept repeating his name, Percy, like it was a collar she was trying to force around his neck.

_I am Perseus Jackson._

The name was his only lifeline; his history was once again evaporating into misty vapour, leaving him with only the events that had happened since he'd found himself in Phoenix. Bella, a vague week at her flat, and—this last the sharpest of all—Bella's final moments.
'You killed Bella,' he said, cutting Annabeth off.

'Bel—oh, you mean the *empousa*. She was going to kill you.'

He shook his head. 'She was keeping me safe from you. She told me you'd find me if I went out, and she was right. I should've listened.'

'She was drugging you, Percy. She needed you to be compliant so she could capture your soul. I don't know what she told you, but—'

'She was my girlfriend!'

Annabeth looked as if he'd slapped her. Thick heavy silence twisted between them. Percy unclenched his fists, which he didn't even realise he'd balled up in the first place.

When Annabeth spoke again, her voice was slow and measured, as though her words were broken glass that might cut her on their way out

'It was all a lie, Percy. *Empousai*—they prey on men and drink their blood. They use magic—the Mist—to make things look different. It can make you believe things that aren't true…like false memories. That one—Bella—wanted more from you. That's probably why she kept you alive for so long.'

*Once I bind his soul to me, I will be immortal.*

There was just enough logic to Annabeth's words to make him question everything he knew—or thought he knew. But even if he did believe Bella had been deceitful, who was to say Annabeth wasn't trying to rewrite his history, too, and recast him into a mould she'd created?

How did he know if her story was any more real than Bella's?

'Percy, you have to trust me. You're safe now.'

'I have to trust you,' he said flatly. 'You're telling me that a vampire demon pretended to be my girlfriend, made up all these lies about who I am, and set up a whole elaborate trap to get me to fall for her so she could steal my soul.'

'Yes!'

'And of course *this,*' he waved his hands around the room, 'definitely isn't a set-up either. I should definitely trust another hot girl telling me I'm safe with her.'

Annabeth took a step back, as if he'd just taken a swing at her. 'I'm not pretending, Percy.' Her voice was small and hurt and for a second he wanted to take back his harsh words, apologise, and meekly agree with everything she'd told him.

But then his rage and panic flooded back. They churned in his stomach, threatening to boil over. There was a sharp tug in his gut, like the twisting of a knob.

Something outside exploded. Water seeped under the gap of the room door.

Annabeth pushed the door open to find the entire floor of the apartment outside flooded to ankle height. The plumbing had come to life: the faucets in the kitchen went off like a sprinkler system; in the bathroom, a toilet bowl spouted its contents in a lively fountain.

Percy put a hand to his stomach. He remembered the pipes exploding in the alleyway in Phoenix.
Just after he’d experienced the same tugging sensation in his gut.

Maybe there was some truth to what Annabeth was telling him. He was a demigod. And his powers were every bit as lethal as Bella had suggested.

The walls of the apartment seemed to close in on him, the jaws of a trap snaring him into an identity the demigods wanted to force upon him. To them, Percy Jackson meant something—but what? And was that who he really was, or was it a clever lie?

*Perseus,* Bella had called him. Which was his real identity?

He pushed past Annabeth to the end of the hallway, to the exit of the apartment.

Annabeth reached for his arm. ’Percy, stop—where are you going?’

’Out,’ he said, pulling away from her. ’Or are you going to tell me to stay inside where it’s safe, too?’

Annabeth’s mouth opened and closed soundlessly. Percy felt a grim satisfaction at getting the last word. He wrenched the front door open.

There was a soft whisper—’Percy.’ Annabeth had found her voice after all. His stomach clenched against the claim she tried to exert on him.

Without turning around, he fired back: ’Stop calling me Percy. My name is Perseus!’

And he slammed the door shut behind him.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Percy tries to adjust to his new surroundings, but it's quickly evident that nothing around him is normal.

V
PERCY

Percy stared at the giant marble statue.

Neptune, they'd called him. Poseidon.

His father.

Or so they'd said, anyway. He studied the statue but it was hard to see any resemblance in a big marble bust. The best he could figure, it looked like the stone statue in Phoenix, the one of the fisherman from Percy's dream.

The past week had been disconcerting, to say the least. He was still trying to come to grips with what Annabeth and her friends had told him. Some of it fit with Bella's versions (they both agreed that she was an empressa, for instance); some of it was the complete opposite (demigods weren't the enemy—at least not his—but monsters, including empressae like Bella, were). Some of it was completely new: he lived in a magical enclave in the middle of Berkeley Hills that was a replica of ancient Rome, protected by a legion of Roman demigods.

Oh, but he was a Greek demigod and the only mortal son of a powerful sea god.

It was enough to make anyone's head explode.

The thing was, he suspected that if these demigods had found him instead of Bella, he might have been more receptive to what they were saying, the way he'd accepted what Bella had told him. Now, though, having to reconcile two versions of a story—especially when the first person to tell it had been conveniently killed by the others—made him question everything more.

I just want to go home, Percy's brain screamed. Except that according to these demigods, he was one of them, and he was home.

He just couldn't believe them. Besides being the complete opposite of what Bella had told him, he had an inexplicable feeling that he didn't belong here any more than he belonged in Phoenix. He'd been given a tour by a Chinese dude named Frank, who was apparently some big shot in the Roman legion. Certain bits about New Rome nudged at his memories, like he might have been here before, but as far as an emotional connection went—zip, nada, blank.

The room he was now staying in remained a mystery. The girl's sweater and the photo frame he'd broken had disappeared from it when he returned after his outburst on the first day—embarrassingly, he didn't have anywhere else to go—but he didn't know what to do with the rest of it. At least the clothes and armour fit him.
He met the various people in the pictures over the next couple of days, either in person or through that weird holographic system they called Iris-messaging. One time Annabeth set up a connection with a family in New York—the kind-looking woman with the toddler and a handsome man with shaggy salt-and-pepper hair.

His family, they told him.

Maybe he wouldn't have minded being related to them. Sally Blofis was warm and calming, Paul seemed decent, and Percy suspected their daughter, Estelle, might be the source of the exuberant scribbles on his corkboard. The thing was, Percy looked nothing like Sally, so he couldn't shake the nagging suspicion that this might all be an elaborate hoax.

To make things even more complicated, an enormous kid with a single eye in the middle of his forehead had strode in at some point, giving Percy the shock of his life when he shouted excitedly, 'Brother!'

Apparently this monster wasn't an enemy.

The only time he felt like maybe the puzzle pieces were coming together was when he looked at the girl, Annabeth.

It was probably because she looked so much like Bella. Or what he thought Bella looked like—it was still hard to square the image of her as a vicious, misshapen demon with the pretty girl he'd known, the façade the demigods said she'd adopted just to seduce him. That was the story they were sticking with. After thinking on it, he had to admit that Bella's final words did make sense in that context.

He wondered how Bella would have explained the situation to him. But she hadn't gotten the chance to, had she?

Because Annabeth had killed her.

And she kept looking at him the same way Bella had, especially when she thought he wasn't paying attention: wistful and hopeful, like he held the key to something she wanted dearly. She never came out and said it, but Percy wasn't totally oblivious. She wanted more from him. He didn't know if in this version of events, they were supposed to have been a couple or she'd just wanted them to be, but either way, the weight of her expectations was stifling. Even if Annabeth was telling him the truth and Bella had been deceiving him, he didn't think he was ready to do this dance with another girl wanting his affections.

He sat down heavily at the foot of the altar and stared up at Neptune.

'If you're really my dad,' he said, 'and you're really a god and all-powerful and everything, maybe you could do something about this crappy sitch, you know?'

No answer. Of course not.

He was probably just going crazy talking to a dusty marble statue. Percy closed his eyes and sighed.

'Percy?'

He looked up. It was Hazel, the curly-haired African-American girl. She was accompanied by two other guys who made a startling contrast of dark and light. Percy recognised one of them as the olive-skinned demigod who'd shown up with Annabeth and Hazel in Phoenix. He still looked like he'd stepped straight out of a goth magazine: black jeans and t-shirt, black aviator jacket, black bangs that
covered half his face.

His companion was a sunny blond with a faint dusting of freckles across his light skin. He wore a purple shirt, emblazoned with the letters *SPQR*—the same letters etched into Percy's arm. The boy had a long, thin scar running up his forearm, but his skin was otherwise clean of any marks. However, around his neck was a leather cord with a row of beads. Percy's fingers reached up to trace the one he had around his own neck.

Hazel knelt so that her face was level with his. 'You okay, Percy?'

He thought about correcting her, then decided it wasn't worth it. Although he'd given them 'Perseus' as a handle, electing to keep the name Bella had bestowed on him, they kept calling him 'Percy' anyway, as though if they used the name enough, it would eventually mould him into the person they wanted him to be.

Instead, he turned to the pair of boys. 'Nick, right?' he said to the goth kid, sidestepping Hazel's question.

'Nico.'

'Right, sorry.' He looked at the other guy with a vague sense of familiarity. He was definitely one of the never-ending stream of demigods in that legion of theirs, but Percy couldn't place his name. He wasn't sure they'd actually been introduced.

'I'm Will Solace,' the kid said.

Hazel said, 'Look, I don't mean to be rude or anything, but you've been moping around for a week and Anna—er, I mean, no one knows what to do with you. I thought I'd try and ask. What do you want?'

Percy turned the question over in his head. What did he want? Well, his memories back would be nice, but he didn't think that was coming anytime soon. Besides that…

He just wanted to figure things out. To work out who he was outside of all the contradictory things he'd been told. Who Bella was. Who these demigods were. What was true and what wasn't.

'I want to try and put things together myself,' he said at last. 'Figure out what's real, you know?'

Nico nodded. 'Yeah, I get it. You want to know the truth, but you can't trust it if it comes from us.'

Percy stared at him in surprise. He hadn't expected anyone to understand. Everyone else seemed so taken-aback when he told them he didn't want any more people telling him stuff about him. But Nico spoke so matter-of-factly, as if Percy's wariness of them wasn't an insult.

Will rubbed his eyebrow with one finger. 'You know, in the ancient days, when people wanted to learn the truth, they used to visit my father's Oracle.'

'Your father—?'

'Apollo,' Will explained. 'God of—well, he's the god of many things, but prophecy is one of them.'

'Isn't prophecy, like, predicting the future?'

'Well, yes, that's the most common understanding of it. But the Oracle also answered questions about the past. It depends on what questions you ask.'
'That's not a bad idea,' Hazel said. 'Except we don't have an Oracle.'

'Wait—this Oracle…is a person?'

Will and Nico exchanged a look.

'Not exactly,' Will said. 'It's a spirit, but it speaks through a person. Back at camp—'

Hazel jumped in quickly. 'We do have auguries. Like omens and stuff—portents that tell us the will of the gods. They aren't easy to interpret, but maybe we could see if there's anything that might help you figure out what you should do.'

Percy turned this over in his head. It all sounded a little hokey, but then so did gods and magic and monsters. 'I guess it wouldn't hurt,' he said. 'Where's this augury?'

'Right next door,' Hazel said brightly. 'Come on.'

Percy followed Hazel, Nico, and Will to the largest temple on the hill: a sixty-foot marble structure dominated by an enormous statue of yet another scowling god. This one looked like he had constipation. Lightning flashed across its domed ceiling as they approached.

A skinny, towheaded girl wearing a toga was sitting cross-legged at the base of the central altar. She had her eyes closed and her fingers placed very precisely on her knees, like she was meditating. Scattered on the marble floor in front of her was an array of plush animals, all sliced down their bellies. Stuffing poured out in odd patterns across the floor.

'Ophelia,' Hazel said.

The girl's eyes flew open. 'Praetor,' she said solemnly. She looked at Nico and Will, and nodded in greeting. 'Ambassador. Legionnaire.' Then her eyes fell on Percy. 'Oh.'

Was oh bad? Percy couldn't tell.

Ophelia scrambled to her feet. She swept the stuffing to the sides of the altar. 'What—er, what brings you here?' There was a jittery edge to her voice. Although she addressed Hazel, her eyes kept darting to Percy and then quickly away.

'We'd like an augury read for Percy, please.'

'Perseus,' he muttered, thinking that if he was asking for a sign from the gods, he ought to at least use the right name.

Ophelia steepled her fingers and pursed her lips. 'You don't happen to have something I could sacrifice, do you?' She gave Percy another quick, nervous glance. 'Never mind. I can see that you don't.'

Clipped to the belt of her toga was a collection of plush animals, these ones intact. Hanging alongside them was a thin golden knife with a jagged blade. Ophelia removed her knife, tapped her lip as she considered the animals, and finally selected a seal with pure white fur. Raising it high above her head, she turned away from them to face the altar. Lightning flashed red across the temple dome. The ground shook as she brought the knife down across the body of the plush seal.

Its cotton guts were jet-black. The dark wisps of fluff spilled out on the altar of Jupiter. Ophelia's jaw dropped.
'That—that's never happened before,' she said.

'What do you mean?' Nico asked. 'What does the augury say?'

'It…well, the message is…okay, it's probably not sink a lone fountain; you'll be home free.' She made a face. 'I've got it: seek information by yourself: it is a hard journey. That part's normal enough. But the colour…'

They all stared at the black innards.

Percy felt like he'd just swallowed ash. 'That's something bad, isn't it?'

'Maybe not,' Will said lightly. 'Oracles aren't always decipherable.'

Ophelia glared at him. 'I'm not an Oracle,' she snapped, her earlier nervousness evaporating. 'You've come to the wrong place for that. And I've read the augury. Take it or leave it.' She crossed her arms like she was waiting for them to leave.

They stepped out of the temple. Clouds the colour of Annabeth's eyes had gathered over the hill during the ritual. They began to disperse, but Percy couldn't help seeing a sign in them, as ominous as the black stuffing. He didn't like the way Nico and Hazel were exchanging looks, like his impending doom had just been foretold.

'We should focus on the message you did get,' Will suggested. 'There's no point worrying about the parts of a prophecy—or augury—that don't make sense yet.'

'Seek information by myself,' Percy repeated. 'It's a hard journey. Do prophecies—or auguries or whatever—actually tell you anything you don't already know?'

'At least it confirms what you want to do, right?'

'Would be nice if it told me where to find information.'

'Well,' Hazel said, 'there is another place you could try. For information, I mean.'

'Where's that?'

'We do have a university. Maybe just learning about stuff—it could help you put things together. Why don't you start there?'

And so he ended up in the registrar's office at New Rome University, trying to muddle his way through a bunch of module transfer forms. Apparently he was a sophomore here and already registered in a bunch of courses for the semester. More signs that this was his life and he should probably fall in and accept what all the demigods were telling him. He had trouble seeing himself as a college student, though. Bella's version of him as a street kid felt more his size. The classes on environmental science and naval ship systems that he was supposedly registered in seemed like someone had went, oh, let's pick some random courses to pretend he actually belongs here.

None of the modules on his list got at the stuff he wanted to find out: what this whole Greek demigod thing was about, and how to trust who was telling him the truth when he didn't have any memories.

'Can I change these?' he asked.

'We're not keen on students making swaps this late in the semester,' the registrar said.
A girl at the other end of the counter looked up from behind a curtain of straightly-ironed brown hair.

'Oh come on,' she said, rolling her eyes. 'He's still within the deadline to drop or add classes.' She gave Percy a conspiratorial look. 'It's noon today, which gives you an hour. They're just trying to fob you off so they don't have to do the paperwork.'

'Fine,' snapped the registrar. 'I really don't recommend it, but if you're going to insist…' He slid a course catalogue across the counter, along with a set of forms. 'You're going to have to fill those in with your new choices. By noon. I'm not taking anything even a second after.'

'Got it.' Percy picked up the forms and the catalogue. 'Thanks,' he said to the girl. She winked at him.

OoOoO

Percy didn't mean to be late for his first lecture. He'd even gotten up earlier and braved the kitchen while Annabeth was still making breakfast so that he'd get to the university on time. But then he'd gotten distracted along the way by a guy with goat hindquarters who wanted some spare change. By the time he found him a handful of coins and made it onto campus, he was already five minutes late, and it took him another twenty to find the right seminar room.

As fate would have it, he walked in just as the lecturer announced, 'So that's when the dark-haired god of the sea first enters the fray.'

Half the class tittered. One girl in the front, with a regal posture and black hair wound smoothly into a long braid, fixed Percy with eyes like onyx—stern and unyielding. She wasn't laughing.

The way she was looking at him, she had to be a recent legionnaire. Percy was learning to pick them out simply by the way they reacted to him, as though in awe of a reputation he had no idea how he'd gained.

Frank said Percy used to be a Praetor—a leader of the Roman legion. After his tour of said insanely disciplined legion, Percy only felt like laughing every time he tried to imagine himself leading that group.

This girl's expression was less awe and more _I got your number, so don't try to pull anything on me_, though. Percy decided to cross over to the other side of the room, as far away from her as he could get. Whatever it was she knew about him, he didn't feel like dealing with it.

He slid into an empty seat behind the girl with the ironed brown hair whom he'd seen in the registrar's office.

'Hello again,' she said, amusement in her voice. 'Nice entrance.'

'Yeah, I live to entertain.'

The lecturer cleared his throat. 'As I was saying, Neptune stirred up the seas and made them impassable. Um, sorry, I mean Poseidon. _Poseidon_ sank the ships of Odysseus—yes?'

The stern-faced demigod girl had her hand in the air. 'Dr Langley, isn't that more consistent with the Roman view? And the text says that Odysseus doesn't play a role until much later.'

'Um, yes, yes, of course, you're right—jumping ahead of myself, there. Nept—Poseidon was a temperamental god, and—'

'Seriously, I don't see why she's taking this course if she already knows so much,' Iron-Curtain Hair
whispered to Percy.

It went on like that for the rest of the class: Dr Langley stumbling over an illogical account of the *Iliad*, peppered with interruptions and corrections. Percy was disheartened by the end of it; Greek Mythology 101 seemed to be as messed up as his memories.

Iron-Curtain Hair turned in her seat. 'Hopeless, isn't he? Be you're regretting switching to this. What did you drop for it?'

'Why did you sign up for it?' he countered.

She shrugged. 'It was something new. I think they started it because of that exchange programme the legion's making such a big deal of. You know, exchange of heroes, fostering friendships, yada yada. There was that big announcement by the senate a couple months back.'

'Um…'

'They probably should have gotten a real Greek to do it, though. Romans teaching about the Greeks…it's like the blind leading the blind.'

'Who knows, maybe he's just trying to show what the Greeks were like: messy.'

Iron-Curtain Hair laughed and held out her hand. 'I'm Jessica, by the way.'

He shook it. 'Perseus.'

'Perseus,' she repeated. 'That's kind of a mouthful. No nicknames?'

'I guess you can call me Percy.' He might as well stop resisting it. Clinging to 'Perseus' might be a way to hold himself separate from the identity the demigods wanted him to embrace, but it wasn't actually helping him to figure out the truth.

'Percy it is. Now, I'd guess you're from the legion, seeing as I've never seen you before, but you're way too funny for that bunch of wet blankets.'

'You're not from the legion?'

'Gods, no. I wasn't really interested in all that Roman hero stuff. Discipline and falling in line and all that jazz…*bor-ing*.'

'I didn't know you had a choice. I thought all demigods went to Camp Jupiter.'

'Well, yeah, if you're a *full* demigod. Like, actually half-and-half. But I think it was my great-grandparents who were? Anyway, I figure I'm more mortal than god anyway, so why bother?'

Percy felt a brief stab of envy. He bet his life wouldn't be this messed up if he'd been practically mortal.

'So what's your story?' Jessica asked. 'Demigod or legacy?'

'Um, nothing much, really. I'm—er—a Greek demigod?'

She raised her eyebrows. 'You say that like you're not sure.'

For a moment, he considered telling her about his amnesia. Then he realised the amazing opportunity he'd been presented with here: to get to know someone on his own terms, someone who didn't
expect him to be this Percy Jackson character with the past that everyone but him seemed to know. Someone who wasn't trying to claim him.

He shrugged. 'I don't really care about my heritage,' he lied. 'So what if I'm Greek or Roman or, I dunno, alien? And the demigod thing is overrated.'

Jessica grinned. 'We should definitely hang out together some time. You got a number I can call?'

'Um, I don't have a cell phone.' At least, he didn't think he did. He stuck his hands in his pockets awkwardly.

'You and every other demigod. You guys are like, allergic to technology. Well, never mind. I'll give you my number and you can call me from a landline or something.' She ripped a sheet of paper out of her notebook and dug in her bag for a pen.

Percy's fingers closed around one in his right pocket. 'Here, I've got one.' He pulled it out and flicked off the cap.

And nearly had a heart attack.

Instead of a ballpoint pen, he was holding a balanced bronze sword, which had nearly taken Jessica's head off.

'Oh my gods!' she screamed.

'I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I didn't know—' He waved the sword around, then realised this was making the situation even worse. 'I swear, I didn't know it did this!'

There was a loud BANG and he jumped as a marble torso appeared in the middle of the seminar room.

'Rule-breaker!' yelled the statue. 'No weapons inside the Pomerian line!'

'What the hell?'

'I should be asking you that, young man!' With his muscular chest and forbidding expression, the statue-man would have looked like a threatening bouncer if not for his lack of arms. Or legs, for that matter—his lower half was nothing but a rectangular square.

The statue fixed beady eyes on Percy. 'Perseus Jackson. Just because you were Praetor once, don't think you can get away with a flagrant flouting of the rules!'

'I'm sorry—I swear I didn't know the pen was a sword. It just appeared!'

'Hmph,' said the statue. He looked long and hard at Percy, and Percy got the feeling that this statue, like all the other godly things around this place, knew something about him that he didn't. 'I suppose you do have some…extenuating circumstances. Very well. Put it in the tray and we'll call it good.'

A floating tray materialised next to the statue. Percy meant to drop the sword in at once, but something made him hesitate. He couldn't help but notice the way it felt in his hand, comfortable and perfectly balanced, like it was simply an extension of his arm. Maybe he didn't have a specific memory of it, but his body knew this sword. His fingers were reluctant to relinquish it.

But the statue was waiting. Percy dropped the sword into the tray, which elongated to accommodate it. With another speculative look at him, both statue and tray vanished.
Jessica cleared her throat.

'Sorry,' Percy told her again. 'Seriously, I had no idea.'

'Yeah, okay,' she said. Her voice sounded a little shaky. 'I'll, um, see you around, I guess.' She left without writing him her number.

Percy sighed and packed up his things.

When he got back to the apartment, he got a pleasant surprise.

The pen was back in his pocket.
Annabeth turned the page of the book in front of her. The first sentence on the new page didn't make any sense. A few seconds later, she turned back to the previous page, realising that she hadn't really taken any of it in. If only the book was in Greek. It would have made reading so much easier. Then again, at least Latin was better than English.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been in the library already; long enough that the words were beginning to blur before her eyes.

She'd begged Reyna to get her a pass to the senate library—the greatest treasure trove of knowledge that New Rome had to offer—and since receiving it, she'd spent practically every waking hour here, waiting by the entrance at opening time and leaving only when the custodian chased her out at night. She'd cut classes and even missed an assignment deadline, but she didn't care. She could catch up on stuff she missed at school, retake the module next semester if need be.

But if she didn't find a solution to help Percy…

Everyone had a different opinion about it. Jason's advice was to give him space, that telling Percy too much would just overwhelm him. He'd told Annabeth about the confusion he'd felt when he'd awoken on the Wilderness School bus with everyone having Mist-induced false memories about him.

'Everyone was trying to push these memories on me and I knew it didn't feel right. It was especially hard with Piper expecting something from me. Even though I liked her, I just couldn't let myself get close to her.'

It was sensible advice and Annabeth was trying to follow it, trying not to push too much on Percy too soon. It wasn't easy, though, when everything she said or did was so entwined with him. She hadn't even realised how automatically she filled in his sentences, or referenced things they'd done together. Not until he winced or pulled away every time she did it.

Frank thought showing Percy places that had been important to him would make an impact, but so far none of their regular haunts in New Rome had jogged Percy's memory. Hazel felt he needed to get back into a routine and she'd gotten him back at the university, except he'd completely overhauled his course load. Piper thought they should just have faith that Percy's memories would eventually return on their own, but the thought of waiting, doing nothing, was simply untenable. Annabeth had even contacted Chiron, who had warned her that it was possible Percy would never remember the past.
'Maybe it would be better to forge a new future,' her old mentor told her gently.

But Annabeth couldn't let it be. Beyond how badly it hurt when Percy looked at her like she was a stranger, the clincher was the Iris-message conversation they'd had with his family a few days ago. The way he'd recoiled when Tyson had appeared in the rainbow, making the big guy's eye well up with tears; the brave look on Sally's face that barely masked the pain when her son didn't recognise her.

Annabeth had promised Sally she would fix it, and she was determined to do so.

After all, it had been her fault: Percy had gotten in the way of an attack on her. And it was her nepenthe recipe that had gotten him lost and captured by that damn empousa.

Annabeth fingered the bronze pendant in her pocket, a spoil of war she'd ended up with after she'd stabbed the empousa in Phoenix. She had no logical use for it, but she'd kept it for some reason. She kept carrying it with her like it might point her to an answer.

So far, it hadn't.

A shadow fell over her, blocking the light. Annabeth looked up to see Reyna standing before her, concern stamped across her face.

'Annabeth, you need a break.'

'I need to find an answer,' Annabeth insisted.

Reyna shook her head and put her hands on the book, covering the page Annabeth was trying to read. 'I bet you aren't even absorbing whatever you're reading any more.'

Annabeth wanted to protest, but Reyna was right. She'd read the paragraph on the page at least three times and she still couldn't say what it was about.

'Lay off the research for the afternoon,' Reyna said. 'Come have coffee with me.' When Annabeth didn't agree right away, Reyna raised her eyebrows. 'Don't forget who got you your library pass.'

Annabeth raised her hands in surrender and let Reyna march her out into the bright sunshine.

OoOoO

If there was one thing cafés in New Rome did well, it was coffee. But Annabeth barely tasted hers that afternoon.

'Earth to Annabeth,' Reyna said, waving a hand in front of her.

'Huh?' Annabeth sat her cup down in its saucer.

'You're still thinking about Percy, aren't you? You seriously need to get your mind off him. I know what it's like to get too focused on a problem. You'll just end up going in circles around it.'

'I can't help it,' Annabeth said. 'You don't know how awful it is. It's like, when we pass each other in the apartment, he can't even look at me. And I know he wants his memories back, but he needs it to come from himself, not from us. He doesn't even trust me any more.' Her voice cracked on the last sentence. This was it, the real reason she couldn't just let things be and start again from scratch with Percy.

He wasn't starting from a clean slate. That damn empousa had fed him a pack of lies and now the
sum of his experience was being lied to and tricked. It was no wonder he was suspicious of
everything anyone said to him. She would have been, in his position. But it also meant that one of his
most endearing qualities, the one that annoyed her no end sometimes, but which she still loved so
much about him, had been lost.

Percy was the kid who had trusted Tyson and Bob the Titan and seen the best in them. The man who
was willing to give people the benefit of the doubt, a chance to prove themselves. Seeing him look at
everyone now like they were his enemy unless proven otherwise—it broke her heart.

'I worry that if we don't fix this, he won't be Percy any more. He'll be...I don't know. Perseus. This
bitter guy who thinks the world is out to get him.' Her breath hitched as she said it, remembering
another friend whom she had lost that way.

Would Percy become like Luke—cold, bitter, and angry? She knew Percy held the same potential
for darkness inside of him. She'd seen glimpses of it before. But his faith in others had always
overpowered his dark side.

'He's in one of my classes, you know,' Reyna said. 'Greek mythology.'

'Seriously?'

'Yeah. It's a rubbish class—I took it thinking it'd be good to know more, what with the exchange
programme and stuff, but the lecturer's crap. I was going to drop it, but now that Percy's in it, maybe
I'll stick around and keep an eye on him.'

'Would you?'

'Sure. Though I don't think he trusts me any more than you. The first day he came to class, he saw
me but he went straight to the other side of the room. I guess he thought I was trouble.' Reyna's
mouth twisted in a wry smile. 'He still has good instincts.'

Annabeth managed a short laugh. 'Still, at least you can see how he's doing. It's hard for me to keep
tabs on him while trying to give him space at the same time. I really want to know how he's coping
with everything, but I'm starting to feel like a stalker every time I check up on him.'

They finished their coffee and Annabeth noticed for the first time that hers tasted off. 'There was milk
in this,' she said, frowning.

Reyna laughed. 'You took my latte by accident and you didn't even realise.'

'Oh my gods, I'm sorry!'

'It's fine. Looks like you need more than just a coffee break. I was thinking of going to the sword-
fighting arena for some practice. You should come. I could do with a decent sparring partner.'

Annabeth traced the rim of her coffee cup. 'I don't know. I should get back to the—'

'If you say library, I'm going to deck you. When was the last time you got some practice in?'

'Well, I didn't have any phys ed credits this term because I couldn't squeeze them in with all my
 electives, so Percy and I were just keeping up practice on our own. Except the last two weeks, he's
been...'

Reyna nodded. 'You're definitely coming with me, then.'
There was a class going on that afternoon so the sword-fighting arena was crowded with students doing practice rounds with wooden swords, but there was one field free. Annabeth and Reyna claimed it and started with a warm-up round, sparring lightly with no serious attempt at attack, just getting into the rhythm of things. Annabeth's drakon-bone sword met Reyna's Imperial gold blade with a satisfying clang. Her focus narrowed to her footwork, her thrusts, and the movements of her opponent. She let her instincts take over, pushing her worries and stress out of her mind.

Reyna was right. She needed this release.

'Ready to go?' Reyna asked.

Annabeth nodded, looking forward to the match now. Sparring with Reyna was always a challenge since they were usually quite well-matched, having both been one of the best their respective camps had to offer.

Just as they took their positions, Annabeth happened to glance over at the other students. The instructor had evidently directed their attention towards Annabeth and Reyna, probably using them as a handy demonstration. Annabeth's eyes travelled over the gathered students and her gaze fell on a thin face framed with the shock of black hair that she would know anywhere.

Percy was here.

Reyna's blow almost caught her unawares. Annabeth parried at the last minute and nearly stumbled, her footwork clumsy in her distraction. She heard gasps from the watching students and gritted her teeth, angry at her own lapse in concentration. She threw herself back into the fight, but Reyna was too skilled for her to overcome such an egregious early error. She went down embarrassingly quickly.

To her credit, Reyna didn't talk down to her with a 'good one!' or any display of sympathy. 'Come on, Chase,' she said, 'that was rubbish.'

'Sorry,' Annabeth said. 'Again?'

They exchanged positions and bowed. This time, Annabeth threw herself into the match, pushing Percy out of her mind completely. She used every battle reflex she possessed, cataloguing Reyna's approach and strike style, matching every blow with her own thrusts and parries. Her footwork was quick and steady. About a minute in, she found her opening and struck at the base of Reyna's sword, using a twist that Luke had taught her a long time ago.

The Imperial gold weapon clattered out of Reyna's hand. Annabeth lunged forward and pressed the point of her sword to Reyna's chest.

'Yield!'

Reyna raised her hands in surrender. Annabeth withdrew her sword. She was breathing hard and sweating, but her head no longer felt tight and tense.

There was a smattering of applause from the watching students and their instructor. They dispersed to the other fields to practice, but Percy hung back. He had a speculative look on his face, his eyes scrunched up as they always did when he was contemplating something. She thought for a second—hoped, maybe—that he might come forward to speak to them, but then he retreated and re-joined his group.
It stung, but there was something else about it. Something in the way he looked at her jogged a distant memory—thirteen-year-old Percy scrunching up his face in concentration as he tried to learn something she was teaching him. Constellations, maybe? No, planets—she'd been teaching him a mnemonic to put them in order: *My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nine Pizzas.*

'I can definitely remember that one,' Percy had said. 'I just have to remember that there's nine of them.'

'Well, think of it this way: it's a mnemonic, and Mnemosyne gave birth to the nine Muses,' she'd told him.

One of the passages she'd read in the library earlier drifted into her mind: *Asclepius and Mnemosyne were often linked in prayer, invoking the process of memory in healing.*

Mnemosyne, the Titaness of memory. Wasn't there a myth about her pool in Hades? Something about drinking from two springs at the same time…

'Oh my gods,' Annabeth said.

'What?' Reyna asked.

'I know where to look. The answer was at home all along.'

'What are you talking about?'

'The nepenthe—the potion we made for Percy. There must have been a missing ingredient, but I didn't realise, because it was from a different source! Reyna—thank you. You were right, this helped. But I need to go now.'

She had to find Nico di Angelo.

OoOoO

Annabeth pulled on her jacket. It was a warm night, especially for October, but she expected the Underworld might be chilly. Maybe. It had been a long time since she'd been there.

Unless you counted Tartarus, which she didn't. Anyone who'd been there could testify that it was a whole different realm from Hades's kingdom.

Hope had been fluttering like a wild bird in her chest since Nico had agreed to take her. She'd pulled out every source she could find on the Mnemosyne—some said it was a pool; others a spring, or a river—and there was even an entire religion based upon it. Although she hadn't managed to connect it definitively to the nepenthe, that recipe had been a closely guarded secret. It made sense that Helen of Troy hadn't penned all the ingredients—maybe she'd even left out the key one to mislead others.

She wondered if she should tell Percy what she was doing. She didn't want to get his hopes up, though. Maybe after they visited Mnemosyne, if they got their answers, if it really worked…well, they'd have to get him to drink it, ultimately. Would he trust them enough to try?

But she'd worry about that later, after they succeeded.

Just as she was about to leave the apartment, Percy emerged from his room.

'Annabeth?'

She blinked in surprise. It was the last thing she'd expected. Percy hadn't initiated a conversation with
her since they'd brought him back from Arizona.

'Um,' she said stupidly. 'Yeah?'

'I was, er…' His face scrunched up again, making a familiar crease in his forehead. Annabeth resisted the urge to reach out and smooth it with her thumb. 'I saw you fighting today.'

'Oh.' Annabeth wasn't sure how to respond. Should she mention that she had noticed him?

'You're really good.'

'Thanks. You're actually not bad yourself.' The words came out before she could bite them back. She winced. Once again, she'd dropped more information about him—information he'd been solidly rejecting when it came from her.

Percy ignored her slip, though. 'Um, I have a favour to ask.' He reached into his pocket and brought out a pen she knew well.

*Riptide.* She hadn't seen it since the fight with Hipponoe.

Percy fiddled with the cap, but didn't flick it off. Probably a good thing. Terminus had long since given up on making Percy deposit it at the city boundaries—nothing really stopped it from reforming in his pocket—but he'd come down harder than Zeus's master bolt if he caught Percy uncapping it inside the Pomerian line. 'I thought maybe you could teach me how to use a sword.'

'Oh,' Annabeth said again. Her heart, already aflutter with hope at finding a cure for Percy's memory loss, went completely insane.

'Look, you don't have to if you don't want to,' Percy said quickly. 'It's just that, I wasn't really getting much from my class today, and I thought I might as well make the most of living with a real sword-fighting pro.'

'No, I mean, yes, I can teach you.' She tried not to sound too eager. 'Tomorrow?'

'Cool,' he said. 'Um. Later, then.'

Annabeth smiled. 'See you later, Percy.'

It wasn't until she got to the barracks to meet Nico that she realised it was the first time he hadn't corrected her for calling him Percy instead of Perseus.

Warmth spread from her heart throughout her chest. It was a step.

OoOoO

'I hope this works,' said Nico, squinting at the cave system on the western edge of the Underworld. 'Percy's weird as Perseus.'

'I hope so, too.'

'I think that's the one,' he said, pointing. Annabeth couldn't see how this particular cave was different from the others, but Nico probably knew best. They approached the entrance, carved into the dark volcanic rock. The temperature dipped ten degrees when they crossed the threshold. Annabeth shivered, glad she'd thought to bring her jacket.

The pool lay in a round depression at the centre of the cave. At its edge was a series of altars, ten in
total, all made of pure white marble and each bearing a flame. Their flickering light danced over the surface of the pool, creating shadows that shifted continuously in its depths. The middle altar was the highest, shaped like a jagged mountaintop. The others each bore a different carved symbol: a writing tablet, a flute, a lyre, a wreath of myrtle. At the second-last altar, represented by a bugle, a girl wearing a Greek chiton, laced boots, and an ivy wreath in her wispy hair was tending the fire.

'Mnemosyne?' Annabeth asked.

'Great Olympus, no!' said the girl, shuddering. 'Please don't mistake me for my mom. That's like, gross.'

'Sorry. You must be—'

She turned to them with an impish look on her round face. 'Thalia. Muse of comedy, at your service. Are either of you looking for a good laugh?'

'Not particularly,' Nico said. 'We're looking for your mother.'

'What do you want with her? Seriously, she's boring. And old.'

'Aren't you like three thousand years old?' Annabeth pointed out.

'Yeah, but mom's three thousand and thirty.'

'Thalia!' Mnemosyne emerged, sliding out of a crevice in the cave wall that Annabeth hadn't even noticed. 'I should snip off your disrespectful tongue.'

Thalia poked the offending appendage at her mother. Mnemosyne crossed her arms and stared at Annabeth and Nico. Unlike her plump daughter, she was tall and thin, with thick bronze hair. Her expression was the very definition of resting bitch face: grumpy pursed lips and bored-looking eyes.

'Son of Hades,' she noted, 'and a daughter of Athena. Well, what do you need to remember?'

'How did you know—'

Mnemosyne rolled her eyes. 'Everyone who comes here wants to remember something. That's all anyone prays to me for now. Time was, I'd get sacrifices for poetry and healing and clarity of vision, but noooo, now it's just "Mnemosyne, I need to remember where I put my keys," or "Mnemosyne, can you come up with a good way to memorise the periodic table?"'

'Well, you did let Calliope and Erato handle the poets,' Thalia said.

'I know that!' Mnemosyne snapped. 'I remember.'

'We're here for healing,' Annabeth said quickly. 'I know about your collaboration with Asclepius. The ancient Greeks prayed to both of you together.'

'Those were the days,' Mnemosyne agreed. 'What is it you need, then?'

'Your pool—we were hoping it would bring back lost memories.'

'Lost memories, huh?' Mnemosyne glided over to the edge of her pool. She put one finger in it and stirred the waters. The surface rippled and Annabeth saw, to her surprise, her father peering down at a baby in a golden basket. Mnemosyne stirred again and the image changed to a young Nico running hand-in-hand across a cobblestone path with an olive-skinned girl—his sister, Bianca. Nico paled and swallowed hard.
'Which one of you is searching, then?' Mnemosyne asked.

'Neither,' Annabeth said. She explained about Percy and his predicament. Mnemosyne's expression didn't change, but her eyes seemed slightly sadder.

'And you heard about the pool's power to recover memories,' Mnemosyne said. 'It's not untrue, but there's a procedure to follow.'

'Well, whatever it is, we can do it!'

Mnemosyne shook her head. 'You don't understand. This is a pool, not a river. It does not mingle with the waters of the Lethe. The only way to use my pool to retrieve memories that the Lethe has taken is to drink from it before you drink from the Lethe.'

Annabeth's heart plummeted to her knees. 'Surely there's something you can do?'

Thalia clasped her hands together. 'Come on, Mom, her story's so tragic. Let's make it happier.'

'He drank Lethe mixed with nectar,' Nico added. 'Would that change anything?'

Mnemosyne considered this for a moment. 'It would be better if he had drank Lethe mixed with water from the spring of memory. But perhaps…' She crossed to the centre altar and placed her hand over the burning flame. After a few seconds, a small vial materialised in it. Mnemosyne plucked it out of the fire and brought it over to Annabeth and Nico.

'This is the most purified of my pool's waters,' she said. 'Mix two parts with one part nectar and let it steep for three days. That's the most potent cure I can offer. Perhaps if your friend's memories have not yet flowed all the way to Chaos, it may work.'

Annabeth clasped the vial to her heart. 'Thank you,' she said fervently.

'Yes, well, it's nice to be asked for something more meaningful these days. One does get sick of all the prayers about rote memorisation…' She shuddered. 'Thalia, did you remember to clean your altar?'

With the abrupt change in subject, Annabeth guessed she and Nico were dismissed. As they left the cave, she heard Thalia complaining, 'Yes, mom, stop nagging.'

'Well, remember that century you neglected it?'

'Mom, that was millennia ago! And besides, Melpomene said she'd cover for me.'

'And you saw what happened—all the Greeks ever wrote from that era was tragedy.'

'I'm going to take it as a good sign that we ran into the Muse of comedy instead of the Muse of tragedy,' Nico commented.

Annabeth laughed. 'Thanks, Nico. Let's hope this works.'

OoOoO

Even without Mnemosyne's potion, things were already looking up. Percy seemed to take their agreement to practise sword-fighting as a peace offering, and their interactions at home were less stilted. He wasn't exactly opening up to Annabeth yet, but he did appear in the common areas more often, helping himself to the big pot of coffee she made in the morning and even popping into the living room for a short chat one evening when she was eating pizza and catching up on the
assignments she'd neglected. They didn't speak of anything significant, just inane small talk about his day, but the fact that he'd sought her out and started the conversation…

She started to realise that the less she offered him, the more willing he was to approach her instead.

Their lessons began the day after her return from Mnemosyne's pool. Annabeth quickly realised that while Percy's memory of using Riptide was gone, his skill with the sword remained. And his natural fighting style was Greek. No wonder he hadn't felt comfortable with the Roman instructor's teaching.

By their second day of training, Annabeth was already starting to feel challenged sparring with Percy. Every move she'd shown him, he'd picked up with ease. It didn't take an afternoon for him to move past competency to proficiency.

On the third day, Mnemosyne's potion was ready.

They both had class in the afternoon, so they'd agreed to have their lesson in the morning. Percy came down to the kitchen looking a little bleary-eyed and poured himself a mug of coffee. He took a gulp and made a face.

'Out of milk today?'

'Oh, sorry,' she said. 'I did it the usual way.'

'The usual way?'

'I like my coffee black,' she explained.

'But you've been making it with milk…' His face closed off, and Annabeth realised her mistake. She'd been making him coffee the way he liked it—the way she knew he liked it.

It didn't seem to matter how many concessions she consciously made—removing her stuff from his room, letting him make the first move, even taking off her camp necklace so he wouldn't see something they shared—she'd more easily cut off her own arm than succeed at cutting Percy out of her soul.

'Perseus,' she said, hoping the use of the name he favoured now would signal a compromise. 'Before we go for training, I need to tell you something.'

His expression was guarded. 'What is it?'

Annabeth explained about her and Nico's visit to Mnemosyne and the potion they'd made from the pool.

'It might be what you need to bring your memories back. Your memories, not something we've told you or what the empousa planted in your head.'

'A drink,' he said. And then, more wistfully, 'My memories.'

'It might not work,' Annabeth warned him, although she was banking everything on its success. 'Mnemosyne said that if your memories have gone out to Chaos, they're really gone. But this was the most potent memory cure she could give us. I—I hope you'll try it.'

A deep crease appeared between Percy's eyebrows. 'You're not gonna make me drink it?'

'They're your memories, aren't they?' Annabeth said in surprise. 'It's your decision.'
Percy looked her in the eye, a long searching gaze. Finally, he said, 'Okay, what the heck. Let's try this thing.'

Annabeth's heart pounded as she passed him the flask where they'd mixed Mnemosyne's potion. After taking a deep breath, Percy downed it in one gulp.

They waited thirty seconds, a minute, two. The air hung heavy in the room, weighted with expectation. Annabeth's hope was like a balloon, rising slowly through its density. Any moment now…

Then Percy said, 'I don't feel any different.'

'Do you remember—?'

'No,' he said bitterly. 'Nothing.'

Annabeth's balloon of hope exploded into hot, stinging disappointment that coursed miserably through her veins. Tears pricked at her eyes, but she made herself hold them back. If Percy was still Perseus—and it seemed like he would be from now on—the worst thing she could do was show how much it affected her.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I really hoped it would help.'

In the silence, Annabeth wondered what he was thinking. If it had been her Percy, she would have guessed that he was worrying about how she felt about it. But Perseus was different—and he didn't care about her.

At last he said, 'It was worth a shot.' He gave her a tentative smile. 'Thanks for trying.'

Annabeth nodded. 'Well,' she said, casting about for a change of subject, 'I can still teach you swordplay.'

Percy seemed to throw everything he had into the lesson that day. He mastered each move nearly as quickly as she could demonstrate it. When they got to their end-of-session match, it was like fighting Reyna, except harder. With Reyna, if Annabeth could recognise the pattern and style she was using, she could anticipate her opponent's moves and counter them. Percy fought the way he always had: with a wild unpredictability that took all of Annabeth's best reflexes to meet.

It thrilled her. This was the way they had always sparred, a dance that kept her continually on her toes. It was the duel they'd repeated time and again since they were kids at Camp Half-Blood, a familiar tango that, truth be hold, was a huge turn-on for her. Percy's green eyes were alert and bright, his face so alive as he slashed and struck and countered and parried. He wasn't even fighting using her instructions any more, but with his own instincts.

It ended when she attempted a tricky move and messed it up. She fell back as he knocked her sword out of her hand. Her feet caught Percy's as she went down. He landed on top of her, pinning her to the ground in an unorthodox victory.

'I think I win,' Percy said.

His hair was completely mussed up, his bangs plastered across his sweaty forehead. His eyes sparkled with exhilaration. His face was flushed and he was breathing heavily, but his mouth quirked in a familiar sardonic smile, with that one lopsided dimple denting his right cheek.

This was her Percy. Memory or no memory, he was still in there.
Annabeth couldn't help herself. She reached up and kissed him.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, a cliffy. Yes, I'm evil. But next update is coming this evening ... so maybe not that evil? :)

In the mean time, check out @preciouschildrenofolympus’s illustration of The Kiss! <3

A few more notes:

Reyna basically walked straight into this chapter and wrote herself in. With that coffee scene (and the one with Percy later), I totally have a coffee backstory for all the demigods. I know, I'm nuts.

I'll also have you know that the bit about Mnemosyne was written before TDP came out. I only went back to make some small edits it to make it more compatible. And yes, she does have a daughter named Thalia.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Percy gets a persistent back pain that becomes something much more sinister.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

VII
PERCY

The heat of Annabeth's lips seared against his.

Percy's senses narrowed to that one point where they connected: salt and softness, fire and friction. Her mouth moved against his and he responded, inviting in every bit of her feverish want and unbridled lust.

An entire ocean roared in his ears, drowning out the rest of the world. Hands, fervent and desperate, reached up to cup his face. A million volts electrified his skin where her fingers met his cheeks. His blood pulsed hot, burning through his veins like an insatiable flame.

Every square inch of his body was on fire, but he would gladly throw himself on this pyre.

Annabeth's hands found their way down his arms, drifted across his sides. Her fingers brushed the small of his back, exposed by his rumpled t-shirt.

A different jolt struck him, this one more like the stab of a lightning bolt than the electrifying thrill that had been spreading from within. Tiny fingers crept up the inside of his spine, as if each vertebra was a handhold for an invisible climber making their way up the curve of his backbone.

A faint hiss echoed in the back of his head: *Mine!*

The voice was Annabeth's, and not Annabeth's at the same time.

He grabbed Annabeth's shoulders and forced himself up, away from the enticement of her flushed face and bewitching lips.

His words came out in a harsh pant: 'What the hell are you doing?'

Annabeth's hands flew to her parted, kiss-swollen lips. 'I—I'm sorry! I didn't—' Her eyes made perfect round O's, their greys dark with desire, her pupils the mesmerising eye of a storm.

Percy wanted to pull her back to him and lose himself in them.

He heard the echo of Bella's last laugh and the ghost of a firm stab in the back.

How could he have been so *stupid?*

He got to his feet and backed away from Annabeth.
"That drink.’ He was breathing hard. 'It wasn't supposed to help me, was it? You planned this.’

Annabeth scrambled to her feet. 'No, I swear—Percy—Perseus—I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to—'

'What have you done to me?’ he demanded.

Guilt was stamped plainly across her face. Her mouth moved soundlessly, just as it had that first day, when he'd challenged her version of events.

And just as he had then, Percy turned and walked away from her.

OoOoO

Percy leaned against the outside of the sword-fighting arena and closed his eyes. The cool, brick wall was a relief for his back, which was still throbbing with an insistent, clawing pain.

'You okay?'

He opened his eyes. Standing in front of him were Nico di Angelo and Will Solace. Under the torches that lit the streets, casting long shadows across their faces, there was no longer such an obvious contrast between them.

Percy shrugged. He had a vague impression that the pair had been in the sword-fighting arena just now and had witnessed the whole embarrassing scene between him and Annabeth. He wasn't sure he wanted to get into it with them.

'We tried,’ Nico said. His voice sounded inexplicably defensive. What had Percy done to him?

'What are you talking about?'

'The drink you were accusing Annabeth about. It was supposed to help.’

Anger flared back up inside him. 'So what, you're here to defend her?’

Will elbowed Nico and gave him a look like, why don't I do the talking here? Nico shut his mouth and glowered at Percy.

'All I know,’ Percy said, turning pointedly to address Will, 'is that I was fine, and then I drank that—that—potion or whatever, and then she—and now—'

'Well,’ said Will cautiously, like he was trying not to startle a scared animal, 'we don't know if the potion had side effects. I mean, it was an experiment, right?’

Percy frowned. 'What kind of side effects are you talking about?’

Will shrugged. 'I won't know until I have a look.' He held his hand out to Percy. 'Do you mind?'

Confused, Percy took Will's hand. The blond boy concentrated for a second, then said, 'Your back's giving you trouble, isn't it?’

'Yeah—how did you know?’

'Healing magic. Just one of my gifts from my dad.' Will pressed his thumb against Percy's pulse point and murmured something that was almost musical. The throbbing in Percy's back reduced to a dull ache. 'Is that better?’
Percy nodded. 'That's amazing. Thanks.'

'No problem,' Will said. He dropped Percy's hand. 'It's just a temporary fix, though. Something’s definitely going on in your system. And it's not the potion.'

Nico's head shot up. His dark eyes narrowed and fixed on Percy like he was trying to x-ray him. Percy looked away. The kid was a bit creepy. 'Great. Like I didn't have enough problems.'

'I know it sucks,' Will said. 'But we haven't given up on trying to help you, okay?'

He didn't really have any reason to trust Will any more than the other demigods he'd met, but something about the kid's calm confidence reassured him. Percy rubbed at his back, then wished he hadn't, because it made the dull, achy spot spread.

'Yeah, okay,' he said at last.

'Good man.' Will rummaged in his pockets and came up with what looked like a chocolate bar made of many little squares—if chocolate was the colour of warm honey, that was. 'Take some of this with you. But don't take it unless the pain gets really bad.'

'What is it?'

'Ambrosia—the food of the gods. It's got healing properties for demigods, but if you eat too much, it'll burn your insides to ashes. You should have some on hand for emergencies, though.'

Percy hesitated. The cure sounded way worse than the problem. He preferred his insides un-immolated, thank you very much.

Will pressed the ambrosia bar into his hand. 'You'll thank me later,' he said. He gave Percy a wink that made Nico raise his eyebrows. Then the boys turned and headed back into the arena.

OoOoO

Maybe it was cowardly of him, but after the disastrous sword-fighting lesson, Percy avoided Annabeth as much as he could. It wasn't easy since they were still living in the same apartment, but he'd gotten a good sense of the schedule she kept by now.

It wasn't that he still believed she'd drugged him. His mind had immediately connected the shocking intensity of their kiss and the way it had drawn him in with Bella's soul-sucking one, but after he had some time to think about it, he realised one big difference.

*That* kiss had been all give—Bella drawing from him everything she wanted. *This* kiss…well, it made him imagine Bella's perspective: drinking from a deep font of intoxicating passion.

He had definitely taken from Annabeth as much as he'd given.

And he probably owed her an apology for jumping to conclusions.

But if he talked to her, they would have to discuss the kiss. Why she'd kissed him.

Why, if it wasn't thanks to some spell or potion, he'd kissed her back.

And why it had felt so damn good.

He couldn't even remember her. How was he supposed to work out what feelings he might or might
not have had for her? What did you even say about something like that?

Compounding the problem was the tingle in his spine that had arrived during their kiss. It was hard to shake the feeling that he'd been cursed, and it was related to both kisses—Bella's and Annabeth's. It couldn't be a coincidence that he'd been virtually stabbed in the back each time. Nor that the *empousa* and the girl looked so much alike.

Will's healing magic had helped, but the pain was starting to flare up again. He wished Will had been a little more specific about how bad it ought to get before he tried the ambrosia. The warning about his insides burning up had been frankly terrifying. He definitely wasn't keen on taking medication with that sort of side effect unless it was really necessary. All the same, the constant, increasing back pains were making him feel like an old man.

He decided to chance the tiniest corner of one ambrosia square. The taste surprised him: rich and buttery, like salted popcorn. It filled him with a pleasant warmth that didn't exactly get rid of his pain, but numbed it to a bearable twinge of discomfort.

It would have to do.

He was almost late for Greek Mythology 101 again that morning because he waited until he heard the sound of Annabeth's bathroom door shutting to dash down the hallway and out of the apartment. Thank the gods for the bit of ambrosia he'd taken. There was no way he'd have been able to sprint to campus and up three flights of steps to the classroom without it. As it was, when he collapsed into his seat behind Jessica, he had a pinch in his back again.

Jessica gave him a curious look, but they didn't have time to talk as Dr Langley got started.

Following his own incomprehensible lesson plan, Dr Langley elected to drop the Greek histories and focus on a comparison of Greek and Roman gods. He spent a lot more time on the latter, which seemed a little pointless in a class titled *Greek Mythology*, but since Percy's knowledge of both was equally sparse, he tried his best to follow even though the sheer number of gods was giving him a headache.

'The Greeks also had a greater focus on primordial deities, that is to say, beings who came before the gods. We celebrate some of these whose lineage we can directly prove, for example Saturn and Caelus, whom they called—um…'

'Kronos and Ouranos.' The dark-haired know-it-all, who had been listening with a long-suffering look on her face throughout the lecture, finally broke her silence.

'Yes, I was going to say that,' Dr Langley said quickly. 'The father and grandfather of Jupiter. I mean, Zeus. But they had many fanciful ideas beyond that as well. Take, for example, the myth of Tartarus: a seething mass beyond the land of Pluto. While we Romans know this Tartarus to be the section of the Underworld reserved for the spirits of evildoers, the Greeks found the need to spin out more unnecessary layers beneath the Underworld, guarded by a made-up deity.'

'That's not a myth. Tartarus exists.'

Dr Langley raised his eyebrows. 'Is that so, Miss—er—Ramirez? And I expect you have proof of this? You've seen this Tartarus, then?'

'Just call me Reyna. And no, but…' Her dark eyes darted towards Percy. She fell silent and shook her head. The expression on her face sent a shiver up Percy's spine.

'Exactly,' Dr Langley said, his voice rich with smugness. 'The Greeks had plenty of myths about the
gods, but we cut through to the truth about them. The real gods have honoured us with their presence and we have documented them dutifully in proper writing. The lineage of our gods trace back to Caelus and our Terra Mater; the Greeks may speak of other deities—Chaos, for instance—but it simply reflects their need to personify every element they can imagine, even the unformed nothingness that preceded the beginning of the world. I think we can safely assume this is actual myth.’

Everything begins and ends...in chaos.

Goosebumps prickled under Percy's sleeves. Although he avoided looking at Reyna, he could feel her eyes boring into him from across the room for the remainder of the lesson.

'Is it true?' he asked Jessica at the end of the class. 'Do you think it's just a myth, this Tartarus and Chaos stuff?'

Jessica shrugged. 'It doesn't really matter, does it? I mean, it's not like we'd ever need to pray to the god of nothingness, right?'

'But the gods appear to you—I mean, us?'

She gave him an odd look. 'Didn't Terminus just show up in here last week?'

Percy blinked. 'I didn't realise he was a god.'

Jessica grinned. 'Where on earth have you been living, Percy?'

Her brown eyes twinkled like it was all some big joke, like this god stuff wasn't as deadly serious as the other demigods made it out to be. The light-hearted way she was treating it reassured him.

The question slipped from his mouth without much thought. 'Do you want to have dinner with me tonight?'

Jessica's grin widened into a bright smile. 'Are you asking me out on a date?'

A small part of his brain, the same part that nagged at him to apologise to Annabeth and figure out what was going on between them, shouted in his head: What are you doing?

The rest of his brain argued back: Why shouldn't I? And why shouldn't he ask Jessica out? It wasn't like he knew what to do about Annabeth and that damned kiss. Maybe it would be good to see what it was like to date a girl who didn't have this whole mysterious history with him that he had no way of remembering. The way Jessica looked at him now was refreshing: no expectations, no fathomless eyes staring at him with sorrow and guilt. Just casual, untainted enjoyment.

If he wasn't going to get his memories back, maybe the best thing for him was to get on with life. And since all his experiences with the demigod stuff seemed, so far, to be disastrous at best and life-threatening at worst, moving outside that circle seemed a pretty good idea to him.

'Yeah, I guess so.' The words came out slightly defensive, but Jessica didn't seem to notice. She was busy scribbling something in her notebook. When she finished, she tore it out and handed it to him.

'My address,' she said. 'And my number, assuming you manage to get yourself a cell. If not—you could just come by around seven?'

'Sounds great,' he said.
Are you sure you know what you're doing? asked the annoying voice in his head.

Shut up, he told it.

OoOoO

Jessica chose the restaurant, one of the never-ending supply of pasta places that dotted the forum. Percy wasn't sure how she could tell one apart from the other.

'Actually, you may as well throw a dart to pick one. We don't really have much choice around here,' she said. 'What I really want is to try food from down south. Tacos or something. Would it kill them to add a bit of variety? But noooo, pizza and pasta and coffee—just the way Romans have done it for two thousand years.'

Personally, Percy didn't see anything wrong with a good pizza. He thought about Phoenix. He remembered some of the food Bella made being spicy. Maybe Jessica would have liked living there. 'Why didn't you apply somewhere else for college? I mean, it would have been something new.'

'That's the curse of being a legacy, isn't it? Just enough scent to draw monsters, not enough powers to deal with them.'

'Powers?'

'Well, duh, like fighting and all that stuff. The first-generation kids get all the advantages. Super strength and mind control and what-not, I guess.'

Mind control? The ache in his back, which had been settling in steadily again since the morning, flared with sudden heat.

'My brother used to complain about it a lot. He said the legion respects your credentials as a legacy only up to the point where it comes to choosing a Praetor. That's when they get picky about whether you have enhanced fighting ability. Mind you, he actually inherited some skill with auguries.'

'Is he still with the legion?'

There was a long pause. 'He died,' Jessica said finally. 'A few years ago.'

Percy winced. 'Sorry.'

Jessica shrugged. 'He shouldn't have left the camp. Got himself mixed up in that war—you know about it?'

'No clue,' Percy said, although the words felt like a lie.

'We never even got his body back. Reyna—you know, the girl who keeps correcting Dr Langley—she was the Praetor then, and she just told us he died in battle.'

'She was a Praetor? So she's a demigod, then.'

Jessica nodded. 'Daughter of Bellona or something like that.'

As if on cue, the chimes above the restaurant door jangled and Reyna herself entered, accompanied by a younger girl. Percy looked away quickly, not wanting them to see him, but something about the second girl drew his gaze back to her after a while.

She was sixteen, maybe, though he couldn't be sure. With her heavy leather jacket and confident
bearing, she had an air of maturity way beyond her teens. That wasn't what caught his attention, though. It was the bright circlet she wore in her spiky hair. It was the sort of thing you might imagine a princess or a prom queen weaving into their braids. Not this girl with her dark-toned make-up, punk jacket, and ripped jeans.

'Percy?'

He tore his eyes away from Tiara-Girl. 'Sorry, what?'

'I said, what are you going to order?'

'Oh.' He scanned the menu. 'Pizza, probably.' He'd developed a liking for a good plain cheese pizza…maybe with pepperoni if he was feeling adventurous.

'Oh, don't be so boring,' Jessica said, thumbing through the menu. 'Look, they have a squid ink tortellini. Let's get that to share.'

'Don't you want one for yourself?'

'I couldn't possibly finish it. You get it, and I can steal from you. Oh, and then we can get the amaretto affogato to go with it.'

Percy was suddenly reminded of Annabeth eating an entire olive-topped pizza by herself in their living room. It had been about a week ago, just after they'd started their sword-fighting lessons. The pizza had smelt so good, he'd asked for a slice and she'd joked, 'Nuh-uh, you're not stealing my olives.' And then she'd ordered him another one—a plain old margherita that had been surprisingly delicious, even more than the olive-peppered slice he'd managed to snag from her.

He pushed the image away and ordered the squid ink pasta.

It arrived looking like sticky black clumps of tar. Jessica seemed to enjoy it, but each piece stuck going down his throat. It reminded him of the suffocating darkness he'd been in before finding himself on a truck in Phoenix. He put his fork down, wishing he'd just gotten the pizza.

Jessica didn't seem to notice. As she speared each piece of tortellini, she complained blithely about the various limitations of New Rome—no malls, slow Internet, the obsession with history.

Percy couldn't really relate. His attention kept drifting away from their conversation—which was becoming more of a monologue on Jessica's part anyway.

Across the room, Reyna and Tiara-Girl were settling into their meal. As though she sensed him watching them, Tiara-Girl looked up from her spaghetti. Their eyes met and even from a distance, Percy could see that they were a startling electric blue. They flickered from him to Jessica and back again and narrowed like an accusation.

Percy looked away. He was starting to regret this date idea.

His back was really starting to bother him again, too.

The pain was still manageable enough when he walked Jessica home after their meal. They stopped outside her building and she smiled at him.

'Well, thanks.' She kissed his cheek. Her lips tickled pleasantly against his skin. After she drew back, she waited for a second, an invitation.
His eyes drifted to her mouth. What would it be like to kiss her—a girl he wasn't sure he liked, exactly, but who at least had no complicated history, no baggage?

He leaned in.

Pain exploded up his spine.

Before their lips could touch, Percy's legs crumpled under him. He reached out instinctively to balance himself and fell forward into her. Jessica yelped and staggered under his weight. They both crashed to the ground.

'Percy, what the hell?'

'My back,' he gasped. 'I need—' He thought of the ambrosia squares Will had given him. Surely this counted as an emergency!

'Take his arm.'

The girl appeared out of nowhere, her footsteps like a ghost's. She grabbed one arm and ordered Jessica to take the other. Through the blinding haze of pain, he could see her tiara sparkling under the street lights.

She'd followed them. Was she spying on him?

He didn't have room to ponder this. Sharp claws were digging into his spine from inside his skin. Gleeful laughter echoed inside his head, which neither Jessica nor Tiara-Girl seemed to hear. They staggered down the sidewalk, dragging him along practically draped over Tiara-Girl, who was a lot stronger than her thin frame suggested. Jessica sounded like she was hyperventilating. Her repeated, 'Oh my gods, oh my gods!' drilled into his already-pounding head.

Finally, they arrived at the bottom of his apartment block.

'Annabeth!' shouted Tiara-Girl, loud enough to wake every building for miles.

Annabeth's head popped out of an upstairs window. 'Thalia? What—oh my gods, Percy!'

She didn't even bother to run down the stairs. In a flash, she had swung herself out the window, grabbed hold of a drainpipe, and shimmied down the two storeys as if she'd done it all her life.

Jessica swore. Annabeth ran to them and grabbed Percy's arm from her, supporting him much more firmly. She and Tiara-Girl—Thalia?—carried him into the building, all the way up to the apartment and into his room. The ambrosia was where he'd left it that morning. He broke off a full square and gulped it down.

'Can someone explain to me what's going on?' Jessica demanded.

Annabeth and Thalia turned to her. Both their expressions were as hard as ice. Jessica shrank back from them.

'What did you do to him?' Thalia said.

'Me? Are you nuts?'

'Leave her alone,' Percy said. The ambrosia was starting to take effect. Relief spread slowly from the back of his neck down to the base of his spine. The claws digging into him felt more like fingernails than knives. He glared at Thalia. 'Who are you and why were you following us?'
'I was looking out for you, Seaweed Brain,' Thalia snapped. The name sent another jolt down his spine. 'If it wasn't for me, you'd still be stuck out on the sidewalk with your useless…friend here.'

'Excuse me?' Jessica said.

'Thalia, she's just a legacy,' Annabeth said, though Percy had no idea how she knew this. 'She wouldn't be able to—'

Jessica shook her head. 'I'm outta here. Look, Percy, I like you and all, but first the sword thing, and now this…it's too much for me. I thought you weren't into all the demigod stuff.'

'I…' Percy wasn't sure if it was worth protesting. It looked as though even if he wanted to, he couldn't escape being a demigod and the insanity that surrounded it after all.

'See you around, Percy,' Jessica said, and left.

'Good riddance,' Thalia muttered.

Annabeth closed her eyes and pinched her forehead. 'Thalia, would you give me and Per—seus a moment?' She stumbled over his name like it confused her. He realised he'd never mentioned accepting 'Percy' after his initial outburst to her about it.

Thalia went out without further comment, leaving Annabeth alone with Percy—a situation he'd been trying to avoid all week. Her eyes were still closed, like she was thinking of what to say. When she opened them, they looked tired and bruised. Percy caught sight of his own reflection in the mirror. There was a faint lipstick mark where Jessica had kissed him.

Guilt and embarrassment twisted in his stomach. He rubbed at the mark, feeling angry as he did so.

What did he have to be guilty about? It wasn't like he'd promised Annabeth anything.

The nagging voice in his brain dripped with sarcasm. No, you just kissed her. That wouldn't have given her the wrong idea or anything.

Wait, she kissed me, he protested. It's not like we were something...were we?

'It's the same thing that happened on Monday, isn't it?' Annabeth said finally. 'Did it—has it been continuous, or did it come on suddenly when you—um,' she cleared her throat, looking uncomfortable, 'kissed her?'

'I didn't kiss her.' He wasn't sure why he felt the need to clarify. 'And the pain—it just…intensified.' That was putting it mildly.

Annabeth's head shot up quickly, but she didn't address his denial of a kiss with Jessica. 'So it didn't disappear after Monday.' She pursed her lips. Her tone was brisk now, like she was interviewing an eyewitness to a crime scene.

Percy shook his head. 'Will gave me this stuff. He said to take it in an emergency.'

Annabeth nodded. 'Ambrosia. Usually it works, but it's not a failsafe. I'm not sure what we're dealing with here, but…' She reached into her pocket and pulled out a bronze pendant: a glowing, round, three-inch disc that looked vaguely familiar. It was spinning of its own accord in her palm.

'It's been glowing and spinning since Monday,' Annabeth said.

Percy reached out and took it. When it touched his hand, gold lines appeared, forming a triangle on
the surface of the bronze. The disc spun a few more times and came to rest. The pain in his back diminished to a dull throb.

'Where did you get this?'

'It was a spoil of war. When I stabbed the empousa. Monsters leave part of themselves behind sometimes when you kill them.'

Percy remembered it now—his fingers closing around a small, hard object when Bella had disappeared. He examined it closely. There was a catch on one end, as though a connected piece had broken off. It was still vibrating, thrumming with its own faint pulse.

Or maybe a ticking time bomb.

'That's definitely new,' Annabeth said, gesturing at the golden triangle now etched in the bronze. 'I don't know what symbol that is, though. The closest thing would be the Greek letter delta, but two of the sides are much too long.'

'My back hurts less when I'm holding it. Is that good?'

'I don't like it. Spoils of war can still work after the monster's dead—like Medusa's head; it still petrified people after it got cut off. But I have no idea what part of the empousa this pendant came from, or what magic it holds. And I definitely don't like that it's affecting you specifically.'

Percy scowled at the pendant. He certainly didn't remember seeing Bella carrying anything like it, but that didn't mean much. He was quite convinced by now that a lot of what he'd experienced with her had been an illusion. But he found himself wishing that Annabeth hadn't killed her, that she was here now, just so that he could interrogate her thoroughly about her motives and methods.

'I don't know what it means,' Annabeth admitted. 'But we will figure this out, okay? We're going to help you, Perseus.'

He couldn't help but contrast her determined expression with the discomposure on Jessica's face when she left. Even with her eyes sad and bruised, Annabeth looked like a girl who would fight to the death for anyone that she cared about.

His stomach clenched uncomfortably. Clearly she did care about him, even after all the accusations he'd thrown at her.

He wished she didn't. She deserved better than to care for an unappreciative jerk with a broken memory.

'You can call me Percy,' he said. 'I guess Perseus is a bit of a mouthful.'

Annabeth's mouth twitched. 'Yeah, kind of. But if it makes you more comfortable…'

'It doesn't, actually,' he admitted. 'Neither of them feels like me. Maybe I should just change my name to, I dunno, Mike, or something.'

She laughed. 'Do you think it would help? I mean, like, not knowing anything, no expectations, just a clean slate?'

The question caught him off guard. All this while, he'd been telling himself that he didn't want people telling him stories about his past because he couldn't be sure who he should trust. But there had been enough clues for him to work out that the demigods' version was the real one.
Maybe it wasn't that he didn't trust them, but that he was afraid it would just really suck if he knew exactly which memories he would never get back.

He didn't know which was worse: if the person everyone expected Percy Jackson to be was some hero he'd never be able to live up to, or a loser he'd be ashamed of being.

Annabeth didn't push him for an answer. 'Sorry,' she said. 'Look, let's just worry about making sure you don't die, okay? And then,' she took a deep breath, 'whoever you want to be—that's up to you.'

She got up to go. When she reached the door, she turned back. Swallowing hard, she said, 'And I'm sorry about—about the kiss. I know I just made things more complicated for you, and...well, I'm sorry.'

Her apology stunned him. She had to have felt him returning her kiss, had to have thought he was giving her mixed signals. Yet here she was, taking the blame for it.

When he'd anticipated an awkward conversation about the kiss, this wasn't what he'd imagined. Not for the first time, he wondered how exactly Annabeth had figured into his past life.

She was almost out of the room when he mustered up the courage to ask.

'Annabeth?'

She turned and waited.

'Were you my girlfriend?'

Annabeth's expression grew unfocused. She seemed to look right through him, like he'd become a ghost. There was a long silence, heavy with the weight of a million words unspoken and a thin thread of guilt that wove through all the things she hadn't told him. Percy was suddenly afraid that she would say yes. He was equally afraid that she would say no.

He shouldn't have asked.

At last, Annabeth said, very softly, 'Get some rest, Percy.'

OoOoO

He dreamt that he was suffocating.

He clawed at the layers of cracked earth pinning him down until they finally gave way to reveal a thin membrane that separated him from light and freedom. He pushed against it and it expanded upwards like a golden balloon filling slowly with air.

He inhaled deeply. A thick, viscous fluid entered his lungs. It had a sharp, spicy sting that awoke every nerve ending in his body. It crackled through flesh and sinew, strengthening his muscles and joints.

He straightened up as his legs—one shaggy with fur like a donkey's, the other a clunky bronze prosthetic that gave off a faint glow—filled with energy. Through the translucent golden bubble that encased him, he could see a sparse landscape of bristly black shrub and a cracked, parched terrain that stretched out for miles under a reddish sky.

He stretched out his arms. His fingernails were long and curved: sharp talons that pierced the membrane surrounding him. The muggy air escaped in a low hiss, evaporating immediately in the
tepid heat. The casing of his bubble disintegrated and piled around his feet like flaky dead skin.

'Tartarus,' he spat. His voice was low and sinister. 'Curse those demigods.'

A round pendant glowed against his chest, beating in time with his own angry heartbeat. When he plucked it up, it swivelled to point into the distance, where the horizon disappeared into a seething black mass.

His lips curled into a thin smile. 'Perseus Jackson,' the hiss escaped from his lips. 'I will find you—the rest of you.'

The pendant shook in his hands and tugged him towards the rolling cloud of darkness.

And then he was out of the empousa's body, freefalling through black nothingness while gravelly laughter rumbled around him in cruel amusement.

*I await you, little hero.* The words were not in any language he could define, but he understood them nonetheless. There was something familiar, too, about the speaker. *Here where everything begins. Here where it all ends.*

Percy woke with a start. His sheets were sticky with sweat.

There was a knock on his door.

'Yeah?' he said.

Annabeth's head poked in. 'Are you feeling better?' she said. 'Sorry to wake you, but I might have an answer—well, actually Nico might have the answer to your predicament.'

'That's good, right?' She looked strangely sombre for someone who was relaying good news.

She didn't answer his question. 'A bunch of us came over. Come out when you're ready.'

The living room was packed. Frank Zhang, the Roman Praetor who had showed Percy around Camp Jupiter, towered over the rest of the group, talking softly to his girlfriend Hazel. Reyna from his Greek Mythology class was there, too, which was weird since they hadn't formally met yet. Next to her was Thalia the tiara girl, still incongruously dressed in her leather jacket and combat boots. Will Solace and Nico di Angelo rounded off the group, sitting quietly together on the sofa.

"Sup,' Percy muttered. It was disconcerting to have all their eyes on him at once.

'Percy, you know Frank and Hazel, and Will and Nico,' Annabeth said. 'And Thalia you met last night—'

'Kind of an abrupt introduction,' Thalia said. 'Sorry about that. You feeling better?'

'Er, yeah, thanks. And thanks for, um, you know.' He didn't feel like rehashing last night's situation in front of everyone, though he suspected they had been discussing it.

'And this is Reyna.'

Reyna stepped forward. 'We haven't been properly introduced,' she said. 'I'm in your—'

'Greek Mythology class,' he said, nodding.

'Right, so. Um, Nico, do you want to explain your theory?'
'It's not a theory,' Nico said. 'It's just an idea.'

'T's a good one,' Will said.

'The empousa said she was binding Percy's soul,' Nico explained. 'We thought we killed her before she could get to him, but what if she did manage to capture part of it? What if she took it with her, to —' He gulped.

'To Tartarus,' Reyna finished. 'That's what you're saying, isn't it? Part of Percy's soul is in the pit.'

Thalia swore. Hazel glared at her.

'It—that makes sense,' Annabeth said shakily. 'And if she's reforming, if she started reforming in Tartarus, like, on Monday, that might explain why Percy felt it then.'

'Wait—back up a sec,' Percy said. 'Reforming? I thought Bella was dead. And Tartarus, like the myth Dr Langley was talking about in class?'

'Monsters don't really die,' Annabeth explained. 'I mean, they do, but they keep coming back. Usually it takes a long time, but there are times when the process gets sped up. And if the empousa has a link to you—maybe that's helping her to come back quicker.'

'You mean she'll just pop up in the world and we can go find her? And get whatever it was she took from me? And that will fix my back?'

'Not exactly,' Will said. 'See, monsters go to Tartarus when they die. They have to regenerate there first. We think the empousa may have reformed in Tartarus, but we don't know how long it'll take for her to find her way back to our world. It might be ten years, or a hundred, even a thousand.'

'And you won't last a month unless you find her,' Nico said.

*How do you know that?* Percy wanted to ask, but he decided he might be better off not knowing. Nico didn't look like he was joking around.

'So I have to find her—in Tartarus, is that what you're saying?' He turned to Reyna. 'I thought Dr Langley said it doesn't exist?'

'Oh, it exists,' Reyna said grimly. 'And it's not just part of the Underworld. Dr Langley's an imbecile.'

'So people really have been to it.'

Everyone's heads turned to Annabeth and Nico, who had both turned very pale.

'You two?' Percy guessed.

'Percy,' Annabeth said slowly, 'you've been there.'

'Oh.' He didn't know what to make of this. 'Well, that should make it simpler, right? We can go find Bella in Tartarus, kick her ass and get back my, um, soul. Easy peasy. We already have seasoned travellers. Even if I don't remember any of it.'

'You don't understand.' Nico's voice was thin and hoarse. 'Nothing about Tartarus is "easy peasy." It's not like the Underworld. We were all lucky to get out alive.'

The image of the augur Ophelia slicing open the plush seal came to mind, its black stuffing spilling across the altar. *It is a hard journey.*
'I'll go with Percy,' Annabeth said. She looked him dead in the eyes. 'You said it yourself. You need someone who's been there.'

'Wait,' Frank said. 'Are we sure we need to do this? If the empousa stole bits of Percy's soul…if she's reformed in Tartarus…if finding her will help Percy—that's a lot of if's. And how will we track her down in Tartarus? I mean, from what you've said about it, the place is huge.'

Something clicked from his dream last night. Percy pulled out the bronze pendant, which was spinning again. It came to a stop in his palm, then swung like a pendulum so that the apex of the triangle pointed at the hall. Whichever way he turned it, the pendant swivelled towards the exit.

Annabeth's eyes widened. 'Of course!' she said. 'It's a compass!'

'Bella's got one, too,' he said. He told them about his dream, although he avoided the part where he'd experienced it from her perspective. And the bit about falling through darkness. He still wasn't sure what that was about.

The black stuffing of his plush-toy augury came to mind again. Percy's stomach squirmed.

'Tartarus is our best bet, then. And once we're there, that pendant will probably lead us straight to her.' Annabeth squared her shoulders. 'I'll go with Percy,' she repeated.

There was a short pause, then Thalia said, 'Count me in. You could use a Hunter.'

Frank and Hazel both looked terrified, but they nodded. 'We're in.'

Reyna's eyes looked far away, as though she was remembering something from the past. 'I'll do it.'

Nico's face was sheet-white. He opened his mouth, then closed it wordlessly. Will squeezed his hand. The two of them exchanged one long, poignant look, and then Will said, 'Nico and I will come, too.'

Percy didn't know what to say. He looked around the room, at the seven demigods who had just offered to follow him into hell. To a place worse than hell, by all accounts. And he didn't even remember any of them.

Thank you seemed way too small to cover it.

'You can't—you can't all do this for me,' he faltered.

'He's right,' Annabeth said. 'Eight demigods travelling together is just asking for trouble, even in the mortal world. We'd attract every monster in Tartarus the second we arrived.'

'Take me, then,' Thalia said. 'I don't count as a demigod any more.'

'What about the Hunters?'

'They're chilling with the Amazons at the moment. They'll get along without me for a while.' Thalia's face was obstinate. 'I've lost too many friends. I'm not losing the ones I've got left. I'm going.'

No one argued with her.

'Hazel, you can't go,' Nico said. 'You have a bigger task—don't forget we need someone on this side to get us out.'

Hazel slapped her forehead. 'Pluto's pauldrons, I forgot! The Doors of Death!'
'The what?'

'The only way out of Tartarus once we're there,' Nico said. 'It's how we escaped before. Someone's going to have to take a quest to find Thanatos and convince him to project the Doors to Tartarus.' He looked straight at Frank.

'He's right.' Frank's eyebrows furrowed in an expression that resembled a serious bulldog. 'I— I think I have a bargaining chip for that.'

Hazel raised her eyes to the heavens. 'We're going to have to convince the senate to authorise the quest. *Both* quests.'

'Not Percy's,' Reyna said. 'Not if the two of you aren't going. The rest of them aren't technically part of the legion. You two are on the senate and I'm a veteran advisor. Between the three of us, we should be able to get the senate's support. Although it'll still take a while to pass the motions and—'

'If we're going, we shouldn't put it off,' Nico said.

'That leaves five of us, then,' Will had gone so white, every blemish on his skin, from his golden freckles to the faded old battle scar on his arm, stood out in stark contrast. But he said bravely, 'That should work.'

'Are you sure?' Annabeth asked. 'Will, you don't know what it's like—'

'I do,' Nico said. He swallowed hard. 'We're sure.'

Percy looked at Annabeth, Thalia, Nico, and Will. 'So, when do we leave?'

'Tonight,' Nico said.

Chapter End Notes

I took a bunch of liberties dissecting the Greek and Roman mythologies in the uni lecture. There's all sorts of versions of old beliefs that you can find on the Internet, but I think the lack of a Roman counterpart for Chaos is telling in itself; also I chose to give the different interpretation of Tartarus as a prison for sinners (as opposed to the Fields of Punishment in Riordan-verse) to the Romans although there are grounds that the Greeks alluded to it as such as well. Whew, trying to keep this stuff consistent is a challenge indeed!

preciouschildrenofolympus’s illustration of the kiss scene can be found here.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Five of the demigods take a road trip with a deadly destination.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

VIII
WILL

As their borrowed Ford Mondeo wound its way south, Will wondered what he'd gotten himself into.

It wasn't his first road trip. He'd taken many as a kid with his mom, back when she still did music tours. Most recently, he'd gone cross-country in Leo Valdez's camper-dragon from New York to New Rome. In terms of size and reliability, the car Annabeth had borrowed off her dad fell somewhere in between Naomi Solace's tiny Chevy (old and beat up, but incredibly dependable) and Leo's spacious but insane contraption (prone to—literally—flaming temper tantrums). It was one of those solid suburban models, great for a college professor and his family of five. Maybe a bit on the squeezy side with three grown boys in the back seat. It was just as well the Roman demigods had stayed behind. If Frank Zhang had been in the group, Will didn't think they would have fit.

Anyway, the car wasn't the problem.

It hadn't been so bad when Annabeth had been at the wheel, but then she'd traded with Thalia—who drove like a maniac, weaving in and out of traffic like an F1 driver negotiating a race track. Sure, they were in a hurry, but a little caution probably wouldn't be amiss.

On Will's left, Nico grumbled, 'I don't see why Jules Albert couldn't have driven us. At least he used to be an actual race car driver.'

'I heard that,' Thalia said.

Will considered Nico's zombie driver. He'd only encountered the dude once, but he remembered two things about him. One, the guy was really steady at the wheel. Two, you could smell his rotting corpse all the way from Olympus.

That might not have been such a great idea on a six-hour car ride.

'Well, I guess it would've been a bit of a squeeze with five of us as passengers instead of four,' he pointed out instead. 'You wouldn't wanna be squashed up all the way to L.A.'

'I don't want to die on the way to L.A., either,' Nico muttered. 'I could have shadow travelled.'

Will rolled his eyes. 'With all five of us? We've talked about this, Death Boy. Unless you've learned how to transport large groups on your own without dissolving into shadow, we're doing this the long way.'

Nico glared at him, though Will wasn't sure if it was targeted at his use of the hated nickname or the
aspersions he'd cast on Nico's abilities.

Probably both. Not that Will cared. Nico was cute when he got mad.

On Will's other side, Percy had been staring out of the window with his chin propped on his hand, gazing at the sunset over the Californian mountains. Now he turned to watch them, his eyes darting between Will and Nico as he followed their exchange.

'Who's Jules Albert?' he asked.

'Long story,' Nico said.

'It's a long trip,' Thalia called back. 'You may as well spill.'

Will zoned out as Nico told them the story of his undead ex-F1 champion chauffeur. It was one of those tales that always made Will curious about the different parenting styles of the gods. You wouldn't imagine the Lord of the Underworld to be a concerned—albeit behind-the-times—parent, but there you had it.

Will's dad, on the other hand, was pretty much the opposite. Apollo was nothing if not current. You probably didn't get to be the god of music and poetry and that sort of stuff if you couldn't keep up on what was trending. On the parenting front, though, his record was more flaky: fickle with bestowing gifts (unlike Nico and his inheritance of a full spectrum of Underworldly powers, being an Apollo kid was like a lottery for godly skill) and attention (Apollo wasn't always great about remembering who his children were, let alone communicating with them). Though he'd been better since his enforced stint as a mortal. He'd even sent Will a birthday card when he turned eighteen, which might have been a first for any godly parent. The quest Apollo had recently undertaken must have given him a new appreciation for the trials his children went through.

Was about to go through, in Will's case.

In Tartarus.

What had he been thinking, volunteering for this quest? It wasn't like he had a ton of experience with this sort of thing. Sure, he'd played his part in two wars, but he wasn't one of the front runners for the dangerous quests. He wasn't Annabeth, leading a team of demigods on a heroic air/sea voyage. He wasn't Thalia, who'd basically signed her life away to hunt monsters for Artemis.

He wasn't Percy, hero of the Battle of Manhattan, saviour of Olympus twice over, a demigod with credentials longer than most minor gods, whom even Will's own father respected (and Apollo didn't hold that many people in high regard).

Percy, who couldn't remember why everyone admired him.

Thanks to a potion Will had administered—yeah, okay, it was to save his life—and maybe screwed up so that he was now dying slowly from an empousa's curse.

Annabeth blamed herself, but Will knew some of it had to fall on him, too. He was the healer, after all.

That was why he was here.

If Will were the jealous sort, he might have been concerned that Nico was with them, too. Will was fully aware of the crush Nico had once had on Percy. (Not that Will could blame him. He'd be lying if he said he'd never had at least one dream about those brilliant green eyes and roguish smile.) But
jealousy wasn't really Will's style. He preferred to think of it as Nico accompanying him, helping him atone for his mistake.

Besides, Will was the one who had volunteered them both. It wasn't entirely selfish. There had been something in Nico's face that morning, a flicker of the shadow that never quite left his boyfriend's soul. Nico never spoke much about his time in Tartarus—not to Will, not to anybody. All Will knew was that Nico had been there at some point during the war, and judging from certain hints he'd picked up from Hazel and Reyna over the years, it hadn't been a walk in the park. But everyone seemed to think Nico had just shrugged it off and moved on by now.

Except recovery from a traumatic experience wasn't quite so straightforward. People often thought healing was always about getting better, but Will knew that there was always a part before, where you had to get worse. The same way a fever raged through the body to expel the germs inside, you often needed a psychological unravelling to dislodge a trauma. Will had seen it happen to Percy and Annabeth in the fall after the Giant War. He'd watched them go through the painful process of falling apart and coming back together.

Nico, on the other hand, seemed to have buried his time in Tartarus deep inside himself. Maybe his friends couldn't see it. But Will wasn't Camp Half-Blood's best healer in a century for nothing.

And that morning, Will had sensed Nico's need to tackle his demons, to face whatever he had encountered head on and beat it this time. He needed to return to Tartarus, whether he knew it or not. And Will would be damned if he let Nico do it without him.

Although he'd be lying if he said he wasn't scared shitless about what they might face down there.

To calm his nerves, he ran over the provisions he'd packed for their journey: nectar and ambrosia, naturally, but also all the specialised healing supplies he could get his hands on. A jar of Lemnian mud. A tincture of Moly. And of course, Gatorade, because Nico was bound to try something stupid at some point with his Death Boy powers.

It was nearly midnight by the time they pulled into West Hollywood, a time that seemed eerily apt for approaching the Underworld. The dark didn't seem to faze Annabeth, who navigated Thalia expertly through the winding streets.

'It was dark, too, the last time we were here,' she said, shrugging.

'That was what, ten years ago?' Thalia said. 'Your memory's insane!' Then she abruptly clamped her mouth shut. In the rear-view mirror, Will saw her biting her lip in consternation.

Annabeth frowned out the window as they passed the only shopfront still lit up, a crooked neon sign flashing 'CRUSTY'S WATERBED PALACE' over its door. 'Some things don't change much.'

Thalia pulled up by the kerbside of a black marble building with tall glass doors. Golden letters above them screamed 'DOA RECORDING STUDIOS.'

'We're here,' Annabeth said. She opened her door and stepped out onto the sidewalk. The others hopped out as well. There was a sign on the building door that said:

VALET PARKING AVAILABLE
CARS NOW ACCEPTED AS COLLATERAL

'What does it mean, collateral?' Percy asked.

'Payment for passage, probably,' Annabeth said. 'Though I'd like to get the car back to my dad
eventually if possible.'

'We already blew up his car once,' Thalia said. 'What's another?'

Annabeth sighed. 'Let's just go.'

Inside the building, the hallways were lit with lava lamps shaped like ancient torches. Rows of plastic fold-up chairs lined the walls, all filled with dismal-faced people who looked like they might not be entirely solid. Bluegrass music belted out from a speaker box in the corner of the ceiling.

At the end of the hallway was the most ostentatious desk Will had ever seen. Made of polished mahogany and embedded with blood-red jewels, it stretched in front of a plain silver elevator with a single button: down. In an ornate armchair behind the desk lounged a man in an expensive Italian suit. He was kind of handsome, a bit like Nico, with his olive skin and finely chiselled features.

'Group of five?' he said. His accent was vaguely European. 'What was it, a car accident?' He pulled out an iPhone and brought up an app. 'No alerts from Thanatos. How many times do I have to tell Death to update me when he makes a delivery?' He swiped across the screen to a time display. 'Never mind—you'll have to wait. I have a crossing scheduled now.'

He shoved the phone back in his suit pocket. 'Tickets for crossing thirteen-oh-eight-one!' he announced to the room at large. Then he turned back to the five of them. 'Have your fare ready when I get back. Prices are on the chart.'

He indicated a sign on the wall, where a list of fare prices and timings were printed:

**Standard passage**—1 drachma; wait time: 10 years

**Expedited passage**—10 drachma; wait time: 5 years

**Shorter wait times by negotiation only.**

**All bribes accepted.**

**Check PlutoXE for latest exchange rates.**

**Children over 12 pay full fare.**

A bunch of ghostly people shuffled forward, tickets in hand. Most of them were pretty old, but Will thought he spotted at least one young face that looked vaguely familiar. Before the group could get to the lift, Nico stepped between them and the Italian-suit man.

'Hello, Charon,' he said, crossing his arms.

Charon did a double-take. 'Oh, it's you. Don't you have better ways of visiting your father than clogging up my ferry?' He looked suspiciously at Will, Annabeth, Percy, and Thalia. 'And which part of the no-living-allowed rule don't you understand, kid?'

When Nico still didn't answer, Charon said, 'Fine. They better pay up, though.'

Nico tapped his finger on the expensive mahogany desk and gave Charon a pointed look. 'Who helped you argue for your last pay raise with my dad?'

Charon sighed and shook his head. 'Okay, okay. This lot isn't going to be happy to be bumped, though. Celebrities,' he grumbled. 'Always so demanding.'

With a jolt, Will recognised the familiar-looking kid as an actor who'd OD'ed last summer. And some
of the older faces in the group had that vague, seen-them-on-TV-but-can't-name-them feel of TV personalities from his mom's generation.

Charon sent the actor kid and four other spirits back to the waiting line, silencing their complaints with a threat to bump them further down the list if they gave him any more lip.

'And don't even think of changing the music channel when I'm gone,' he warned.

They filed into the lift with Charon and the rest of the celebrity group. As soon as the doors closed, they found themselves descending in the darkness, landing with a splash on the surface of a black river. When his eyes adjusted, Will saw that they were in a cavern lit by gemstones studded in the volcanic rock. The lift had expanded into a barge, which Charon poled towards a shore of black sand. He let them off on the beach at the bottom of a rising path that led up towards a foggy grey meadow.

'My next annual review is in a month,' he said to Nico.

'I'll keep it in mind.'

They hiked up the path with the other souls. At the top, they entered an enormous screening area like the kind you saw at airport security: a long winding line marked out by post-and-rope barriers, except the posts looked like they were made from femurs and the ropes from sinew. The end of the line split into ten security checkpoints, all manned by ghouls in pale green uniforms. They were frisking the spirits that passed through the metal detectors, except at a smaller, separate line on the end marked 'EZ DEATH', where the spirits passed unmolested.

'They've…upgraded,' Annabeth noted.

'Luckily for us,' Nico said. 'Come on.'

He led them to the other side of the rope-barrier line, where a roped-off channel had been marked out 'SECURITY PERSONNEL ONLY.' Nico lifted the barrier and they all ducked under it. The nearest security ghoul turned to them, but when he saw Nico, he gave a sharp salute and returned to his duties.

As they got closer to the entrance marked WELCOME TO EREBUS, Percy yelped and stepped back, treading painfully on Will's toes. A moment later, Will saw what had startled him and nearly jumped out of his skin himself. An enormous three-headed Rottweiler had appeared out of nowhere, so big that it spanned the entire row of checkpoints.

'Cerberus,' Annabeth said.

Three heads leaned towards her, their tongues lolling out. Will ducked to avoid being splattered by monster dog drool.

Cerberus's tail wagged. One of the heads barked. It was deafening, but it sounded...joyous. Another dog head made a low, pleading sort of whine.

'He...does he remember me?' Annabeth said in amazement.

Nico shrugged. 'Possibly.' He raised his hand to scratch Cerberus's left head. The dog was so big, it was unlikely that Nico's small hand could have made any difference, but Cerberus seemed to be pleased by the attention nonetheless. Annabeth copied him on Cerberus's right head. The middle one whined and gave Will a hopeful sort of look.
Will hesitated. Pat the monster guardian of the Underworld? Well, sure, why not. In some weird way, it was kind of like visiting his boyfriend's home and meeting his pet dog.

After passing Cerberus, they followed Nico through a gigantic field filled with glassy-eyed spirits. These parted naturally before Nico, leaving them an open path to walk through, but closed the gap behind them once they passed.

'Is anyone else as freaked out as me?' Percy whispered.

Will nodded. It was like being in a crowded room at an insane asylum: every spirit chattering away to itself with no apparent awareness of anyone else.

'Well, it's not the first time we've been here,' Thalia said.

'Don't tell me.' Percy sounded resigned. 'I've been through this before and I just don't remember.' He turned to Will. 'I would've thought this wouldn't be your first time, though.'

'What makes you think that?'

'You're dating Death Boy here, aren't you?'

'Don't call me that,' Nico said sharply, shooting Will a look that said plainly, This is all your fault.

'We haven't actually done the meet-the-parents thing,' Will said.

'Sure we have,' Nico said. 'I've met yours.'

Just as he said this, they reached the gates of a magnificent palace built of glittering obsidian. It was silhouetted against a backdrop of craggy volcanic mountains. Its grounds stretched across the Fields of Asphodel to reach the edge of the only bright spot in the gloom: a gated community surrounding a tropical island. A low parapet made a ring around the palace grounds, marking out the sector of the Underworld that was Hades's personal territory.

Standing at the edge of it, Will was reminded of the first time he had brought Nico home to Schoharie and they'd stood in front of his mom's tiny house. Nico had given him a terrified look, like a caged animal about to be led to slaughter. 'Are you sure about this?' he'd asked.

'Relax—it's just my mom,' Will had reassured him. 'She'll like you.'

Looking at the black obsidian palace, he imagined the situation in reverse. It didn't match, though. You could fit ten of Will's houses into the courtyard of this palace. And Hades wasn't just Nico's dad. What demigod wouldn't have a healthy amount of respect, if not fear, for the Lord of the Dead?

Then again, that kind of applied to all the gods. And Nico had met Apollo, though the fact that the god had been a mortal kid barely a year older than Will himself at the time probably reduced the intimidation factor.

Nico seemed to sense what Will was thinking. A smile twitched at the corners of his mouth. 'Maybe I should invite you over to stay. See how you like meeting my parents. Fair's fair, right?'

'Ha ha.'

'Seriously, I do have a room there.'

'Let me guess, decorated with skulls and stuff?' Will said dryly.
'How did you guess?' Nico shrugged. 'My dad thought it was funny. I think. Hard to be sure, with him.'

'Guys,' Thalia said, 'back to the quest? You can get past the meet-the-parents hurdle when we make it back. If we make it back.'

Annabeth pointed to a path leading off to the right of the palace gates. 'That way, isn't it?'

'That would be the shortcut, yet,' Nico said, his face sober again. The shadow of Tartarus flickered across him again. He looked like he had more to say about the route, but he just pressed his lips together and started down the path.

It led into a dim tunnel that smelt of earth and minerals and something else that Will couldn't quite put his finger on. It reminded him of the smell of ancient magic, the way the soil of Lemnos, with its healing properties, gave off a different scent from commonplace mud. The tunnel narrowed and sloped downwards. The air took on a chilly, metallic quality. Will could smell iron in the walls now, like they were made from the blood-soaked earth of a battlefield or the stones of a sacrificial altar.

They emerged into a dark cavern. The path beneath them sloped steeply towards a sharp drop-off: a cliff overlooking a pitch-black chasm. The whole cavern churned with a deep, coercive magic. It snaked out of the chasm and wound itself around Will, a compelling force drawing him to the edge like it was a magnet and Will a hapless steel nail.

'Do you guys feel that?' he whispered.

Annabeth shivered. 'It's Tartarus. The pull—once it latches on, you can't break free of it.'

'Like running from a black hole.' Nico's voice was hollow and echoey in the cavern. He stared down into the chasm and then turned to Will. The dim glow of the stalactites cast eerie shadows across his pale face. A thousand nightmares played in his eyes.

Will reached for his hand, although he wasn't sure if it was to offer Nico some comfort or take some for himself. Nico's fingers were trembling and even colder than usual.

'Well,' Thalia said, 'we do want to go in now, so…'

As if an unspoken signal had passed among all of them, they reached for each other's hands at the same time. And then, linked in a tight circle, they jumped.

Chapter End Notes

I realise the layout of DOA recording studios is not quite in keeping with the canon description in Lightning Thief, but where's the fun in repeating the books? Let's just say Charon redecorated a little. All those pay raises must have gone somewhere, right?
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

While in Tartarus, our heroes run into some familiar curses.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

IX
WILL

They fell for an eternity.

The blackness enveloped him, numbing all his senses. Though he knew they'd taken the leap together, holding hands, Will couldn't shake the terrifying sensation of falling alone, abandoned and isolated. He closed his eyes—not that it made any difference in the inky darkness—and focused on his hands.

There it was: the faintest brush of skin against his palms.

He imagined Nico falling through the same abyss without even this tiny ounce of comfort. Whatever terror was creeping through Will now, it had to be barely a fraction of what Nico had gone through before.

Not this time, Will promised. I will change his experience.

Carefully, he laced his fingers through Nico's and gave his hand a firm, hard squeeze.

He counted his heartbeats—one, ba-boom, two, ba-boom, three, ba-boom—before slowly, but firmly, Nico squeezed right back.

The cold wind whistling past his ears took on a scalding quality. Will couldn't be sure if the air had actually turned red-hot or if the cold had just intensified to the point that his nerves were burning all the same. His body still felt chilled from the inside, but there was a stickiness to the air that seemed more compatible with heat.

Will opened his eyes. The darkness had given way to a red-tinged haze. The others slowly began to come into view: the skull ring on Nico's finger, the glint of Thalia's silver circlet, the outlines of their bodies. A landscape of jagged black peaks unfolded beneath them as they shot through a rusty sky.

The scarlet clouds stank of blood and rotten eggs. Will was reminded suddenly of a study he'd once read about mice put into a state of suspended animation by hydrogen sulphide gas. What if the smell of Tartarus froze all their cells and made them stop moving entirely?

Stop it, he told himself, shaking his head fiercely to clear his imagination.

'What?' Thalia's voice seemed to come from a hundred feet away instead of right next to him. He realised Annabeth was trying to yell something, too, but though her mouth was moving frantically, her words were lost to the wind.
Annabeth raised her voice. 'Aim—river—last time—!'  

'What the hell? How?' Percy sounded panicked.  

Without warning, they were sucked back into shadow, hurtling through a different sort of darkness. It was just the tiniest bit softer, a smothering blanket instead of choking fumes. Will thought their direction of travel might have changed, too—more of a horizontal than a straight drop. Then his feet hit ground in a painful thud that jarred his knees as the shadow spat them out onto a gritty surface.  

The others materialised next to him, looking equally shaken by the abrupt landing. Will wasn't sure how they'd all managed to stick this landing without breaking anything until Nico appeared and collapsed immediately into an unconscious heap.  

'Nico!' Percy gripped his shoulders. 'What did he do? What's wrong with him?'  

Will fell to his knees and rifled through his pack. The Gatorade had to be right at the bottom, of course. He tilted the bottle to Nico's lips.  

'Come on, you stubborn moron,' he muttered.  

Nico's body twitched feebly. His breath came out shallow and ragged. Even when Will had emptied the whole bottle down his throat, he remained unresponsive.  

Annabeth touched Will's shoulder. 'Give me the bottle.'  

She came back with it a moment later, her arms scalded as if she'd plunged them into boiling water, and held it out to him. 'Make him drink this.'  

The liquid inside looked like blood and smelt of burning coals. Will stared at Annabeth in disbelief. 'What—?'  

'Trust me.'  

Her tone broached no argument. Will tipped the bottle against Nico's lips. As soon as the first drop touched them, Nico spluttered and coughed. The colour flooded back into his ashen face.  

'The Phlegethon,' Annabeth said. Her voice was raspy and hoarse. To his alarm, Will noticed that the stinging redness on her bare arms was the least of her problems; her face was puffy and covered with welts, her lips cracked and blistered. The others didn't look much better. From the way his own skin stung, Will guessed that he, too, looked like a radiation victim.  

Never mind the smell; the very air of Tartarus was poison.  

Annabeth pointed to the fiery river where she'd filled the bottle. It splashed down from a waterfall several hundred feet away and stretched across a broad delta, carving dark red branches throughout the plain. 'It's how we—' She swallowed hard. 'If we drink from it, it'll keep us alive.'  

'You want us to drink from the River of Fire?' Thalia said dubiously. 'Isn't it supposed to be a punishment for the wicked?'  

'She's right.' Nico had finally come to. He sat up and wiped his mouth, wincing. 'It keeps them alive so that they can continue suffering.'  

Will's chest lightened, buoyed up by relief. 'You idiot! I told you shadow-travelling all of us would be too much for you!'
'Would you rather we all died as splats on the rocks of Tartarus?' Nico countered.

Will scowled. It was hard to argue with that. Still, he wanted to punch Nico for giving him such a scare. He settled for saying, 'Don't do it again.'

'So, um,' Percy interjected, 'you were saying we need to drink fire?'

Annabeth and Nico both nodded.

'At least we have the bottles,' Annabeth said. 'It's better than scooping the water with our hands. Do you have more? It'd be good if we can carry some with us.'

Will hesitated. All his bottles were filled with healing supplies.

'Nectar won't do us much good down here, Will.'

Reluctantly, he handed her his pack. He had to look away as Annabeth emptied out the bottles, unnerved by the idea that his trusty medical standbys might be ineffective here where they needed them most. She started to approach the Phlegethon, but Percy put a hand on her arm.

'Let me,' he said.

'Percy…'

He indicated the raw, red skin of her arm. 'It hurt you, didn't it?' he said. 'Let me take a turn.'

Percy didn't complain when he plunged his hands into the River of Fire, but Will could tell from his face that it was no refreshing dip. Sparks danced on the water's surface like fiery embers spitting from a log fire. When Percy finished, he looked like he'd been washing his hands in acid.

'Cheers,' Thalia said, raising her bottle.

Drinking the Phlegethon was like getting a blast of pepper spray straight down his throat. If he'd shot gas into his mouth and then lit a match, it probably would have hurt less. The blisters on his skin swelled and burst. Will found himself on his knees, retching uncontrollably, except nothing came up: the fire consumed everything in his belly, leaving it hollow and empty. When he finally got control of his shaking body, Nico was by his side, patting his back soothingly.

'Gods,' Thalia said weakly. She was also on all fours, recovering from her own convulsions.

Nico and Annabeth were right, though. Horrible as it was, Will could feel the strength returning to his limbs. His healing senses were coming back as well; he became aware of the vitality settling over the others like a protective cloak over their bodies.

It felt so wrong that something that hurt so bad could be healing.

'Where to, then?' Thalia asked.

Percy pulled out his compass. It spun a full circle in his palm and pointed downriver, where the Phlegethon chugged towards an ominous fog that was so many layers of grey stacked on top of one another, it might as well be a wall of tar.

They trudged along the sparse plain. Although the landscape stretched out wide and open on their right, the oppressive heat, coupled with the threatening shadow of the forbidding mountain range on their left, gave Will the feeling of being enclosed in a baking furnace. Along the way, lumps of yellowish-green liquid bubbled up from the ground: pus-filled boils on the skin of the earth. To Will's
horror, when he took a closer look, there were shadowy shapes inside. Some were vaguely humanoid, others like beasts.

'Monsters,' Annabeth confirmed.

Percy looked ready to hurl. 'I had a dream about this. I was—well, I was inside one of those things.'

'You were probably seeing what the empousa saw,' Annabeth said. 'That means she's here.'

There was a sharp zip as Thalia sent an arrow straight through the bubble. It burst like a popped pimple, showering the ground in pus-like liquid. The monster inside disintegrated.

'Maybe we'll get lucky,' she commented. 'Maybe she'll still be in one of those bubbles.'

'Preferably before we get to the Dark Lands,' Annabeth muttered, glaring at the black fog in the distance.

After they had been walking for what seemed like hours—or possibly days; what did time mean in Tartarus, anyway?—they came upon the most bizarre sight Will could imagine in the pits of hell: a stone circle that made a respectful ring around a stone altar. Like everything else in Tartarus, the stones were black, but they were definitely marble, and there was an air of sacredness about the circle that didn't fit with the rest of this godforsaken place.

'The shrine of Hermes.' Annabeth's voice was full of relief. 'Come on.' She scaled the ridge overlooking the circle and ran straight up to the altar. The others followed her.

When they passed between the marble columns, the air seemed to become kinder. At any rate, it no longer stung Will's nostrils when he inhaled. He tried to imagine how a sanctuary like this could have formed in the middle of the world's most dangerous pit, but came up blank.

He decided not to question it. On the altar, a welcome sight awaited them: laid out like a banquet was a heap of mortal food—fruit, cheese, chicken legs, even large slices of good old cheesy New York pizza. Although no fire had been lit, a cloud of fragrant smoke hung over the stone. Every so often, more food would materialise in it, joining the substantial pile on the stone table. It smelt exactly like the offerings he'd burnt for his dad every meal at Camp Half-Blood. Will's stomach began rumbling in earnest.

'Is this real?' he asked, hardly daring to believe his eyes.

'Yeah, it is,' Annabeth said. 'I called Chiron before we left and asked him to help. Thank Olympus—the Hermes cabin must have been burning sacrifices all night!'

Her words jogged something in Will's memory. 'That's how you sent us a message from Tartarus during the war!'

Annabeth nodded. 'I don't know how it works, exactly, but the shrines are connected.'

'Never mind how.' Thalia reached for a thick slice of pizza. 'As long as it works.'

They sat in a circle around the altar and helped themselves to the bounty before them. For a while, they just ate in silence. All the food looked charred around the edges, but it tasted as good as if it had been freshly served at the dining pavilion of Camp Half-Blood.

Will was the first to notice when Nico stopped eating. He'd plucked a pomegranate off the altar and was turning it slowly in his hands, staring at it with hollow eyes.
Will bumped his shoulder gently. 'You okay?'

Nico put the pomegranate down. 'I don't recognise any of this,' he said. His voice sounded as thin and sharp as his Stygian blade. 'It's almost as if—as if Tartarus can have something good in it.'

'What did you see when you were here?'

It was a risky question. Will didn't know if Nico would just shutter down like he usually did when the subject came up. Yet something told him it was right to offer him an opening to share it, now that Tartarus wasn't just the private shell of Nico's previous trauma but an experience they were all sharing.

'Darkness,' Nico said after a long pause. 'I think it was caves.'

Annabeth looked towards the hulking shadows of the volcanic mountains on their left. If she had something to say about the way they stretched beneath the turbid storm front, she didn't voice it.

'There was no…' Nico looked at the pomegranate in front of him, then to the altar, still piled with food, and finally around their little circle. 'Hope.'

'Hope,' Annabeth repeated. Her eyes were misty and sad. Her next words were a surprise. 'When we were here, we had a guide. A Titan. His name was Bob.'

'I know.' Nico's voice was barely a sigh.

Thalia's eyes widened. 'Bob?' she said. 'I remember him—he was the Titan Percy dragged into the Lethe. It wiped his memory completely!'

Percy looked up sharply from his pizza. 'I—what?'

'It's okay, he was trying to kill us.'

'But you said he helped—he was a guide…?' Percy looked between Annabeth and Thalia, his face a furrow of confusion.

'He was a janitor,' Nico said. 'After he lost his memories. We called him Bob, and he cleaned my father's palace. He became a friend. And he helped you.'

But not me. The unspoken accusation simmered beneath his mild tone, unnoticed by anyone but Will. Maybe it was because he'd learned over the years how to tune into Nico's emotions—always so carefully controlled, it took even Will a combination of experience and his natural healer's senses to detect.

Percy was still struggling with the conundrum of Bob.

'He came down here to help me?'

'He jumped into Tartarus,' Annabeth confirmed. She took a deep breath and related how Bob had brought them to this very shrine, showed them a way to the heart of Tartarus, and convinced a giant, Damasen, to help them, too. As they listened, Will sensed the bitterness Nico had buried for so long clawing to the surface. Although Nico's face remained impassive, his silent scream thundered in Will's ears: I was alone. No one helped me!

Will put his hand on Nico's, but Nico twitched away from him.

'They gave us hope,' Annabeth finished. 'That even here, good exists.'
Maybe it was the savoury smoke from the burnt offerings on the altar, or the comfort of good food in Will's belly. The story didn't exactly make the bleak despair of Tartarus melt away, but it softened it somewhat.

He reached for Nico's hand again and this time his boyfriend didn't pull away.

'What happened to them? Bob and Damasen?'

Annabeth's eyes flicked nervously towards Percy. The latter was so still, he could have been a statue next to the altar.

'They stayed behind,' she said quietly. 'They gave their lives so that we could escape.'

Will's heart dropped to his stomach. So much for hope.

Annabeth drew idle patterns in the ashen ground, her eyes sad and her movements slow. 'But we—I promised I'd never forget. As long as we never let their memories fade, there's the possibility that they'll return someday.'

'Did he ever remember who he was?'

'Bob got his memory back in Tartarus,' Annabeth said. 'Don't give up hope, Percy.'

Percy nodded slowly, but Will got the feeling that it wasn't actually the memory loss he was concerned about.

Thalia cleared her throat. 'Anyway, what's our next step?'

'We still have to find the *empousa*,' Nico said. He turned the pomegranate over again, as if it were the secret anguish he'd unlocked and he didn't know what to do with it.

Percy's compass pointed out of the shrine, directing them mercilessly towards the incessant black fog. It was extremely close now, no more than a hundred feet away. Will's heart sank even further. He didn't know what was in there, but he didn't think it was a health spa.

They decided to rest at the shrine of Hermes for the night—or whatever passed for night here; it wasn't like Will could tell the difference under that ceaseless red sky. Maybe the *empousa* would move and the compass would point away from that ominous storm front.

But in the morning, the direction hadn't changed. There was nothing for it. They forged on.

Inside the fog, they had to hold hands to stay together. The visibility was better than the blackness they'd fallen through to get to Tartarus, but only just. The others were like shadowy outlines moving along with him. Their only source of light was Thalia's silver tiara, which glowed valiantly against the encroaching darkness, and the bronze compass that continued to point them further into the dark.

The air here was no longer scorching, but cool and damp, with a chill that seeped right into the pores of Will's skin. The temperature change was so drastic, it was like they'd stepped off the face of one world into another.

*Like we dropped from a monster's chest down to its toes.*

Will shivered, and it wasn't just from the cold.

*Stop it,* he told himself. He had to stop using body analogies. He really didn't want to think of this place as alive.
After a while, he noticed tree-like shapes sprouting from the ground around them. The trunks were long and smooth, ending in round knobs that formed a thick canopy over their heads. It reminded Will of the fossil forest near his home in Schoharie. He remembered visiting it with his mom years ago, before he'd gone to camp: the way the upright stumps jutted out like long bones sticking out of the ground. This forest had the same unnatural spookiness to it—another place that existed out of time.

Annabeth stopped moving, yanking Will to a sudden stop as well.

'What's wrong?' Thalia whispered.

'I recognise this,' she said. 'This forest. It was where we met—'

As if roused by her voice, the trees started to quiver. Will flashed back to the memory of a giant bat flying out from the fossil trees in Gilboa Forest—the first monster he'd ever encountered.

If there were creatures in these trees, he'd bet on Apollo's lyre that they'd make the bat look like a cute, fuzzy pet.

Nico and Thalia both drew their weapons. Will reached for his bow.

The canopy came alive with glowing red dots as a dozen eyes awakened in the trees. The first creature landed on the ground mere feet away. Her wings, jagged and bat-like, poked out of the tattered black dress she wore. She had leathery skin so wrinkled and folded she made an elephant look like a cosmetics model.

'Furies,' Nico breathed. 'But it can't be!'

'No,' said Annabeth. 'They're—'

The arai! The voice seemed to emanate from the air, reverberating off the bony tree trunks. Bringers of curses, destroyers of souls!

Another of the bat-women dropped from the trees, so close that Will could feel the whoosh of her wings.

'Thalia, no!' Annabeth cried just as Thalia let her arrow fly. It pierced the nearest arai, which dissolved immediately.

The master voice hovering over them chortled, as though the monster's death was something to be gleeful about. Yesss…a curse on you, Thalia Grace! Oh, which shall we pick?

'What in Hades?' Thalia demanded.

And then she stumbled backwards into Will. Her hands flew to her chest and came away stained red.

Blood, Will thought, staring at the sticky wetness. It oozed from her back as well, as if the arrow she had loosed had struck her straight through.

Vengeance! hissed the unified voice of the arai, as more of them dropped out of the trees. We deliver the final curses of the slain, the bitter wishes of the defeated. How many monsters have you pierced with your silvery arrows, Huntress? How many deaths are on your head?

'They're curse spirits!' Nico snarled. He swept his sword in a threatening arc. 'Stay back!'

Usually, monsters backed away at the sight of the Stygian blade. The arai, however, kept closing in,
spreading themselves into a ring around them.

'How do we fight them off?' Percy yelled. He had drawn his own sword, too, but the celestial bronze was no more effective than Stygian iron in threatening the *arai*. Will grabbed Thalia, supporting her arm around his shoulder. If they had to run, she was going to need help.

'We can't!' Annabeth put Thalia's other arm around her own shoulder. 'If we kill them, we only reap curses on ourselves.'

'Well, *run*, then!' Thalia gasped.

They bolted through the gap in the circle of *arai* and dashed through the forest, Will and Annabeth supporting Thalia between them like they were running a bizarre four-legged race blindfolded. It was all they could do to dodge the bony trees. Percy and Nico slashed through the trees as they ran, clearing a path. Several black trunks thudded behind them, followed by loud crunches that Will hoped was the sound of squashed *arai*.

Unfortunately, he also heard clawed feet scrabbling over the fallen trees and the beat of leathery wings taking to the air. Sweet Apollo, how could he have forgotten that those things could fly?

The quality of the darkness changed abruptly, like they'd emerged into a clearing. The air was thinner, as though bereft of the moisture of foliage.

'Stop!' Nico yelled.

Will, Annabeth, and Thalia skidded to a halt. His foot dislodged a pile of gravel, which flew off in a whoosh—right over the edge of a cliff.

The *arai* emerged from the forest to form a curved wall of demons backing them up against the cliff edge. They laughed as they tightened the semi-circle.

*So many curses to choose from...what shall it be?*

One of them leapt at Percy with her razor-sharp claws aimed at his face. Percy's sword came up to meet her.

Before you could say the word 'curse', Annabeth had launched herself between Percy and the attacking *arai*, drawing her sword at the same time. It plunged straight into the *arai*.

Annabeth collapsed in Percy's arms. A ring of scarlet blossomed from her back.

'What did you do to her?' Percy cried.

*A gift from Bella the empousa!* howled the *arai*. *Repayment for how you stabbed her in the back. Choose, demigods—a curse for each one of us you kill!*

Percy staggered back as though he had been cursed as well. 'You—'

But he didn't get to finish his sentence. The demons closed in on them, claws extended.

Nico surged forward to defend them, cutting through the entire front line of *arai* with his Stygian iron sword. Maybe he thought his Underworld blade might offer some protection. Or maybe he knew there just wasn't any other choice.

The *arai* shrieked with laughter as Nico's clothes erupted into flames.
You burn, Nico di Angelo, just as the Roman legionnaire Octavian did when he was launched to his fiery death!

Will dropped to his knees, beating at the flames with his pack. 'That wasn't his fault!' he shouted.

Or will you choose another curse, son of Hades? The final moments of Bryce Lawrence, perhaps, when you unleashed the power of death on him?

The fire went out abruptly. Will had a brief glimpse of Nico's raw, blistered skin before his boyfriend's body began to fade. Beneath Will's fingers, Nico's form turned as insubstantial as black smoke, like he was crumbling away.

It was Will's worst nightmare—his greatest fear for Nico, that he would ultimately dissolve into shadow if he overreached and struck the limit of his powers.

'No, Nico, hold on!' he begged. He focused as hard as he could, channelling all the healing power he had into Nico. It helped just a little. The fading stopped. He could feel the contours of Nico's skin again, although it was still dangerously smoky around the edges.

'Bryce…' gasped Nico. 'Ghostified—him—deserve—'

'No,' Will said. Whatever curse Nico had unleashed, Will was certain he did not deserve to suffer from it.

Around them, the others had stepped forward to take on the attacking arai, and they hadn't fared much better. Thalia's body was pierced as though someone had shot an entire volley of arrows into her. Annabeth had been flung fifty feet away, where she lay bleeding from her gut, weeping and trying to crawl back towards them.

Only Percy was still standing, his celestial bronze blade glowing as it vanquished the malevolent curse spirits, none of whom seemed able to find a suitable curse to bestow.

Cursed son of Poseidon, wailed the arai. You bear the Curse of Lethe. We cannot inflict any more on top of that.

'The curse of…' Percy's voice faltered over the words.

The Lethe! The River of Forgetfulness! Your companions have doused you with its waters and it runs through your blood! They wiped your mind and soul clean!

'Wait, my—they—' Percy looked at Will and the others in bewilderment. 'They're lying, right?'

Will didn't know how to answer him. The demonic eyes of the arai seemed to glow even brighter, like blinding red laser pointers boring straight into Will's pupils.

Will you curse them, too? Curse them for what they have done to you!

'Tell me!' Percy insisted. Maybe the arai couldn't curse him, but Will was certain they'd done something to trigger that dark, crazed look in his eyes. 'Did you wipe my memory?'

'We—yes, but—'

The arai shrieked with glee. Curse them, son of Poseidon! Add to our repertoire!

Percy fell to his knees, his head in his hands. Will felt like doing the same. The arai's mad laughter was a cacophony in his ears. His head was about to explode with the sound.
But there were only the two of them left. And if Percy couldn't be cursed, he was their only hope.

Will ran to him. 'Percy, get up!' he urged. 'You need to fight them—'

Percy gave him an anguished look. 'My memory—you guys...I don't even know what's real and what's not. And if you guys lied to me—if we're all just reaping what we sowed—'

'No, we didn't!' Will promised. 'We didn't tell you everything, but it was because we were afraid we would make things worse. I can explain, but first we need to get past these demons. Come on.'

He hauled Percy back to his feet. Percy looked at him uncertainly. He seemed to be fighting an internal battle. Will took a deep breath and shot an arrow. He didn't know what would happen when he hit the arai; he couldn't think off-hand what curses he might have acquired throughout his life. Unlike Percy, he didn't have the Lethe's protection. But what else could he do?

The arrow flew straight and true, dissolving an arai, but to Will's surprise, there was no accompanying pain.

*Where are your curses?* shrieked the arai. *Why have your enemies not cursed you?*

Will's heart leapt hopefully in his chest. He had no curses!

'I'm a medic,' he snarled at the arai. 'My job is to heal, not to harm. But I definitely make an exception for demons who are hurting my friends.'

With a nod to Percy, he notched another arrow.

There had been many times before that Will had wished for greater skill in battle, to have inherited a more useful gift from his father in defeating the enemies that besieged Camp Half-Blood. He now saw the huge advantage to being a healer. When you were trying to heal people on the battlefield, they didn't tend to curse you with their dying breaths. Of course, now that he was cutting down arai, maybe that would change. Could the spirits of curses curse you, too? He guessed he was about to find out.

Percy's expression cleared and he leapt back into action, slicing through the demon spirits. Will shot an entire volley of arrows into them. Soon, they had made it through the entire pack.

But the curses the arai had already delivered didn't vanish with them. Around them, Will's friends were still dying.

Percy ran to Annabeth and dragged her back to the group. 'You're good at healing,' he said to Will. 'Can you...?'

Will had never tried anything of this level before. His magic was good for small things—cleaning wounds, repairing breaks, helping one person at a time. But he summoned all the strength he could, recalling the way he had channelled his energy into Nico earlier. He put his hands out and concentrated.

In his mind, he pictured Annabeth leading the blue team during capture the flag, the glow of sunset lighting up her confident, capable face. He pictured Thalia grinning impishly as she and her Hunters challenged the Apollo cabin at archery practice. And Nico—oh, *Nico*. He imagined walking hand-in-hand with Nico down the Via Praetoria while his boyfriend told him about the actual Rome, across the ocean; the way Nico's face lit up only for him, like Will was his own private sun, illuminating his shadowy features; the slow, shy smile that transformed Nico's brooding expression the first time their lips touched.
More images flooded his mind. Thoughts of Chiron and his ever-steady advice—*There is art to medicine as well as science, child*; *Your father has gifted you; trust in your abilities*; *Your talents are essential.* Memories of himself sitting on the front porch with his mom as she strummed the banjo and sang to him. *'Your dad could do the most amazing things with music. One day you'll learn how, too, sweet sun.'*

Will drew on all this, reaching deep into his soul. He felt the healing magic surge through him and flow out through his palms, bathing them all in a gentle, golden glow. A lilting song whispered through the trees, driving out the echoes of the araï's cackling. Dimly, he realised that it was his own voice singing an ancient hymn to Apollo.

Thalia and Annabeth's wounds closed up. Nico's skin lost its charred, smoky tinge.

*It's working,* Will thought in relief.

Then his vision blurred. The trees tilted alarmingly, like the entire fossil forest was turning sideways. The ground rose up to meet him.

Will collapsed next to Nico. The last thing he felt was his boyfriend's arm, warm and solid and whole again.

Chapter End Notes

As I am repeatedly mentioning, I owe a great deal to my betas for this fic, and I wanted to give supernaturally-percyjackson an extra shout-out in this chapter for her excellent suggestions for the Hermes shrine scene. She made it infinitely better so if you enjoyed it, leave a kudos for her too!

Also, *I'm not kidding about the mice.*
Annabeth opened her eyes to find herself in Percy's arms.

For one second, her heart went spinning in giddy cartwheels. Then she remembered that they were deep in Tartarus, facing a horde of demon curse spirits.

Except the araí were gone. And although Annabeth's body ached as if she'd just run a marathon, scaled ten of Camp Half-Blood's lava walls, and wrestled a giant to boot, she was alive. Her shirt reeked of her own blood, reminding her of the curses she'd invoked. A knife in the back from the empousa. A spear through the gut from the giant Enceladus. Bruises blossomed where a sticky filament had wrapped itself around her neck—a gift from Arachne, no doubt.

It was a miracle she'd survived.

The others didn't look much better. Thalia's clothes were drenched in blood, the fabric pierced a thousand times over. Nico looked like he'd taken a tumble into a sooty fireplace. Will lay unconscious by his side, though his body bore no visible injury.

Percy was the only one who seemed unharmed. His jaw was set in a hard line. In his hand, he gripped Riptide so tightly, his knuckles were white.

Nico shook Will. 'What happened?' he demanded. 'Did he get cursed, too? What was it?'

Percy let go of Annabeth and took a step back. 'The demons couldn't hurt either of us. We got rid of them. And then he healed all of you.'

Nico swore and dug into Will's pack. 'Over-exertion, then. Exactly what he's always nagging me about.'

He dribbled bottled Phlegethon into Will's mouth. Will came to with a violent cough.

'You idiot!' Nico scolded. 'After all that crap you gave me about taking on too much, I swear—'

Will groaned and raised a hand to his head. 'What was I supposed to do, let you guys die?'

'How did you avoid getting cursed?' Thalia asked.

'They couldn't find curses for either of us,' Percy said. 'I guess Will never killed anybody.' His eyes narrowed. 'And they said I was already cursed. That you cursed me.'
Although he looked around all four of them as he said this, the you stabbed Annabeth like a dagger hurled unerringly into her chest. In a controlled, even tone that didn't quite mask an undercurrent of anger, Percy repeated the words that the arai had spoken to him.

Annabeth remembered then the last curse the arai had bestowed upon her: an invisible force that had flung her away from the group—away from Percy. *Retribution from Hipponoe: may you never be loved again!*

The arai had cackled most gleefully at that, probably because they'd realised there wasn't much they could add to that curse.

'You guys are gonna explain what they meant.' Percy pointed to Will with Riptide. 'And why you didn't deny it. You promised.'

'I did,' Will said weakly. He looked at Annabeth. 'You should tell him. All of it.'

Annabeth swallowed hard. Percy's eyes bore into her, harsh as a tempestuous ocean storm. Where did she begin? All of it, Will said, but what did that mean? Their entire history—the one Percy hadn't wanted to hear?

Or the part that was all her fault? Her hubris, her decision, her mistakes.

The part that might make Percy hate her.

*You will never be loved again!* No, she certainly didn't need the arai to deliver that curse.

'Well?' Percy said. 'Are you gonna to tell me who wiped my memory and why?'

Annabeth opened her mouth to begin. But before she could speak, a sly, sibilant voice emerged from the gloom.

'Oh, but why would she do that? Misunderstanding is so perfect for sowing discord!'

The speaker appeared from the edge of the forest. Her body, draped with a black toga, was so thin that Annabeth almost mistook her for one of the slender trees, spouting branches of hissing vipers from her head. Entwined in her snaky locks were scarlet ribbons, flowing from a blood-soaked headband that held her dishevelled bangs clear of her malicious crimson eyes.

'Lovely,' she said, surveying them with the cold, callous smile of a psychopath. 'You're already halfway there.'

Percy levelled Riptide at her. 'Get lost. This is between me and them.'

'Ah, but it has everything to do with me, too. Surely you don't mean to have a dispute without the goddess of strife?'

'You're Eris,' Annabeth breathed.

The goddess turned her malevolent gaze on Annabeth. In her gleaming eyes, Annabeth saw visions of brothers running each other through with swords, husbands throttling their wives...her own mother, Athena, reduced to petty arguments with her fellow Olympian goddesses.

'Yes, indeed. I have sparked the bloodiest wars in history! My children spread discord throughout the world. I am the mother of hardship, pain, lies...' She grew taller as she spoke, shooting up towards the canopy until she towered over them. 'Quarrels and disputes! Murders and anarchy! These are all
my children! And so, my dear demigods, what bitterness can I sow among you today?"

'Forget it,' snapped Thalia. 'We're not interested in fighting. Unless it's fighting you.'

Eris touched her index finger to the tip of a poniard—a small, slim dagger—in her hand. 'Such complacence. Do not forget—it was I who created the golden apple that precipitated the Trojan War. I have broken up couples who boasted of loving each other more than Zeus and Hera!'

Thalia snorted. 'That's not saying much.'

'Will you put me to the test, then, daughter of Zeus?' Eris brought her poniard down as if to stab Thalia. Percy stepped forward and met the dagger with Riptide.

'Will you defend them, then, Perseus Jackson?' Eris hissed. 'The ones who lied to you, who are responsible for your current affliction—oh yes, I see clearly that you bear the curse of one of my daughters.'

She breathed out her words in a mist of red fog that wrapped itself around Percy. He lowered Riptide.

'Don't listen to her, Percy!' Nico drew his own sword. But instead of attacking, Eris stabbed her poniard into the ground. Fissures spread from its point, carving lines in the earth that ran between the five of them.

The red mist descended over Annabeth's head. Shadowy images swirled in it, resolving into a movie reel of every annoying thing her friends had ever done. Thalia smirked at her in front of a row of archery targets—'Get used to playing for second from now on!' Nico scowled and flung a pack of Mythomagic cards at her head, snapping, 'If you're so smart, why didn't you figure out how to save Bianca?' Will appeared in the doorway of cabin six, which she'd turned upside down in a frantic search, holding up her laptop with a sheepish grin. 'Connor made me take it…I lost a bet with him.'

Every urge she'd ever had to throttle them surged into her head, staining her vision a deeper, bloodier red. A snarl escaped her mouth, directed at Will, whose eyes reflected a slow burn back at her.

'This is almost too easy,' Eris said, her voice brimming with amusement. Thalia and Nico were already duelling sword to bow across the rift between them. Percy's murderous gaze vacillated between Will and Annabeth, as though he was undecided as to which of them he should attack first.

Eris didn't intend to kill them herself. No, she was much more enamoured of making them kill each other.

'Not much sport in provoking natural enemies, is there?' Eris mused. 'The daughter of Zeus and the son of Hades—bah, too easy.' She fixed her sadistic, glittering eyes on Annabeth and Percy. 'Ah yes, the biggest challenge. Coming between even the most dedicated of lovers.'

A cold chill trickled down Annabeth's spine. She wanted to draw her sword and run it through Eris, but she was afraid if she tried, she might end up attacking her friends instead. Or worse, Percy.

Eris's fog thickened around her with a vengeance. Its tendrils squeezed her chest like it was trying to wring hatred and anger from her heart. Eris's voice dripped poisonous honey in her ears: *He decided you were worth forgetting. He chose an empousa over you. Doesn't that make you just livid?*

The image of Percy wrapped around Bella in the alley in Phoenix flashed tauntingly at her. It blended into other wounds, old hurts that she thought she'd gotten over long ago: Percy laughing with Rachel as they drove down a winding beach road; Percy holding hands with the gorgeous
Calypso on a paradise island.

Darker memories emerged and floated to the surface. She saw Percy facing Luke on the Williamsburg Bridge, cold green meeting malevolent gold. 'Can't you see he's evil, Annabeth? He's Kronos, through and through.' She saw a sinister shadow in Percy's face as he brought Riptide down in a murderous arc. Wild mania burned in his eyes as he raised a whirlwind of poison.

*How dare he frighten you? How dare he turn into what he set out to fight?*

There were many things that had made her so mad with him. Her blood boiled with every image Eris showed her, rage roaring through her veins and pounding in her ears. It wasn't an unfamiliar feeling. Another memory surfaced—a time when she'd been royally pissed off at him, although she couldn't even recall why.

'I'm so mad at you!' she'd yelled.

'Okay,' he'd said, very seriously. 'I'm sorry.'

'Do you even know what you're apologising for?'

'Not really. But I love you. So I'm sorry I made you mad.'

The mist blew apart. Annabeth looked straight into Eris's amazed face.

Eris wanted her to focus on the anger, on the parts of Percy that had ignited her wrath, but a person wasn't just made of one part. You loved them whole—the good and the bad.

And with Percy, the things that infuriated her about him were often the same things she loved about him. It had been that way right from the beginning, when he had returned to her despite her explicit instructions to leave, in order to fight off three Furies closing in on her.

She saw Percy making her stop in the forum even though they were already late for class, because he just had to offer a denari to the fauns by the fountain.

Percy halting their run for a disoriented tourist on the street—'What's the harm, Annabeth, they just need directions,'—right before the werecat threw off its disguise and tried to sink fangs into his neck.

Percy charging headlong into a fight after she'd explicitly told him to stay back. 'This wasn't the plan, Percy!'

'Screw the plan, it's not like our plans ever work!'

Percy trying to send her to safety, even if that meant he had to stay behind in Tartarus.

How she hated the way he trusted people when he shouldn't, the way he never listened and always screwed up her plans, the way he was so infuriatingly loyal; but how she loved him for it. And what she would give to have that Percy back!

The cry that escaped her mouth was half-exasperation, half-laughter. The choking anger subsided. The mist was receding, being pushed further away from her. It was like a dam had burst, releasing a flood of memories—good ones, to overwhelm the bitterness and resentment with waves of love.

Strolling hand in hand down the Via Praetoria in perfect, contented silence. A kiss under the Eiffel Tower. Lazy Sunday mornings curled up in bed.

She drew deeper within herself, concentrating on every precious memory she had of love—not just
for Percy, but her friends, too. Years ago, in the Temple of Fear, Piper had taught her to focus her thoughts around a single emotion. Annabeth did so now, calling upon her love for her friends—everything about them, good and bad. She pictured Thalia laughing and spinning her around at an old school dance in Brooklyn ('Who needs guys for a good dance?') Will holding her hand in the Plaza Hotel as he bandaged her shoulder ('You're gonna be fine, Annabeth. Percy's coming now.') Nico standing by Hestia's hearth, meeting her hand in a high five ('I'm happy for you guys.')

Like a golden ray of sunlight, her thoughts wound through Eris's discordant fog, beaming a path to her friends. When it touched them, the ugly expressions on their faces turned to surprise. Thalia and Nico dropped their battle and stared at each other, bewildered. Will fell to his knees, gasping as the red fog lifted from him. A silvery light reached out and twined with her golden one. Annabeth saw herself with Will, racing through the woods at Camp Half-Blood with a blue flag held aloft between them. They splashed across the creek and shared a grin as the flag turned grey and gold—a team victory.

And then Thalia and Nico joined the battle, too, adding more visions of their friendship. Annabeth watched herself drape a blanket over a younger Nico. She saw Thalia pull her into a tight hug and whisper in her ear, 'You'll always be family to me, Annabeth.'

Triumph surged through Annabeth's heart. They could fight this. Eris wasn't going to win.

Then she looked at the goddess of strife and her heart plummeted.

Eris had relinquished the four of them, but her attention was fully focused on Percy. Her long, clawed nails rested on Percy's shoulder as she whispered into his ear. The mist that they had forced away from themselves swirled exclusively around Percy—the only one of them who hadn't added to the collection of good memories.

Because he didn't have any.

Without his memories, what strength did Percy have to fight Eris's powers? What could he draw on to resist the strife she induced?

Percy let out a cry of inchoate rage. He raised Riptide high above his head and stabbed the sword down, plunging it straight into the rift Eris's poniard had already made in the ground. The cracks deepened, cutting a jagged line through the earth. It created a fissure that separated Thalia and Nico, who were nearest the cliff edge, from the rest.

And then the ground beneath them collapsed. For a brief moment, their feet scrambled for purchase, finding none. Will lunged forward to grab Nico's hand. Annabeth stumbled towards them, tripped, and landed flat on her stomach. Her arms reached uselessly into the empty air where her friends had been a second ago.

Her mind refused initially to register what had happened. Thalia, Nico, and Will couldn't have disappeared into that black chasm.

Except they had. Just like that, they were gone, leaving her with Eris and Percy.

Percy.

Annabeth rolled over onto her back. Percy stood over her, sword raised, his eyes glowing red and Eris's mist settling over him like a vengeful cloak. Annabeth stared up at him, frozen with horror. How could she fight? Even if she could bring herself to battle Percy, he was an incredibly powerful demigod. When he took full control of that power, it was as terrifying as it was wonderful. Annabeth
remembered the times she had seen him like this: standing over her on the Williamsburg Bridge to face Kronos's army single-handedly, commanding a hurricane in the middle of Central Park against the onslaught of Hyperion, glowing as brightly as his father as they charged down Otis and Ephialtes in the Parthenon.

And the last time they had been in Tartarus—slaying Arachne, choking the goddess Akhlys with her own poison.

Only now, his wrath was directed at Annabeth.

'Percy, please—'

Behind him, Eris cackled with glee. 'Everything that befell you, it was her fault! She stole your memories and lied to you! Doesn't that make you so angry?'

'I'm so mad at you,' Percy intoned.

Annabeth swallowed. 'I'm sorry.'

'She doesn't mean it. She—'

'Sorry,' Percy repeated. 'Because you did lie to me? You did steal my memories?'

'Because I failed to protect you.' His image blurred through her tears. 'I'm sorry I failed you. I love you.'

For a moment, the red in his eyes seemed to flicker with its original green. But Percy kept his stance, Riptide hanging like a guillotine over her head.

'I'm sorry,' she said again. 'I never meant to hurt you.' And while she waited for the blade to fall, she told him, 'I love you, no matter what.'

She wanted that to be the last thing she ever said.

Annabeth closed her eyes. She felt the whoosh of Riptide swinging through the air.

The blow didn't come. Instead, Eris gave a blood-curdling screech.

Annabeth blinked.

Percy had run Eris through with his sword. His eyes were no longer red, but the bloody mist still clung to him. His face was set in the same fierce, hard expression. He stared at the ashy fragments of the goddess, breathing heavily.

'I don't know what's the truth,' he said to her remains, 'but I do know it's not what you're telling me.'

The pieces of Eris didn't reply. A faint breeze curled around them and swept what was left of her over the cliff. Her angry fog faded into the chasm. Annabeth crawled to the drop-off, where the darkness that had swallowed her friends reproached her.

They're gone. They're gone and you failed to save them. Just like you failed Percy.

'Thalia!' she screamed.

There was no answer, no indication that her voice even managed to travel into the chasm below. The darkness seemed to absorb all sound. Percy joined her in yelling their friends' names, but their voices
sounded tinny and weak.

Percy swore. 'It's my fault. I—I killed them.'

Annabeth turned to him. His face was pale and gaunt, his eyes hollow with self-loathing. The sight of him taking the soul-crushing guilt upon himself ripped into her heart like an arai's curse.

'No,' she told him firmly. 'That was Eris. She twisted your mind—she played with all of our minds.'

He shook his head. 'I shouldn't have been persuaded. I should've known she was lying, just playing with me. You're all here because of me! And I...oh gods...'

She couldn't let Percy take this on himself. Especially when the real finger of blame should be pointing at her.

'Eris got to you because she was telling the truth, sort of. Your memories—the empousa getting her hands on you—it was our fault. My fault,' she admitted. 'So it's me you should be blaming. I'm the one that got you into this whole mess.'

Percy's eyes widened. 'What are you saying?'

Annabeth pushed herself to her feet. Her entire body was trembling so hard, even her teeth chattered. But she made herself speak.

She told him everything. From the attack by Hipponoe, who wanted revenge on her for killing Joe Bob, to her decision to use the Lethe, to the mistake she'd made with the nepenthe and his subsequent disappearance after they'd fed him the potion.

When she finished, Percy was silent for a long time, his mouth drawn in a hard line.

'You should've told me,' he said finally.

Annabeth looked down. 'We—I wanted to, but at first...you already hated me. You thought we were all lying to you. If you knew I was responsible for your memory loss, too...And then when everything started to get better, I wasn't sure if bringing it up would just hurt you more. I didn't want to make you stop trusting everyone again.'

'Maybe I would've appreciated the honesty.'

'I'm sorry.'

Percy nodded. His eyes softened. 'So am I. I guess I didn't really make it easy for you either. And for what it's worth, it kinda sounds like I might've gotten myself into all of this.'

'Percy, you took a curse meant for me.'

'That wasn't your fault.'

'It was my stupid pride—' She choked on a rising sob.

'It sounds like I chose to do it,' Percy said mildly. 'I guess I was—we were—well.' His mouth twisted wryly. She remembered the question he'd finally asked her the night before they left for Tartarus, the one she'd found herself unable to answer because he'd used the past tense, as if it were a piece of history that would never again be true. Were you my girlfriend?

Then he said, in a tone that filled her with hope, 'You must've been hurting so much all this time. I'm
sorry. I wish I **could** remember. I—I don’t like hurting you.'

Annabeth swallowed hard. 'It's okay. Maybe you'll still get your memories back down here. Even if we have to go to the edge of Chaos.'

'Even if we don't…' Percy looked at her hesitantly. 'Well, maybe we could start over. I wouldn't mind giving it a try. You and me.'

*You and me.* The glimmer of hope swelled in her chest.

'We have to save you first,' she reminded him. 'And the others. They **have** to be alive.' She refused to accept the alternative.

Percy looked dubiously over the cliff. 'I can sense water,' he said. 'Right at the bottom. Maybe Nico did that thing he did when we fell in here.'

'Shadow travel.'

'Can we climb down?'

Annabeth considered it. They'd made it down a cliff face in Tartarus before. It had been treacherous enough when they *could* see the handholds. Here in the Dark Lands, they would be feeling blindly for every crevice.

Before they could make a decision, something in Percy's pocket jerked. He pulled out the bronze compass. Its triangle pattern winked like a firefly in twilight, pointing north along the cliff's edge. It seemed to have acquired a life of its own, tugging Percy's hand in that direction.

Annabeth and Percy exchanged a look.

'I guess we follow,' Annabeth said.

Under the compass's insistent direction, they skirted the edge of the cliff. The terrain sloped gently downwards. After a while, Annabeth heard a gurgling below their feet, like a rush of water flowing through rock. She imagined a river cutting its way through an underground gorge, pouring out of a cavern beneath them. Maybe this path would eventually wind down to the bottom.

*Please let the others be there.*

The cliff face curved to the left. As soon as they followed it round, they seemed to pass out of the inky night into a foggy dawn. The sky was lighter and the air weighed less, no longer settling heavily on her shoulders as it had a moment ago.

Then Annabeth realised with a chill that this was because their bodies no longer had as much substance for the air to press down on. Percy looked like he had after drinking the nepenthe, smoky and insubstantial, like he was formed entirely of thick fog. Judging from the translucent quality of her own fingers, she probably didn't look much better.

Sprouting along their ghostly feet were patches of brightly-coloured flowers that were utterly incongruent with the dismal landscape. Something about this path was eerily familiar.

Ahead, the cliff jutted out like a peninsula over a churning black void. A lone figure stood on it, veiled in shadow. The one thing that stood out was a pinprick of golden-bronze light. Their bronze compass strained towards its round, bright point.
'It's her,' Annabeth said. 'The em pou sa.'

'What's that black stuff?' Percy asked, sounding simultaneously fascinated and repulsed. 'Where are we?'

Annabeth looked again at his smoky appearance, the way the contours of his body blended into the air like a shroud of nothingness had been flung over him.

*The verge of final death,* hissed the echo of a voice that haunted her nightmares. *Here, you are closer to nothingness than any mortal has ever been.*

She should have guessed that the compass would lead them here. If the em pou sa was after Percy's soul, she would come here, to the place where his memories had washed out.

'The edge of Chaos,' she whispered.

Percy's eyes widened until he looked more ghostly than ever, a pair of green eyes staring out of the gloom.

'Come on,' Annabeth said.

She felt the pull of Chaos before they got there. The air was impossibly thin, as if its molecules had been sucked away into a hungry vacuum. Annabeth's lungs felt like they had been ironed out onto a two-dimensional board. Weightless as her limbs were, moving was a challenge. She had to glide rather than step forward on her legs.

At least the wishbone charm on her bracelet still felt solid. She hoped it meant she'd still be able to wield her sword. They'd be disadvantaged enough facing the em pou sa here without losing the use of their weapons.

The em pou sa didn't seem to notice their approach. She was focused on the black hole before her. In her hands was a compass like Percy's. The light they had seen was shining from it, a weak beam travelling into Chaos.

Or so Annabeth thought, until she realised that the light was actually travelling in the opposite direction. The em pou sa was drawing a misty substance out of the void.

Next to her, Percy stumbled. He clapped one hand to his back—the same spot that had pained him before Annabeth had given him the bronze compass.

'Percy!' She grabbed his shoulder, thankful to find his physical form still holding despite his ghostly appearance.

'I'm—fine—' he gritted out. 'It's her—'

The em pou sa turned. Unlike Annabeth and Percy, she looked perfectly solid, untouched by the veil of nothingness that clung to them. The glow of her compass set off her hair such that it burned like a flaming torch in the night.

Her red eyes gleamed when they landed on Percy. She started to laugh.

'This couldn't have worked out better if I'd planned it myself!' She crooked one manicured claw at Percy. 'Hello, gorgeous,' she said to him. 'You're right on time. And now, you are going to make me immortal.'
The goddess Eris has a cameo in HoH, but I decided to flesh her out more. She was loads of fun to write!
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Thalia has to make a sacrifice in order to save her friends.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is the first instance where the fic earns its rating—it's rated M for references to paedophilia. There are no explicit descriptions, but if dirty old geezers being what they are makes you squeamish, you want to avoid this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XI
THALIA

If it hadn't been for the ledge, Thalia would probably be dead. As it was, she hit the ground hard enough to knock the wind straight out of her. But the fall—maybe twenty feet or so—wasn't deadly. She didn't even seem to have broken any bones, although pain flared through her joints as they absorbed the shock of her landing.

Thank Artemis she still had her teenage body, with its youthful resistance to serious injury. She had a feeling that at her true age, her bones should have been more brittle.

Grassy debris rained down, scattering around her the earth that had crumbled in Percy's Eris-induced landslide. A few feet away, Nico groaned. He and Will had landed in a heap—it looked as though Nico had actually broken Will's fall—and his ankle seemed to have borne the brunt of the impact. His foot was twisted in an awkward angle.

Will rolled to the side and sat up.

'Don't think it's broken,' gasped Nico.

'No,' Will agreed, putting one hand out to feel it. 'A really bad sprain, though. A couple of snapped ligaments.'

He started to concentrate, but Nico knocked his hand away. 'No. You've already stretched your healing powers to the limit. You need to save your energy. Just use—' He stopped and looked blankly around them for Will's supplies.

'My pack's gone,' Will said. 'I think it fell…' He waved his hand at the drop-off.

Thalia sighed. Great.

Will pursed his lips. 'Never mind. I'll improvise.'
While Will set to work fashioning a crutch for Nico out of his jacket and a few of Thalia's arrows, she tried to assess their situation.

They were on a narrow, rocky ledge no more than six feet wide. It was a miracle they'd even hit it instead of tumbling all the way down to the bottom. Thalia couldn't tell how far the cliff extended downwards.

Although they couldn't be that far from the top, it was shrouded in darkness. She couldn't even see three feet up the cliff face. The rock was smooth as bone, with no outcroppings or indents. Unscalable. The only crack in it was a split that started a few inches above her head and ran down vertically, widening into a two-foot gap from her waist down.

Thalia contemplated using her arrows. If she could shove them into the rock face, they might be able to etch a route up. Experimentally, she stabbed one at the rock. It struck with a dull clang that reverberated in her ears like the hunting bells Artemis used to confuse prey—a magical echo that muffled all other sound and dulled the senses of their quarry.

'What in Hades?' she muttered.

The arrow hadn't made even the slightest notch in the black bone. Maybe if she fired it from her bow…except the ledge was too narrow for her to get a good shooting angle.

Thalia gave up the idea. Nico wasn't in any shape to climb, anyway.

She gritted her teeth in frustration.

Will looked up from his work. He'd strapped up Nico's foot and managed to cobble together a thin stick from the shaft of several arrows, held together by strips of leather. Nico leaned on it cautiously. It twisted a little under the strain, but bore his weight nonetheless.

'We need to get back up there,' Nico said. His voice sounded hazy and distorted through the echo of arrow against cliff. 'We left Percy and Annabeth with Eris.'

Thalia decided not to mention that Percy had sent them plunging out of the fight. It was Eris's fault anyway. She looked guiltily at Nico, whom Eris had egged her into attacking. 'That was her strategy, wasn't it? Divide and conquer.'

Would she succeed with Percy and Annabeth, too?

Before, Thalia would have said it was impossible, that no force on earth—or below it—could have made Percy turn on Annabeth. But this new Percy, she wasn't so sure of. He was all the power commanded by the son of a Big Three and none of the heart. Colder, more suspicious—less Seaweed, more Brain, she thought ruefully.

The image of Percy's face, contorted with hatred as he plunged his sword into the ground, blended into an older memory. Another cliff, another fight, a different boy.

The same twisted anger.

_Luke's expression gives way to desperation and a softer, pleading look. And then he topples from the cliff—at her hand—and falls, and falls, and falls…_

Thalia shook the memory away. It had been nearly a decade ago. Why was she still thinking about it?
Percy, she reminded herself. Percy was supposed to be different. He wasn’t supposed to turn hard and angry and traitorous like Luke had.

Artemis would have said, *What can you expect from men?*

But it was Reyna’s voice Thalia heard in her head instead. *It doesn’t matter who hurt or betrayed you. We don’t define ourselves by what men do to us, but what we choose to do to ourselves.*

For someone so young, that girl had a lot of wisdom and a yard of guts.

Thalia wondered what Reyna would do if she’d been the one to come down here instead.

A shout from Will brought her back to the present.

‘I think this leads somewhere.’ He was peering into the narrow opening in the rock face. It was just wide enough for a thin person to crawl through.

It was also the only path with a remote possibility of getting them off this ledge.

‘All right,’ Thalia said. ‘Lead the way.’

OoOoO

It made no sense whatsoever that it should be brighter inside the rock than out on the open ledge. But Thalia had long since given up trying to wrap her mind around the physics of Tartarus.

After they crawled through the gap in the cliff wall, they found themselves in a narrow passageway that widened into a tunnel barely high enough for them to walk upright. The cave walls were coated in a filmy grey substance that bathed them in a hazy light. It was brighter than the inky darkness outside, but also foggier, like they were trudging through industrial smog.

Thalia ran her hand along the wall. It didn’t feel like rock. The surface was slick and slimy, and it pulsed beneath her fingers. She pulled her hand away quickly with a hiss of revulsion.

‘What is it?’ Will asked.

‘It’s…gross.’ She shuddered. ‘Feels like we’re inside a monster’s—’

‘Don’t,’ said Nico darkly. ‘For your own sanity, don’t follow that thought to its conclusion.’

Will changed the subject. ‘Where do you think this leads?’

‘Not a clue,’ Thalia said. She could no more fathom the geography of Tartarus than she could its physics.

‘It feels familiar,’ Nico said. ‘Reminds me of the Labyrinth,’ Will agreed. ‘Same twisting tunnels.’

Nico shook his head. ‘I think this might be the way I was…’ A shiver ran through his body, ‘…taken.’ He swallowed hard. ‘By Gaia’s forces. To the heart of Tartarus.’

Thalia suppressed a groan. ‘Why does that sound ominous?’

‘It’s not,’ Nico said. ‘Not a bad thing, I mean. That’s the only place the Doors of Death can anchor down here. It’s where we’d have to go eventually. Percy and Annabeth—if they survive—will have
to get there, too. We just have to hope we'll meet up.'

It sounded like a long shot, but what better idea did they have?

The tunnel sloped downwards, which Nico also declared a good sign. After a while, they heard the sound of running water. Another positive, according to Nico. 'Everything flows to the heart of Tartarus.'

Thalia hoped it might be the Phlegethon, carving an underground path through the rock. Then she decided she was definitely going crazy if she was hoping to meet the River of Fire.

They needed it, though. None of them had been in great shape to begin with, not after the attack of the *araei*, and the cave smog was clogging up their lungs now, making them labour for every breath.

The trickle of water got louder. An orange glow appeared in the distance, like a lantern on a foggy moor.

Their tunnel opened up into a warmly lit cavern. The ceiling made a low dome several feet above their heads, dotted with glittering amber gemstones. These were embedded along the cavern walls as well, giving it its dim glow. Their tunnel wasn't the only entrance; there were at least eight other openings leading in. Two had streams trickling through, which cut across the cavern. Each divided into two branches. One of the four divided branches merged with one from the other stream to form a single line that snaked around the far edge of the cavern and ran out along a different tunnel. The remaining two streams ran in a parallel, faster flow out another exit.

'Maybe one is the Phlegethon?' But even as she said it, Thalia heard the faint, watery wail of misery that marked a different river.

'The Cocytus,' Nico said grimly. 'And the other is the Lethe.'

They hobbled along the cavern edge, careful to avoid the rivers.

'Which tunnel do we pick, then?' Will asked, peering at the multiple openings in the cavern wall.

'That depends,' said a low, gravelly voice, 'on where you want to go.'

Out of the cavern entrance between the two rivers came a stooped figure shuffling slowly towards them. He moved sluggishly, hunched over a staff that supported his laborious steps.

'Demigods,' he said. 'So…young.'

He was a shrivelled old hunchback with a tiny, withered body. His mottled skin was cut so deep with wrinkles that it resembled a patchwork quilt stitched together by an uneven hand. The loose skin on his face hung revoltingly in a floppy wattle beneath his chin.

'Who are you?' Thalia demanded.

'Oh, you know me,' said the old man. 'Everybody knows me. No one escapes me, in the end.'

He leered at them, revealing three crooked teeth in a maw of diseased gums.

'Stay where you are,' said Nico. 'Not a step closer, old man!'

'Old man?' The old geezer's mouth formed a tight, angry line. His eyes gleamed dangerously, going from milky white to a bloodshot pink.
'I don't like this,' whispered Will.

They backed away quickly towards the nearest tunnel. At least the dude's approach was slow, hampered by his reliance on his staff.

'Old man,' he repeated. 'Let's see how you like old age, young ones.'

The air of the cavern thickened until it felt like they were wading through honey. Thalia had once been in the presence of Kronos when he had manipulated time itself, and it was exactly like the Titan of time was taking control now, with everything slowing to a snail's pace.

Except when she looked at her friends, time also seemed to be speeding up. With each step they took, they seemed to gain ten years. Their faces drooped; lines etched themselves in the corners of their eyes and mouths; their shoulders hunched forward despondently.

Thalia put a hand to her own cheek. Although her movements were sluggish, her skin still felt supple and smooth.

Of course—she couldn't age.

'You're Geras, aren't you?' she said.

The old man kept plodding towards them with a smug, satisfied look on his weather-beaten face.

Nodding slowly, he said, 'Behold my power—no man escapes my scourge.'

Caught in his spell, Will and Nico's bodies were becoming nearly as shrivelled as Geras's. Their mouths hung open listlessly. They seemed incapable of producing coherent speech.

If this kept up, would they age all the way to death?

'Stop!' Thalia cried. She racked her brain for anything she could remember about the god of old age. 'Aren't you—aren't you supposed to be a good god? I mean, that's what the ancient Greeks believed, right? You were supposed to bring fame and excellence to the elderly.'

Geras gave a loud, phlegmy harrumph. 'Once,' he growled. 'Once I was respected, revelled. Once I conferred wisdom and experience along with wrinkles and osteoporosis. My gifts were once coveted as a crown of maturity.'

As he spoke, the ceiling of his cavern came to life to illustrate his words. White-bearded men in togas presided over a court while young courtiers served them fruit and wine. Youths kneeled and kissed the feet of iron-haired grandmothers.

'And then what happened?' Geras waved his hand and the paean to senescence morphed into pitiful scenes of degradation. A decrepit old beggar was spat on while he huddled in the doorway of a building. Children giggled and made faces at a wrinkled old crone as she hobbled laboriously along the sidewalk. Four vacant-eyed octogenarians sat around a bingo table in a drab nursing home, staring listlessly at the game cards in front of them.

'Demoted by gods and mortals alike. Banished and forgotten. Cast down to Tartarus to rot while they celebrated that slut Hebe instead. No honour. No respect.' He glared at Nico, whose hair had gone snow-white by now, but fortunately seemed to have otherwise stopped ageing while Geras focused on Thalia.

Then Geras's sinister, gap-toothed smile returned. 'But I get my revenge, don't I? I wither all,
crambling your bodies to dust, drawing night across your eyes and turning them milky with age. Perhaps you do not respect me. But you will fear me.'

'But we do respect you!' Thalia said quickly. 'If anyone appreciates old age, it's demigods. I mean, think how many of us die young.'

She couldn't even count the number of friends who had fallen before they'd had a chance to grow old. She thought of the gamble they'd taken in coming down here, trying to give Percy that chance. Her mind flitted again to Luke, cut down in the prime of his life. Once, they'd met a demigod in his sixties and marvelled at his longevity. She remembered thinking, what if that could be us, too? What if they'd both had a chance to grow old together, without being dogged by monsters and prophecies?

She'd sidestepped death and ageing, but she sometimes wondered what it might be like if she'd remained mortal. Would she look like Reyna and Annabeth, with their knowledge and experience written across their faces? What would it be like to grow old alongside them?

'Hmph,' Geras said. 'What's your name, girl?'

'Thalia.'

'I knew a Thalia once,' Geras looked slightly less grumpy. 'Daughter of an old friend. Used to be quite fond of her.' His face darkened again. 'But that was before. When I had a place on Olympus. Before everyone decided old age was to be avoided.'

On the ceiling, pictures appeared of middle-aged ladies injecting botox into their faces and rich men undergoing liposuction. Geras looked at them in disgust. 'Mortals are cheating left and right these days—they'd rather tango with Thanatos than come quietly to me.'

One of the men bled out on the operating table, dead in his attempt to regain his youthful physique. Thalia shifted her weight uncomfortably, acutely aware of her own age-defying appearance. Geras didn't seem to have noticed yet that she hadn't turned as decrepit as her companions.

'So they wish to keep their youthful appearances,' Geras sneered. 'But there is plenty more I can steal.' He spread his fingers along the cavern wall and the gemstones embedded in it moved aside to make room for a glowing five-by-five grid. Rosy pink cheeks appeared in one square; in another, a network of dots connected by blindingly white lines.

'Health…' said Geras, 'cognitive ability…vitality…'

Each lit-up square condensed into a gem as Geras spoke. His eyes ran lasciviously over one of them before it shrunk—the curvy outlines of a feminine figure.

'They're actual qualities,' Thalia said. Horror and fascination flooded her as she stared at the gems in the wall. 'You're taking all of that from people—their health, their minds—' All squirrelled away into his despicable collection, leaving their owners stricken with illness, impotence, and dementia.

'I collect the years of mortal life.' Geras filled a horizontal row with gems and drew his finger across it like he was playing a ghoulish game of bingo. The gems sank into the cavern rock and the line he'd drawn through the squares solidified into a long silver rod.

'What else have I got to entertain me in this infernal pit?' he growled. 'Here at the confluence of Cocytus and Lethe. Bah! If they want old age to be synonymous with misery and senility, that's exactly what they'll get.'

Geras touched his rod to the ceiling. A butterfly cloud blossomed from its end and splattered across
the domed surface. The rod transfigured into a remote, which Geras aimed at the ceiling. Above their heads played a video of a statuesque young girl dancing on a wide stage.

'Is that…?'

'A memory, of course,' said Geras. His eyes travelled appreciatively over the young dancer's figure. 'I have an understanding with Mnemosyne. Alzheimer's they call it these days, I believe—such a wonderful affliction.'

With a practised flick, he cast his rod and discarded the memory into the stream on his left, which had to be the Lethe.

'You just—you took someone's memory!'

Geras shrugged. 'They'd wash out to Chaos in the end anyway. All I'm doing is hastening the process along. Sometimes I can even collect from early-onset years. Now those make for great streaming quality.'

Like an expert fisherman, he cast into the Lethe again and reeled in a squirming silver fish. He flung it up to the ceiling and pressed play. This one featured a five-year-old girl splashing in a bath. Geras fished out another, and another. There was a definite theme to them, all starring girls of a rather specific age range. The lecherous grin on Geras's face as he watched them sickened Thalia. She could just imagine him holed away down here, binge-watching his stolen memory collection like it was a paedophilic Gilmore Girls marathon.

Then her mind snagged on the way he reeled in each memory. Geras was pulling against the current.

'Where does the stream lead to?' she asked.

'Chaos, naturally.'

'And you're retrieving the memories from there? You can do that?'

'Of course. I am the son of Nyx herself, you know,' he said loftily. 'And this is my private channel. What's that they call it these days…pirating? High definition streaming, any time I want it.'

An idea began to form in Thalia's head. 'I'll strike a bargain with you,' she said quickly.

Geras snorted. 'What can you possibly have to bargain with me? I'll collect your years one way or another. No mortal can avoid me. You all come to me in the end, and those of you who don't…well, the dead don't bargain either, do they?'

'I'm not mortal.' This was a real gamble. If Geras hadn't caught on yet, he certainly would now, and given his attitude towards age-reduction plastic surgery, Thalia doubted he had much love for the immortally young Hunters. She'd have to keep his attention by dangling something he wanted in front of him instead. She hoped she'd read him right.

Geras squinted at her. 'Curse my eyesight! It's been getting worse by the millennium.' His filmy eyes finally focused on her tiara. 'One of Artemis's infernal Hunters. Cheats, all of you! Never ageing, always evading me. I should have known.' He stamped his rod on the ground in a rage. 'That's why you're not responding to my powers. Well, maybe I can't get at you, but them—' His head turned slowly back to Will and Nico.

'No, wait,' Thalia said firmly. 'You're mad that you'll never get to collect from me. But what if I gave you something?'
'Keep talking.'

'The missing years. The ageing that never happened. What if I offered you those?'

_Bingo_, she thought, as Geras's eyes sparkled. He was clearly enticed by the idea of collecting a coveted, unreachable prize. She saw the glow of her own immortality reflected in his greedy gaze. It seemed to hang over her like a second skin. There were layers to them: the years of her childhood clung most tightly to her; her six years as a Hunter danced on the surface. Was that what Geras was drooling over now?

It made her skin crawl to think of herself ending up on his paedophilic video collection. But she had a hidden hand up her sleeve, if she could just play her cards right.

'I'll give you a year,' she bargained. 'In return, I want safe passage for me and my friends past your cavern.'

'That will cost more than one year.'

'Two, then.'

'Five.'

Thalia added quickly in her head. 'How about six, then?'

Geras's grin widened. She could see him mentally stripping off six years as a Hunter with his eyes.

'But I want one more thing, then. I want to know how you retrieve memories from Chaos.'

'Planning on putting together your own shows, eh? Reckon that juvenile prude Artemis doesn't let you have much in the way of entertainment.'

Thalia ignored his insinuation. 'Do we have a deal or not?'

'Deal,' said Geras. He touched his silver rod eagerly to her head.

Thalia ducked away. 'Swear on the Styx first. We pass through and you show me how to retrieve memories.'

'I swear. On all the rivers of Tartarus—oh, all right, Styx included. Safe passage for you lot and the key to memory retrieval. All for the bargain price of six years.' He was practically salivating now in his eagerness.

A deep rumble shook the cavern, sealing their bargain.

Geras pointed his rod at her again. This time, Thalia let him lift the ghostly shade of her years from her. She concentrated hard on feeding him the right ones.

Geras didn't seem to notice anything amiss. The shades he fished off her took the shape of a teenage girl. It was a good thing Thalia hadn't looked all that different at fifteen than she had at twelve. Or maybe Geras was just myopic enough from his days of constantly streaming movies in a darkened cave that he couldn't discern the subtle differences that might have alerted him to the fact that he wasn't extracting what he coveted.

The years lifted from her with a faint whiff of pine. Although Geras was removing them, Thalia felt instead like a mantle was falling over her shoulders. Her body seemed fuller, heavier, and—hang on, was she taller, too?
Geras wound the six Thalia-shades around his rod, then twirled the rod like a baton. The six years went flying like ninja stars and lodged into the cavern walls, six more gemstones in his vast collection. They were the verdant colour of a pine forest. Geras's eyes lingered on them as if he were itching to play the memories right there and then. Fortunately, he remembered to uphold his end of the bargain first.

'You can have this remote,' he said, handing her his rod. It weighed less than she expected, as though it were made of light, or thought. 'Fish as close to the source as you can, or else the buffering takes forever. It's easiest right at the edge of Chaos. Less drag.'

'Would I be able to return the memories to their owner?' She probably should have asked this first.

'Sure. I do it sometimes for kicks. The mortals get so confused when the addled old sundowners come lucid all of a sudden.'

Thalia tried not to let her disgust show.

'Anyway, if it's Chaos you're after, you'll want that tunnel.' He pointed. 'And…' With a careless wave of his free hand, Will and Nico unfroze. Thalia was relieved to see the scourge of age lift gradually from their faces. It was a bizarre reversal of time that would have put Benjamin Button to shame. Even Nico's bunged ankle caught the power of the rewind. He straightened, dropping his makeshift crutch.

Geras retreated into the tunnel between the rivers, probably to check out Thalia's gift in private. There wouldn't be much time before he realised she'd tricked him.

'Come on,' she said, looping her arms through Will and Nico's. 'We gotta get out of here.'

She led them down the tunnel Geras had pointed out.

'Thalia,' Nico gasped as they ran, 'you didn't seriously give him—'

'Of course not.' They were far enough down the tunnel that the orange glow of Geras's cavern was no longer visible behind them. She slowed to a jog. 'Six years as a tree, remember? What good were they ever going to do me?' She pictured Geras's outrage when he found himself staring at a solid pine tree. Serve him right, the old creep.

Will laughed. 'Apollo's hymns, that's brilliant!' He sobered quickly. 'You still look older, though. Not old-old like Geras made us, but like a grown-up.'

_Six years_, thought Thalia. She'd look twenty-one. Way too old to be Hunter. What was Artemis going to say?

Maybe she'd have to go join Reyna's sister and the Amazons. What would Reyna think of that?

'Never mind that,' she said. It wasn't something she could worry about now. 'We have to find Percy and Annabeth. And I have a feeling that the edge of Chaos is exactly where they'll end up, too.'

Chapter End Notes

_Geras_ is another one of the gods that got a cameo in HoH.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Percy's memories await him at the edge of Chaos.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

XII
PERCY

The skin on Percy's back seared like it had been touched by a branding iron. He would have fallen if it weren't for Annabeth's hands on his shoulders.

The air seemed to be bursting with a million electrons. Its static charge tugged him towards the cliff edge where Bella was standing, drawing a river of light out of the darkness. The laser beams of her gleaming red eyes bored straight into him.

Percy's compass cracked open. Light poured from it, flowing out to the foggy stream Bella was pulling from the void. When it met with the other trail of light, the two rays expanded into a mesmerising cloud of mist. Colours swirled through it, like light filtered through a prism. They were predominantly shades of blues and greens, with threads of silver and gold winding their way across. Sunset hues dripped through occasionally, like little water droplets, some outlined with a tinge of black. They reminded him of the golden bubbles that he'd dreamed of in the Salt River.

He took a tentative step forward.

'My missing piece,' Bella crooned. 'Come to me, then. Join with me—we will be immortal when we are one.'

The pain in his back diminished to a faint tug. He felt lighter than ever, as though he was made of that dancing, weightless mist. If he could only shake the single string mooring him to his body, he could rise out of his skin and merge with it.

He wanted to snip the thread.

Annabeth grabbed his arm. 'Percy,' she hissed, 'what are you doing?'

It was her voice, more than her fingers, that anchored him. The pull of it was familiar, thickening into a rope that tied itself firmly around his waist.

'Come,' Bella repeated, and her honeyed tone worked away at the knots of his grounding rope. 'I will rise out of Tartarus once and for all. You can come with me.'

'Percy, wake up—she's going to kill you!'

Annabeth planted herself between Percy and Bella. The contrast between the two girls was striking. Bella had once again taken on the seductive appearance of the beautiful, fair-skinned girl he'd met in Phoenix, with the chocolate-brown curls, regal cheekbones, and winsome eyes framed by long
lashes. She still resembled Annabeth, but Annabeth herself looked completely washed out. Her face was haggard and gaunt, practically skeletal. Every inch of her was a dull grey—her blond hair had turned ashy, her eyes so pale they were nearly transparent, her skin the colour of smoke.

Percy looked between the two of them uncertainly.

Bella laughed. 'Surely you don’t buy any of her lies, Perseus?' She held out the compass in her hand—a mirror image of his own. 'We are connected. You knew when I reformed. You came to me.'

'I…' The colourful mist was tantalisingly close, swirling above Bella's hands. He wanted to dive straight into it. Was that what Bella was offering? To put together all the missing puzzle pieces that would make him whole again?

'Yes, you want this,' Bella said. 'Come. You're mine, Perseus, you already know it.'

Annabeth drew her sword. 'No, he's not!' And she swung it at Bella.

Bella was too quick for her. She sidestepped the blow neatly and darted around Annabeth, knocking her to the ground in the process. Annabeth barely managed to avoid being lacerated by a sharp claw.

A claw?

Percy blinked. Bella's image wavered. Her hands became curved talons, ending in clawed fingers. She tottered towards them on mismatched legs of bronze and animal fur. Her hair frizzed out into a flaming puff around her face, which was the only part of her that retained its cold, dazzling beauty.

The sight of her paralysed Percy. He was rooted to the ground, unable to draw his eyes away from her mesmerising appearance. The bronze compass slipped from his fingers and rolled to the edge of the cliff.

Its motion distracted Bella. Her eyes widened. Then she made a dive for the compass.

Annabeth launched herself at Bella. She caught the empousa by her shaggy ankle, tripping her up. The compass teetered for a second at the drop-off and then it fell into the dark chasm below, taking its stream of light with it.

Bella whipped around to face Annabeth. Her lips curled back in a vicious snarl. She snapped her compass shut and shoved it in her pocket. The colourful mist drifted over to the void and began to bleed into the blackness.

Percy had a crazy urge to jump off the cliff into it.

'I didn't drag myself out of the skin of Tartarus to be thwarted by a meddlesome girl,' Bella hissed at Annabeth. 'I'll deal with you first.'

Annabeth rolled away as Bella pounced. 'Percy, run!' she screamed at him. 'I'll hold her off.'

Her words knocked sense into him at last.

'Don't be stupid! You can't take her alone!' He fumbled for his pen, finally gathering his wits enough to extract his sword.

Percy lunged at Bella. He was slow and clumsy, hampered by the strange airiness of his limbs and the return of the throbbing in his back. She dodged his strikes easily, her uneven legs moving with unexpected grace. Bella ducked his blade and connected a well-aimed kick to his wrist, forcing him
to drop his sword.

His attack had given Annabeth time to get back to her feet, though. She ploughed straight into Bella, knocking the empousa to the ground. Percy picked his sword back up.

Annabeth and Bella were locked in a deadly struggle. Percy didn’t know why Annabeth was tackling Bella with her bare hands—her sword lay discarded as she grappled with the empousa—but it made it hard for him to jump into the fight without accidentally cutting Annabeth.

A gush of bright red spurted from Annabeth's shoulder as Bella's claws sliced through her flesh. Annabeth held on, though, like she was attempting to physically restrain Bella.

Then she pulled away, her hands closed around a small object. She kicked herself away from Bella with such force that the empousa flew back several feet. Annabeth flung the item she had snatched over the cliff's edge. Percy's breath caught in his throat as he recognised its gold-bronze light.

Bella's compass sailed away into the void to join its counterpart.

'No!' Bella screamed.

The effect was startling. Although he didn't exactly feel strong or healthy, the pain in Percy's back vanished. He straightened up. He hadn't noticed before the invisible noose that was tightening around him. Not until he escaped it, the way a fish might slip its hook and swim off to freedom.

Bella whirled on Annabeth, fury blazing in her eyes. Annabeth was already bleeding profusely from the cuts she'd sustained in their tussle. She wasn't going to be quick enough to dodge an attack this time.

She'd weakened herself to free Percy from Bella's grip.

In that moment, it didn't matter if he remembered Annabeth, or whether she had meant anything to him. He only knew that he would not let her die at the hands of the empousa. The cry that erupted from his mouth was reflexive, a guttural roar of protectiveness.

Percy charged at Bella.

His sword ran straight through her gut, Roman-style. The momentum of his attack carried them right to the edge of the cliff and thrust Bella off. Time seemed to slow as he teetered on the verge, watching the empousa's scarlet eyes widen in disbelief at the celestial bronze blade sticking out of her stomach. She hung over the void with her mouth in a round, red 'O', backlit by the alluring green-blue mist that still hovered just over the cliff. Her arms reached up as if to gather it.

'Perseus Jackson,' she gasped, and then the flames of her hair seemed to consume her body, leaving only her bronze leg intact. It fell into the chasm, swallowed by darkness. The ashes held her shape for a second, then disintegrated with a puff that fanned the colourful, swirling mist towards Percy.

He expected the mist to be more light than liquid, so it was a shock when the colours splashed over him. They formed a whirlpool of distorted images: faces and places flashed past his eyes in quick succession, accompanied by the disjointed, overlapping murmur of voices.

He's the one, he has to be/Perseus, he always won/Tell the sun and the stars hello/As long as we're together/Cookies can be blue/You're never getting away from me again—

Twelve-year-old Annabeth stared at him with wide grey eyes framed by her princess curls. His mom enveloped him in the warmth of her smile and the tenderness of her embrace. He stood in the middle
of a hurricane, raising wind and water with his bare hands. A silver-haired Titan and a red-skinned giant battled an army of monsters under a bloody sky.


Percy wanted to catch every memory and hold it tight.

Everything that made him Percy was here in this whirlpool at the edge of Chaos, and he knew there was still more to be pulled out of the depths.

'Come, Percy Jackson. Come find what you have lost.'

It was the resounding voice that rang through his dreams, and it was accompanied by the viscous darkness from the old nightmare. Black sludge dragged at him like a vicious undercurrent.

'No!' he yelled.

He fought against the pull of Chaos, but as he did, his memories released him and drifted back towards the void. He realised his mistake the moment he made his desperate grab for them: already balanced precariously on the cliff edge, the motion sent him toppling off the side. He fell back into the maelstrom of memories. And beneath them lay complete nothingness.

A final death. No do-overs.

How ironic was it that he would find his memories here, only to follow them into the primordial soup of Chaos?

Laughter resonated through his head.

His stomach swooped with the sudden loss of solid ground beneath his feet. It reminded him of the tug that had preceded the explosion of the water pipes in Phoenix and the flooding of the apartment in New Rome. Without thinking, he lifted his arms and summoned his colourful whirlpool. The liquid memories cut a stream through the insistent pull from Chaos's vacuum and boosted him like a fountain. They drenched him with a vivid image: Annabeth, standing barefoot on a pier, reaching out a hand to him.

'Hold on, Seaweed Brain. You're not getting away from me that easily.'

The Styx, he thought, the memory shining like a beacon in his mind. Enveloped in its light, he could feel the familiar tug in his lower back, anchoring him against the current that threatened to sweep his identity away. It was the same tether that had always kept him grounded—through the Curse of Achilles, through Hera's meddling, and the despair of the Cocytus.

And even now, through the Curse of Lethe. However tenuous the link had become, even when he'd almost lost it, she had been there. Annabeth was the answer to who he was.

Strong fingers closed around his wrist with fierce determination. The spurt of water he'd summoned had given him enough of a boost that Annabeth was able to lean over the edge to grab him. She lay flat on her stomach, both arms dangling over the cliff and gripping his wrists so tightly that her knuckles turned white.

Annabeth heaved with all her might. She must have anchored her legs around something at the top because for one incredible moment, it felt like she might pull them both out.

But then Chaos roared in Percy's ears and his fountain evaporated, depriving him of its bolstering
support. His hands slipped in Annabeth's grip until they were hanging on to each other by the tips of their fingers. Inch by inch, she began to slide over the edge with him.

'By all means,' said Chaos, 'bring her, too.'

The cold that enveloped him had nothing to do with the icy amusement of Chaos. Annabeth was the world to him and he'd hurt her badly and then dragged her into Tartarus with him and almost killed her, and—oh gods—now he was about to fall into Chaos and drag her over the side with him.

'Let go,' he told her. 'I'm not pulling you in.'

Her fingers tightened over his. 'No. You're not getting away from me, Seaweed Brain.'

Annabeth's face was streaked with blood and tears and the grime of Tartarus, but she had the same resolute expression that she wore in his memories—the one that said she refused to give up no matter what the odds were against her.

*I didn't give up on him then and I won't now!*

Another image tried rise up in his head, but his memories were already dissipating back into the depths of Chaos. His attempt to control their flow had been blocked.

There was a jerk as Annabeth's anchor came loose. She cried out and Percy wrapped his arms around her as they tumbled away from the edge in a free-fall that felt like it was happening in slow motion. He made a last-ditch attempt to pull any water available to him, but only succeeded in dousing them both in a rainbow of liquid.

Annabeth gasped. Her eyes went wide and Percy guessed that his memories were playing for her, too.

'We're staying together,' he promises her, and they fall—like a twisted foreshadowing of their current predicament.

The three Fates must knit irony into their lives with steel yarn. *You wanted your memories? Sure, here they are—right before you scatter into a million pieces of nothing at all. You escaped Tartarus once? Here, try a deeper pit—see how you escape from this.*

Chaos had gone quiet, subsiding smugly to the bottom of the pit to wait. The primordial god must be satisfied that they were sinking into his realm with no chance of escape.

Percy thought bitterly of his plush seal augury with its black stuffing. *Seek information by yourself; it is a hard journey.* In retrospect, this outcome had been a dead giveaway. He should have done everything by himself like the augury said. How could he have let Annabeth and the others come down here with him? First he'd sent Thalia, Will, and Nico plummeting to their deaths and now he'd brought Annabeth down, too.

There was only one last thing he could do for Annabeth. Percy put his lips to her forehead. All he could offer her was the knowledge, before she died, that he did remember her, and he did love her. He drew the wet cloak of memories over them like a shawl, enveloping them in the best of their shared memories.

Annabeth made a noise between a sob and a hiccup. 'Remember Bob and Damasen?'

'Maybe we'll meet them there,' Percy said. It was unlikely, since their consciousness would probably splinter into pieces very soon, but it was a comforting thought to take to their final deaths.
'I hope the others will know to tell the sun and stars hello for all of us,' Annabeth said through her tears.

Below him came a murmur. 'Stars.' An echo, maybe, although he didn't know what was down here for sound to bounce off.

Percy looked up. Indeed, there was silver and gold sparkling overhead, streaming towards them like shooting stars.

Then he realised they weren't stars, but arrows arching straight at him and Annabeth. Percy twisted his body to protect Annabeth from them.

The arrow whistled straight through his t-shirt, catching the fabric perfectly where it fluttered off his back. He felt the shaft graze lightly against his skin. And then, with a jerk, it caught him in mid-air.

Annabeth grabbed hold of the arrow before it could rip through Percy's shirt. It was attached to a rope that hung down from a tiny opening a short distance beneath the clifftop. Percy could just make out three small figures standing on the ledge.

'Thalia!' Annabeth gasped. She clung to the shaft of the arrow for dear life. 'Grab hold!'

Percy's hands closed around hers. The other shooting star arrows fell just above their heads, shot with the unerring aim of a Hunter of Artemis. Percy and Annabeth each grabbed hold of a dozen.

'Annabeth first!' Percy shouted. She glared at him, but couldn't argue as Thalia, Will, and Nico hauled her up.

'Stars.' He heard the murmur again as he waited his turn. It came from below, like the rumble of Chaos's voice, except it had a gentle, wistful tone. Then his friends began to pull him up to the cavern ledge and it faded away.

The pool of his memories drifted around him until he was almost to the top. Maybe Chaos just noticed then that Percy was escaping, and was trying to entice him back. Or maybe Percy was just too tired to keep pulling them to him. Either way, when Nico pulled him onto the rock ledge, a horrifying blankness began to settle back over his mind. Frantic, he twisted around to face the chasm.

The blue-green mist was still there, though it was a fainter shade now.

When he reached a hand towards it, willing the memories to return, his fingers slipped through air. It was as if they had all evaporated into the shadows, leaving no trace of the liquid he had previously been able to manipulate.

Annabeth took his hand and squeezed it. He stared at her wildly. The images that had been so clear moments ago vanished, like someone had run a cycle of bleach through his mind. There was something important about Annabeth, something that explained the surreal fall they'd just had and their conversation on the way down about stars and the sun.

Only it was as clear as the black sludge of Chaos. Percy smacked his forehead with a shout of frustration.

Thalia put a hand on his shoulder. 'I got this,' she said calmly.

She had a thin, silver rod in her hands, which she flicked towards the pit of Chaos as if it were a fishing pole. A second later, she was reeling in a wriggling fish with fluid, blue-green scales. She twirled the rod in her hands like a baton and the fish became a spinning cloud over their heads, gaining weight and form as she twirled, until it took the shape of a flowing cloak. It settled over
Percy's shoulders, a fluid mantle that rippled like water but had the feel of solid cloth—a patchwork woven of different fabrics: soft silk, warm fleece, but also rough denim and even a square of hard armour.

The cloak seemed to melt into his skin through the small of his back. There was no stream of sounds and images this time when the memories flooded in. He had no time to linger on each one as they returned. It wasn't like the time in Portland when he'd drunk the Gorgon's blood and recovered his stolen memories bit by bit. (Yes, he remembered that now, as if he'd never forgotten.)

Percy just blinked, opening his eyes as if awakening from a dream, and everything was there.

It was weird, like before Percy and after Percy—or maybe he could call them Percy and Perseus—were two halves that had been welded back together:

"'Sup,' said Percy. 'Miss me, did you?'

'Not like I could remember you to miss you,' said Perseus with an eye-roll.

'I got a bone to pick with you, Perseus,' Percy said, a little too casually. 'Annabeth—'

Perseus was shame-faced. 'Yeah, I totally screwed up there.' He grimaced. 'We've got some grovelling to do, man.'

'We're grovelling,' Percy confirmed.

His memories of Annabeth—both sets of them—were remarkably consistent. Steadfast, loyal Annabeth, who loved him and never gave up on him even when he was an idiot before, or after, when he hurt her over and over again. How many times now had she helped him stay whole?

There were so many things he needed to say to her—I love you, I was such an idiot, you're unbelievable, I don't deserve you—it made him feel as tongue-tied as when he was sixteen and trying for the first time to confess his feelings for her.

Fortunately, the first thing that tumbled out of his mouth was an apology.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'Gods, Annabeth, I—' He swallowed hard as he remembered how he'd threatened her under Eris's fog. Percy glanced at the others as well. He'd tried to kill them, too. He wasn't sure how they'd even survived, let alone come back to find and save him. 'I nearly killed—'

Will shook his head. 'We don't blame you.'

Annabeth put a finger on his lips. 'Shh. It's okay. You stopped. It was harder for you to fight her, and you did. Even when you didn't remember me, you fought for me.'

Percy touched her cheek. There was a long, fresh scar running down the length of it. 'It's not okay. Look at you.' What I did to you, his mind shouted at him.

'You look just as bad, Seaweed Brain,' Annabeth pointed out with a short laugh. She leaned into him. 'We'll make it back from here, okay?'

He kissed her.

It was nothing like their last kiss, desperate and electrically charged. He tasted her relief, mingled with the bitter tang of blood and his guilt, assuaging it. This kiss was the peace that fell when you stepped over the threshold of home after a long trip away.
Annabeth's lips parted with a small sigh.

'Okay, you two.' Thalia waved a hand in front of them. 'I don't mean to break up the happy reunion, but let's go. We still have to get out of here.'

Percy let his hand linger on Annabeth's cheek a moment longer, then he let her go. He took his first good look at Thalia, Will, and Nico since they'd pulled him out of the pit. Will and Nico didn't seem too much the worse for wear, but Thalia…

'What happened to you?' he exclaimed. 'You look—'

'Older, yeah, I know,' Thalia said. 'It's a long story.'

Will studied Percy. 'I'm guessing you two have a long story to tell, too,' he said. 'But I assume it ends well.'

'As well as can be in Tartarus,' Annabeth said. 'Percy killed the empousa.'

'And got his memories back,' Thalia said. She looked at Percy. 'You're welcome, by the way.'

'Sorry, I should have said—thanks.'

'Let's not celebrate too soon,' said Nico. 'Like Thalia said, we still need to get out of here.'

Annabeth nodded. 'The Doors of Death. If Hazel and the others can get them to appear—and I trust them to—they'll land in—'

'The heart of Tartarus.' Nico shivered. 'That's the only place they can show up.'

'Okay, how do we get there?' asked Will.

'Well, we went through the Mansion of Night last time,' said Annabeth dubiously. She turned back to the cliff ledge.

Percy gulped. 'I—I remember.' The words were a miracle and a curse at the same time. Much as he appreciated the return of his memories, some of them weren't exactly sunny walks in a garden. Tartarus hadn't seemed quite as terrifying when he didn't remember it.

Somewhere across the dark chasm was a narrow doorway leading to a ghastly house of horrors. He wasn't keen to relive the insane jump over Chaos—especially not after nearly dying in the pit—or the mad rush through the territory of Nyx.

A new wave of admiration and gratitude made him want to kiss Annabeth again. And give Nico a big hug. Their memories of Tartarus were intact and they'd chosen to come down here for him anyway.

'There's another way,' Nico said. He pointed to an opening in the cliff face that tunnelled into the rock. 'When we came through, I started to recognise the path. This is the way I took—or, well, I was taken.'

The four of them exchanged looks. Nico's hands clenched and unclenched convulsively. He looked about as eager to follow the route as Percy was to leap across the chasm.

'Are you sure?' said Annabeth.

'He's sure,' Will said. He took Nico's hand. 'We trust you, Nico.'
Nico squared his shoulders and nodded. 'It won't be pretty,' he said. 'But it'll get us there.'

Percy had no doubt Tartarus had plenty of fresh horrors up his sleeve. He and Annabeth couldn't have seen it all the first time round. Still, they'd dealt with it once. And they'd all made it this far. They'd survived the arai and Eris and whatever Thalia, Will, and Nico had faced after that. He and Annabeth had gotten his soul and memories back.

Whatever Tartarus had to throw at them, they'd face it together.

Percy clapped Nico's shoulder. 'You're the boss, then. Lead the way.'

Chapter End Notes

Happy birthday Percy and happy anniversary Percy and Annabeth! Looks like I ended up posting this chapter on the right day! (What better day to return his memories, right?)

Hope you all enjoyed this one as much as I did writing it! The Chaos scene was one of the earliest scenes I dreamed up, and it's another one of my favourites!
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

The path through Tartarus leads the demigods into some more old friends.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

XIII
ANNABETH

Annabeth had thought trudging across the skin of Tartarus was the worst experience ever, but crawling through its interior definitely proved her wrong. Their journey just kept getting suckier.

The underground terrain was even less hospitable than the hostile upper surface. Stalactites and stalagmites crowded the passageway, the smaller ones stabbing them in the foot as they walked. The big ones closed in on them like jagged teeth in a narrow, dangerous mouth that threatened to snap shut and rip them to pieces at any moment.

The foul stench of soul vomit in the muggy air made Annabeth want to gag constantly. She pulled her shirt up to cover her mouth and nose, but it did little to block out the rancid odour. None of them spoke; they were all struggling to navigate the treacherous speleothems while breathing as shallowly as possible.

To take her mind off the torturous trek, she focused on Percy. The gaps between the spiky pillars were so narrow that they had to plod along in single file. Percy was just ahead of her and Annabeth kept putting her hand out to steady his back as he stumbled along. Well, actually, she was probably steadying herself as much as she was supporting him. But she savoured the way his shoulders relaxed at her touch, no longer shying away from the contact.

They had come this far. They would get to the Doors of Death and get out of here.

Just when they were ready to pass out from the stench, a whiff of fresh breeze entered the tunnel. The trickle of water echoed beyond the walls. The passage widened, giving them more room between the stalactites and stalagmites. Percy fell in step next to her. His hand found hers and she squeezed it gratefully.

'Sacred cattle of Apollo,' Will said, 'that smelled worse than a packed ER. Remind me never to complain about the smell of body fluids again.'

Percy laughed. 'Even Tyson's worst belch can't beat that.'

'Ouch!' Up ahead, Thalia hissed and stepped back. In the spot where she'd been, a drop of rust-coloured water squeezed out of a crevice in the cave ceiling and splashed to the ground, followed by another, and another. 'That burned!'

Annabeth and Nico reached the fortuitous conclusion at the same time: 'The Phlegethon!'

'The rivers must run underground as well,' Annabeth said.
Nico nodded. 'They flow throughout Tartarus. Under the surface, too, like--' His face took on a
greenish tinge and he stopped talking. Annabeth thought of the pulsing vessels that ran below the
heart of Tartarus and guessed why he wasn't keen to finish the sentence. When you thought about
what Tartarus actually was...well, that kind of knowledge didn't really inspire sanity.

Will looked at the steady reddish drip. 'I hate to suggest this, but...'

'We need it,' Annabeth finished. 'You're right.'

No one argued, although Thalia winced and Percy made a face. They were all in terrible shape. Will
had bandaged Annabeth's cuts from her fight with Bella the best he could, but she was bleeding
through the strips of cloth. She stepped up and put her mouth under the steady drip.

The first drop burned worse than scalding coffee and hit her throat and stomach like a straight shot of
vodka. Annabeth turned away, coughing uncontrollably. Her gag reflex had barely recovered from
the nauseating stink of the tunnel and it kicked into overdrive now, emptying the contents of her
stomach onto the ground.

When she stopped retching, Percy was squatting next to her, rubbing her back soothingly.

'I'm okay,' she said weakly. 'I think it's worse when your injuries are more severe.' She forced herself
to get up and approach the Phlegethon drip again. Her second swallow was still excruciating, but she
managed to keep it down. Percy kept his arm around her as she gulped down a steady trickle of fire
water, until her skin knitted back together and her exhaustion lifted.

Once they'd all recharged, they continued on their way.

As they moved along, the flow of air through the cave increased. The stalactites and stalagmites
shrunk in width until they were replaced by thin, black bristles. Annabeth couldn't figure out where
the wind was coming from, but it howled through the tunnel at random intervals, so powerful that
they had to hang on to the skinny bristles to keep from being swept off their feet. The bristles weren't
that firm either. They bent easily, like flimsy reeds growing out of a swampy marsh.

In fact, the surface of the cave had become thick and gelatinous, an oozing glue that hampered their
steps and slowed their pace.

'Like mucus,' Will said in disgust, lifting his foot to examine the sticky goo that covered it.

'It's on the walls, too,' Thalia observed.

'It's like walking down a giant's nose,' Will said. He waved at the pliable bristles. 'Complete with
nose hairs.'

Annabeth, Percy, and Nico exchanged a glance, but didn't say anything. No need to confirm Will's
suspicions. She shuddered, though, wishing she hadn't taken that biology elective last semester. It
made it all too easy to imagine the exact region of Tartarus's body that they might be traversing.

Their passage branched off into two tunnels. A soft, white glow emanated from one of them; the
other looked like a black hole.

'Which way?' Thalia asked Nico.

Annabeth found herself hoping Nico would pick the pitch-black path, though she couldn't put her
finger on what it was about the eerie light from the other tunnel that troubled her.
Something tugged at her memory, a thought that had been germinating since Nico had mentioned travelling through caves, back at the shrine of Hermes. She pictured the way the mountain ranges cut across the Dark Lands.

Diagonally.

She wasn't surprised when Nico pointed to the lighter path.

'It's not going to be easy,' he warned. 'If I'm right, the stuff that's in there...'

'Right, because it's all been a walk in the park so far,' said Thalia with a roll of her eyes. But she put her hand on her bow as if to reassure herself of its presence.

Percy nudged Annabeth's shoulder. 'What are you thinking?'

'I don't know.' Annabeth had always thought Nico's experience in the pit had been similar to hers and Percy's. Now she wondered if he had seen worse horrors deep in the bowels of Tartarus.

Going through the cave system had seemed like a good idea compared to leaping across the chasm of Chaos, but maybe they should have taken their chances with the Mansion of Night after all.

'I don't like this,' she admitted. 'But I think it's the way we have to go. Just—let's all hold hands, okay?'

It wasn't that holding hands made it any easier to traverse the tunnel. In fact, it was quite awkward to manoeuvre. However, no one objected. The air here was hostile and sinister, almost producing a constant hiss of rejection.

You don't belong here, it snarled at them.

Not that they belonged in Tartarus in the first place. But down here, that feeling was multiplied tenfold.

'I feel like we're being watched,' Will said nervously.

Percy frowned. 'Do you think Tartarus himself—'

'Shhh,' Annabeth said. 'Don't say his name. Not here.'

The silvery mucous lining of the walls lit their way, but when it illuminated what was in their path, Annabeth almost wished they were wandering in darkness.

Here and there, fluid-filled cavities formed in the walls, each covered by a thin membrane stretching over the hole. Inside were the twisted forms of monsters growing straight out of the ground like hideous science experiments. It wasn't much different from the way monsters regenerated on the skin of Tartarus, but these were all incredibly ancient creatures—some of the deadliest, most terrifying monsters the Greek pantheon had to offer. An amphisbaena curled in a circle with poison spewing from each of its two heads—one on either end of its snake-like body—that turned the fluid in its cavity neon green. A pitted stretch of the cave housed a gaggle of half-grown telkhines, looking like grotesque seals with misshapen heads.

'I guess the worst monsters form down here,' Thalia said.

'The ones that take the longest to reform, I think,' Nico said. He closed his eyes. 'He told me this was a safe place for them.'
'He?' asked Will. Nico didn't explain.

Annabeth looked at the growing monsters, feeling more than ever like an intruder in the internal organs of Tartarus. Everything about this path shouted at her to get out.

The thought that had been struggling to form in her head put forth a little root.

*Another way... only good for Titans.*

Percy seemed to be thinking along the same lines. 'Do you think this was Bob's path? The one he took to meet up with us at the Doors?'

'I don't know. Maybe.'

'I thought about them when we were hanging over Chaos,' Percy said quietly. 'How he jumped into Tartarus when we called. I thought it was our turn to join them. I wonder what it'd be like down there. To be nothing.'

'I don't know if it'd actually be anything. I mean, that's what nothing *is*, isn't it? Just...emptiness.' Was it, though? She remembered thinking something similar about Tartarus before they'd realised it was an actual place. Then again, a lot of their experience of Tartarus was what their minds made it out to be. Who was to say Chaos wasn't the same? That there wasn't an even higher power beyond the primordial deity?

Maybe it *was* possible to survive it—and anyway, hadn't they promised to keep Bob and Damasen's memories alive on the slim hope that eventually, their friends would regenerate, even from Chaos.

'We used to think it was impossible to come back from Tartarus,' she said finally. 'I guess...you never know.'

Percy nodded. 'I'm glad I have my memories back. I promised not to forget them.'

*We promised not to forget them, Seaweed Brain.*

The next cavity they came across was a massive crater. Inside was the most ancient monster of all: one with the long, scaly bottom half of a dragon, but a woman's upper body. Her skin was made of sleeping creatures—snakes curled around her legs and out of her scalp; beast heads circled her waist—and her tail was lined with wicked barbs.

'Kampê,' Annabeth whispered.

Percy drew his sword. He must have intended to run the monster through before she could fully regenerate and claw her way out. Unfortunately, these cavities weren't like the monster zits on the surface. Riptide tore the membrane, but space seemed to bend inside the cavity, curving the blade away from Kampê.

The dragon lady opened her eyes.

'You idiot!' Thalia yelled.

Kampê and her monster-covered skin came to life at once. The snakes hissed; her beast-head belt snarled.

'Demigods,' rasped Kampê. Her clawed hands found the rip in the membrane and tugged at it, widening the gap.
'RUN!' Percy bellowed.

Annabeth didn't need telling twice. As they barrelled down the tunnel, she was reminded vividly of the first time they'd encountered Kampê in Alcatraz. She'd chased them down with a pair of poisonous scimitars then, but with Tyson's help they'd escaped into the Labyrinth.

Tyson wasn't here now. And it was probably too much to hope that Kampê's scimitars weren't either. A loud ripping noise behind them meant Kampê had probably torn her way out of the cavity. Annabeth's blood was roaring in her ears, but through it, she could hear the unmistakable pounding of the dragon lady's legs on the rock.

'Faster!' gasped Annabeth, though she didn't think they had a chance of outrunning Kampê, even with their head start. They didn't even know what they were running to. For all she knew, they could be sprinting into the arms of something even worse.

'Annabeth!' Percy grabbed her arm, jerking her sideways such that she narrowly avoided running head-first into a jetstream of frigid water.

It burst like an icy cannon from a crack in the rock and plummeted in a perfect vertical. It took Annabeth a second to realise that the water was in fact cascading over the edge of a cliff.

A cliff they were about to charge straight off of.

Nico yanked Will back by his tattered shirt before the latter could topple over the edge. Annabeth, Percy, and Thalia skidded to a stop behind them.

They had emerged from the tunnel into a cavernous chamber. On their left, they were blocked by the water that gushed from the rock and thundered over the steep cliff. Ahead and right, their path simply ended in a sharp drop-off.

They were trapped.

The thunder of the waterfall as it plunged into the narrow gorge between their ledge and the opposite side mixed with the thumps and screeches emanating from the tunnel behind them.

It echoed confusingly about the chamber, making it impossible to tell how close Kampê was to catching up to them. Frantic, Annabeth peered into the ravine. A thin black line snaked along the bottom from the base of the waterfall.

Could they jump? The pain of the river was probably preferable to dealing with Kampê (unless, of course, this was the Lethe).

She was about to suggest they cliff dive when she spotted the weird curvature of the cliff below them. It was hard to tell, but a section of the cliff face seemed to bend inwards, away from the vertical rush of water. There was a dark patch a few feet down that looked like a hollow in the rock.

'Climb!' Annabeth ordered, pushing her friends to the cliff edge. Ignoring the stinging splashes from the falling water, she led the way down the cliff face. She barely stopped to look for hand- and footholds, trusting adrenaline to carry her diagonally downwards.

Her fingers found the spot where the cliff curved to form an underhang. Gratefully, she swung herself into the hollow space behind the waterfall and let herself fall to land on the hidden rock shelter.

'In here!' she called to the others.
They had all just made it in when the clang of swords rang out overhead. It was undoubtedly Kampê, and she must have found her scimitars.

*Don't let her sense us,* Annabeth prayed.

Through the mist of the thundering waterfall, she saw Kampê's massive shape soar across the canyon and disappear. Annabeth wasn't sure how long they waited, hardly daring to breathe.

Kampê didn't return.

'I think we're safe,' Thalia whispered at last. 'Should we climb back up?'

'Probably better to go down,' Annabeth said. 'We have to get past the gorge anyway.' She peered through the curtain of cascading water, thinking again about jumping. Now that the urgency had passed, the idea was less appealing. 'Do we know which river this is?'

Even as she asked, the answer came to her. The roar of the waterfall wasn't just from water hurtling over a cliff; it was a collective howl of agony. She didn't need Nico to confirm that they were hiding behind the River of Pain.

It was a good thing they hadn't taken the plunge.

They set off down the cliff face again, climbing sideways to get further from the Acheron Falls. The whole time, Annabeth could hear the souls of the damned crying out in anguish, pleading for absolution that would never come.

*You'll never be forgiven!* they shrieked at her. *Behold your sins!*

The faces of everyone she had ever failed swam before her eyes: Thalia, Luke, her cousin Magnus, Silena, Bob and Damasen…the list went on.

Percy.

Here they were in Tartarus again, and both times it had been her fault. He might have forgiven her, but she certainly hadn't forgiven herself for screwing up.

Her foot missed a foothold. She slid wildly down a foot before she managed to catch herself on a crevice in the rock. The jerk jarred her shoulder badly. She felt her nails crack when they dug in.

'Annabeth!' Percy grabbed her wrist. 'I've got you—'

A rockslide cut him off. The holds he had been using crumbled. With a sickening sense of déjà-vu, they plummeted through the air.

Several feet from the bottom, something soft and springy broke their fall. A bed of interconnected fibres stretched between the two cliff faces, bouncing up and down with them when they hit it.

Annabeth had a split second to think, *thank the gods,* before her mind kicked in and set alarm bells ringing.

They weren't bouncing *on* the fibres. They were stuck to them, bobbing along with their vibrations. Her nose filled with the cloying, overly-sweet smell of scented rot—a smell that had haunted her nightmares for years.

Annabeth barely registered Thalia, Will, and Nico calling for them from above, asking if they were all right. Her attention was fixed on the big hulking shape crawling towards her and Percy, moving
slowly but precisely across the woven strands of her massive web.

'Oh, this is sweet,' said Arachne, her mouth widening to show off her full set of pointed, needle-like teeth. 'I had not imagined that I would net such perfect prey.'

In one of Annabeth's earliest memories—she must have been about five or six—she had been climbing on the jungle gym at school and she'd put her hand straight through a spider web stretched across the metal bars. Even after she'd scrubbed herself raw in the bathtub, the ghostly caress of the web had clung to her skin for days, even though her exasperated stepmother had insisted that there was nothing touching her. It had baffled her father and stepmother when Annabeth had wept and pleaded not to be sent back to school, and no amount of logic—a strategy that had always worked with Annabeth, even as a child—would calm her fear.

Now, caught like a fly in Arachne's giant web, that same terror erupted in a sheen of cold sweat over Annabeth's body. Her skin crawled where the silken strands held her fast—so delicate and yet so unyielding, a fibre unlike anything else on (or beneath) the earth.

If her brain hadn't been paralysed by fright, she might have appreciated the unique structure of the silk and the exquisite engineering capabilities it offered. But rational thought fled in the face of being trapped in a spiderweb, facing the mother of arachnids herself.

It didn't matter that she'd survived many perilous encounters over the years. It didn't matter that she'd tackled bigger, more dangerous monsters with less trepidation. It didn't even matter that she'd faced Arachne before and won.

No matter how many times she'd risen above her fear in the past, Annabeth would never be able to face a spider without this overwhelming surge of terror.

'Hey, Spiderbitch!' Percy was making a valiant attempt to flail his arms. All he managed was to shake the entire web. Still, it got Arachne's attention. 'You're looking even uglier than I remember!'

'You,' Arachne snarled. 'I remember you. The insufferable son of Poseidon.'

'Shouldn't you still be a stinking pile of ashes?'

Distracted from Annabeth, Arachne picked her way over to Percy. Foam bubbled from her mouth in frothy anger.

'You talk too much,' Arachne hissed. Her mandibles clicked together every second word, tapping out a metronome beat of her annoyance. A strand of silk shot out from one of her bulging spinnerets and slapped across Percy's mouth. 'I will kill you first.'

Annabeth needed to pull herself together now. Before Arachne killed Percy.

Don't fight emotions with logic. Focus on one emotion that's bigger than the fear.

It was the same advice she'd used when facing Eris. Annabeth focused on how Arachne was about to murder Percy and protective anger flared to her aid. The sickening sweet stench of the spider became less nauseating and more irritating. Arachne's monstrous body, with its eight barbed legs and malevolent face, was just as hideous as ever, but instead of terrifying, it now registered as simply menacing. She was just another monster Annabeth had to fight to save Percy.

Anger wasn't precisely rational, but her mind knew how to work with it. Strategic thought returned to her.
Percy let out a muffled yell through his silken gag. Annabeth realised that he wasn’t just trying to draw Arachne’s attention away from her; he was also using his voice to help Thalia, Will, and Nico locate them.

His diversion might have worked if Arachne didn’t have four eyes. Two of them were fixed murderously on Percy, but the two bugging out of her temples spotted the shower of arrows raining down from Thalia’s bow. The spider might be slow moving across the web, but her spinnerets were fast. Filaments shot from them and knocked Thalia’s arrows harmlessly aside. Arachne sent another jet of silk to wrap around Thalia, pulling her down to join Percy and Annabeth in the web.

Nico must have shadow-travelled, because he and Will appeared suddenly underneath them. Nico slashed his Stygian iron sword across Arachne’s web in an attempt to cut them loose, but the sword only tangled in the web, which yanked it from Nico’s hand. Arachne shot out a thick stream from her spinnerets that curled around Nico in a criss-cross pattern. Will ran to help and Arachne snared him with another filament, this one jerking him up by the ankle and slinging him upside down inches below the web.

Nico struggled from inside the cocoon Arachne had woven around him. It tightened as he writhed, forming a perfect, solid ellipse from the initially flexible prison. Arachne eyed it with satisfaction.

‘Recognise your handiwork?’ she said to Annabeth. ‘The masterpiece you would have me make. Only I have perfected your original design. And here you are, giving me the chance to use it.’ Her raucous laugh tore through the canyon. ‘You thought you would trick me. Chinese Spidercuffs indeed. Now I weave Arachnacuffs—my ultimate trap. Oh, I shall have the last laugh now!’

Part of Annabeth’s brain registered admiration at the way Arachne had adapted the Chinese handcuff design—a trap that tightened around its victim when they tried an intuitive escape. When Annabeth had tricked Arachne into ensnaring herself before, she’d only been concerned with making the trap functional. Arachne had converted it into a work of art.

Art. Annabeth picked up on that train of thought. ‘I’m surprised you spent all your time on that,’ she said. ‘Not very impressive, is it?’

‘Not very impressive?’ Arachne’s mandibles clicked in a furious staccato.

‘Well, you said yourself it was nothing,’ Annabeth said, reprising the conversation they had had in the bowels of Rome. ‘Not even a tapestry.’

‘Your arrogance is insufferable, daughter of Athena,’ snapped Arachne. ‘Just like your mother’s. No appreciation for the elegance of my work. The beauty is in the versatility of each individual thread. Can you not feel its delicate caress? And yet it holds you tight. Do you know what skill it takes to craft silk like that? I toiled for ages to create the perfect combination. Every strand works together in synchronous artistry. It would hold fast even the most powerful god. I dare any of them to escape its pull!’

Annabeth hoped someone—even Tartarus himself—might appear to strike Arachne down for that statement. The spider had obviously not become any less boastful in the time she had spent here.

But no angry, avenging gods appeared.

‘So you demand a tapestry?’ Arachne continued. ‘I am still perfectly capable of weaving.’ Her black, lidless eyes glittered with malice. ‘In fact, I think I shall enjoy giving you a demonstration.’

She began weaving as she spoke, coloured silk shooting out of her spinnerets and spraying over the
cliff walls. Her weaving was as masterful as it had always been, creating the pattern of two demigods falling into a glittering web so life-like, Annabeth could almost imagine it was actual video footage of their tumble into Arachne's trap.

'My revenge has been long-await,' Arachne gloated. 'How many ways there are to kill you! I simply cannot decide. I must weave them all! Observe, my dear daughter of Athena—observe and despair.'

She moved on to another tapestry, this one portraying herself lowering Annabeth into her wide-open mouth. The real Arachne's mouth glistened with saliva at the picture.

Annabeth shuddered involuntarily. The motion made the silk strands gripping her cling tighter to her skin. Percy and Thalia had stopped moving completely; just as Arachne had said, the very silk functioned like the Chinese Spidercuffs. Any attempt to struggle increased its grip.

Nico's cocoon was completely still, too. Annabeth wasn't sure if he could even breathe in there. How solid was the silk? Had it suffocated him? Will had been swinging about madly at first, but that had gotten him impossibly tangled as well, restricting his movements.

Annabeth's mind started to tumble back into panic. Even if she could keep Arachne talking—and she'd never manage to divert her attention indefinitely—how would they get free?

Arachne started on her next tapestry: a depiction of Annabeth and her friends stung by the barbs on the spider's legs. She laughed, a gleeful rip-rip-rip that heightened Annabeth's despair. Arachne was clearly enjoying the mental torture she was concocting by showing exactly how she intended to kill them. In the background, the wailing souls in the Acheron played an agonising accompaniment to the tapestry of their demise.

Then, just as Arachne turned back, ready to enact her woven depictions, a war cry rang out. A massive rake swept through the air—no, not a rake, a broom: exactly the right implement for sweeping cobwebs off ceilings. It dislodged Arachne's grip on the threads and knocked her right off. The spider's legs curled up and she bounced on the ground in a ball.

The web detached from the cliff walls and clung to the broom's bristles with Annabeth, Percy, and Thalia still wrapped up in it. They swung through the air as a silver-haired Titan brought the other end down in a jab at Arachne.

Arachne rolled away, shooting a silk strand at the handle. But a sabre-toothed tiger leapt out of nowhere and pounced on her. She shrieked and scuttled away.

'Oops,' said Bob the Titan, noticing the three demigods dangling off the bristles of his broom. He lowered them gently to the ground.

Annabeth watched in a daze as Small Bob the tiger chased Arachne down the ravine. She ran up against a lizard-tailed giant, who hit her in the head with a massive fist. She collapsed and Small Bob's mouth opened impossibly wide to swallow her. With a loud crunch, all that was left of Arachne were a few scattered legs. Annabeth didn't know if the spider would simply turn to ashes inside the cat's mouth or actually be ingested, and what that meant for Small Bob's digestive system.

She decided she probably didn't want to know.

'Nasty, sticky stuff,' said Bob. He tried to pull Annabeth, Percy, and Thalia from his broom, but his fingers just got stuck in the mess of cobwebs.

'Stop moving,' Damasen told him. He picked up one of Arachne's discarded limbs before tromping
over to them. He reached up and gently plucked the strand of silk stringing Will up, swinging it from one finger. Using the spider's leg, he rubbed it along Will like he was de-linting him. The silk caught on the barbs and came off onto the leg. Damasen put Will down and carefully stroked the spider leg up his own finger, peeling off the silk thread as though it were a layer of dried glue.

Small Bob came bounding back in cat form and deposited the rest of the spider legs on the ground by Bob's feet. Damasen helped Bob brush off his broom's bristles, releasing them all from the tangled mess.

It took a while longer to unravel the cocoon holding Nico. He emerged deathly pale and shivering uncontrollably, but thankfully alive.

Annabeth hardly dared to believe what had just happened. While Damasen wound the unravelled spider silk into a ball and wrapped it carefully in a piece of cloth, she tried to find words.

It wasn't just that the Titan and the giant had saved them from Arachne. The very sight of them was a miracle in itself. The others were speechless as well. Percy's jaw hung open in complete shock.

Her voice came out at last in a tearful squeak. 'Bob—Damasen—you're here.'

'We are here,' Bob agreed, beaming. 'Bob and Damasen have come back to our friends!'

Chapter End Notes

The amphisbaena is a mythological serpent that is apparently a spawn of Medusa; I figure if RR ever gets round to it, it might make an appearance. Greek mythology certainly has no end of magical creatures to draw from!
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

The alternate route through Tartarus is more treacherous than the original.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is rated R for references to self-harm and allusions to mental illness and post-traumatic stress. Although the details are not explicit, I would still like to stress that if any of these issues are triggers for you, it might be better to skip this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XIV
NICO

Nico couldn't stop shivering.

He'd always avoided small spaces since he'd been trapped in Otis and Ephialtes' bronze jar, and Arachne's spider silk prison was a considerably tighter fit than the jar. Even after he was freed, he couldn't shake off the claustrophobic way the fibres had closed in on him, wrapping him progressively tighter in their iron grip.

And then there were their new companions. Percy and Annabeth were clearly overjoyed at Bob and Damasen's appearance. Nico knew he should be, too—Bob had been a long-time friend, one of the few he'd had in those lonely years between losing Bianca and finding Hazel—but the 'welcome back' he offered the Titan tasted like bile in his mouth.

Twice, now, Bob had come when someone had needed him. But why had he never come for Nico?

'Nico, friend,' Bob said in his rumbling voice, 'you are not good?'

'I'm fine.' Nico pushed the bitterness down. Stop being petty, he told himself.

Oh, but you always knew how to bear even the most trifling grudges! How many people have you blamed for things they couldn't control? The wailing souls in the Acheron gleefully supplied him with examples of all the times he'd lashed out with anger. At Percy. At Annabeth. At Jason. The list went on. Your heart is full of hatred. You're no better than us.

Shut up, Nico told them silently.

Will looked at him sharply. Obviously he didn't believe for a second Nico was fine, but he didn't push it.

'How did you and Damasen make it out of Chaos?' Annabeth asked. 'We hoped you would, but we didn't really know if it was actually possible.'
'Hm,' said Bob. He scratched his scruffy silver beard. 'Stars called our names.'

Damasen held out a twisted bundle of rope wound with a few silver arrows: the lines they'd left dangling into the pit of Chaos after pulling Percy and Annabeth up.

'You called for us in the dark of Night, Annabeth Chase,' he said. 'You called us back to who we were. Who we chose to be.'

'We chose us,' Bob said.

'You chose your own fate,' Annabeth translated.

'When we chose to fight by your side, it gave us an identity that was foreign to Tartarus. It gave us an identity to hold on to even in Chaos.'

Bob nodded. 'Tartarus could not collect our souls for his armour after all.'

Annabeth looked like there was more she wanted to ask about this, but she just said, 'Will you come with us now, then?'

'You picked a dangerous path, demigods,' Damasen said solemnly. 'The Caves of Night are not meant to be traversed by mortals.'

'We didn't have a choice,' Thalia said. 'And we're stronger than you think.'

'Perhaps. But what lies in these caves are not things that can be defeated by physical strength alone.'

His eyes fell on Nico. 'I think you know this, young son of Hades.'

Nico looked away.

'Do you know another way, then?' Annabeth said hopefully. 'We have to get to the heart of Tartarus. The sooner the better.'

Bob and Damasen looked at each other.

'Caves are fastest,' Bob said. 'But full of spirits. They do not disturb Titans. I do not know if your minds can withstand it.'

'I've made it past them,' Nico said. 'Mimas brought me through these caves.'

Six pairs of eyes fixed on him curiously. Nico wanted to sink back into the shadows. He'd never spoken of this before. Not to Reyna, not to Will, not even to Hazel, to whom he'd outlined the essentials of his experience right after he'd gotten out of Tartarus the previous time.

No one knew how he'd been tricked by the crafty giant Mimas into thinking he'd found the Doors, only to tumble down a black chute, straight into the bowels of Tartarus. Or how Mimas and his band of gigantes had bound him and marched him through these caves before handing him over to the twin giants and their bronze jar.

He'd managed for years to suppress the visions that the cruel deities in the Caves of Night had presented him. But now he was back on the doorstep of those spirits, with the nightmares so close, they took no effort to recall.

'The spawn of Nyx make their homes in these caves,' Nico explained. 'We've only scratched the surface of it. She birthed all the primordial spirits that personify the darkest evils. Pandora's pithos, the jar that released those evils into the world—it was filled here.'
'Just more demons to fight, then,' Thalia said.

Nico wanted to smack the confidence off her freckled face. 'You don't understand,' he said flatly. 'They make you see—see things.'

They weren't things he could find words for. How could he possibly explain how the spirits of Nyx had turned him inside out and put his innermost feelings shamefully on display?

Once, he'd hoped that he could have shared his story with Percy and Annabeth. Then he'd realised their experience was different. No one who had never encountered the Caves of Night could possibly understand how it felt to come through them. They way they shattered you into a million pieces of your own shame.

*You will always be alone, Nico di Angelo. Who would ever love you?*

He remembered begging for mercy while Mimas howled with glee. In the end, Otis and Ephiadtes hadn't needed to stuff him in the bronze jar. He'd crawled in by himself, broken and desperate to escape the horrors. The soundproof jar had given him a brief respite from Mimas's horror show, before he'd realised that in his weakness, he'd been enticed into another trap.

He'd never admitted it to anyone, but he hadn't turned to his pomegranate seeds as a ploy to survive. By the time he'd remembered he had them, he'd simply been grateful for the escape the death trance allowed him, even if it was into a mindless coma.

None of the other demigods on the Argo had even suspected during his time with them that he'd used the seeds occasionally to forget. To meditate until he was completely numb to his feelings. They'd barely noticed when he'd holed himself up, silent and still.

A hand fell on his shoulder. Expecting Will and not wanting his pity, he tried to shrug it away. But Annabeth's grip was firm.

'I remember Mimas. How he plays on your emotions,' she said. 'It's awful. I hated it, too. But he's not here now. And you are. You were strong enough to survive it once, and that's why you knew you could get us through again. You led us this far, Nico. We trust you. And we're in this together.'

*You will always be alone.*

Nico shook the voice out of his head again. He put his hand on top of Annabeth's. She smiled and squeezed his shoulder once, then let go.

'We will help to keep the spirits from attacking physically,' Damasen said. 'But their powers are beyond our control. Many have been driven mad by what they show—even the lesser monsters dare not venture here.'

'Take them spirally,' Bob suggested.

Damasen's rust-coloured eyes blinked slowly. 'Yes, that is a possibility.'

'Where are we going?' Annabeth asked. 'Will it still get us to the heart of Tartarus?'

'A small detour,' Bob promised. 'A rest stop.'

'With luck,' Damasen added, 'it will give some peace after…'

'Rest stop sounds good,' said Percy.
With Bob and Damasen in the lead, they plunged forward into the red-tinged darkness of the caves. The Acheron followed them at first, in a crescendo of wailing souls that soon reached a frenetic pitch of agony.

_Suffer with us, Nico di Angelo!_ they screamed in his mind. _Why should you escape punishment for your crimes?_

Bianca sizzled up in a storm of electricity, clutching the tiny figurine of their father. Percy and Annabeth slipped from his hand and fell away into endless darkness. Bryce Lawrence faded into black obscurity. Octavian exploded in a firestorm.

Nico gritted his teeth until the insistent cries of _'Your fault! All your fault!'_ finally dulled to an accusing murmur when their path split from the river. The others wore varied expressions of relief at the reprieve, but Nico knew the Acheron's torments were child's play compared to what lay ahead of them.

They didn't have to wait long. A loud clang greeted them at an otherwise innocuous junction. Sprouting from an outcrop of rock was the upper body of a girl with ashen skin and cymbals in place of hands. Her hair grew in two plaited bundles that ended in thick, grey bobs. These beat against the cave walls in time with her clashing cymbal hands to create a booming rhythm that reverberated through Nico's whole body.

Her lips stretched into a wicked smile. Although she didn't speak, a dull whisper rose out of the darkness: 'What have we here?'

The last word echoed down the tunnels like a doorbell alerting the cave dwellers to their arrival. As it grew louder, the speaker fluttered down from the ceiling. She landed in front of Nico, her bat wings curving back around a golden trumpet that hung over her shoulder.

'I thought I heard visitors,' she hissed. Across her body, dozens of wagging tongues took up the chant: _Visitors, visitors, VISITORS_. Purple eyes dotted her feathery skin, running along her arms and torso. She had more ears than Nico could count: at least three pairs on her head alone, and more sprouting from her sides.

_All the better to hear you with,_ one of her tongues told Nico.

Bob stepped in front of her. 'They're with us, Pheme,' he said.

Pheme laughed. 'I don't touch, Titan. I merely spread the news—_all_ the news.' Her mouth curved viciously. 'And my siblings don't need to touch your…_friends_—' the word dripped with innuendo—'to devour them.'

'Keep moving,' Damasen ordered. 'Pheme spreads hearsay—her words travel like wildfire. The others will descend shortly. Bob and I will guard you, but we cannot carry you through if you stop.'

Passing Pheme was like walking through a high school hallway under the judgemental eyes of the entire student body. Gossip spewed from her numerous tongues, a flurry of speculation and recrimination.

_That's the new kid. The weird one with the foreign accent._

_He's not one of us._

The rumours grew more pointed, turning into barbed accusations about his personal life. It was just as Nico remembered from his first passage through this place—his secrets tossed around and
dissected in persistent whispers that grew louder by the second.

*I heard he's got a crush on a boy.*

*I heard it was Percy Jackson—like he'd ever have a chance! Jackson's no poof.*

*Did you hear what he got up to with that Solace kid? Bloody fag.*

It had been bad enough the first time, with Pheme whispering his own shameful feelings into his ears. Now his old fears about coming out were on display again, only this time four other people—six if you counted Bob and Damasen—were privy to them, too. Even though it was no longer a big secret that he was gay, the torments he had endured while coming to terms with it were his. It was just like when Eros had laid him bare before Jason, forcing confessions from him that he hadn't been ready to give.

Even if his friends accepted him, it didn't mean he was comfortable having his intimate feelings on display. And the spirit of gossip and rumour was only the tip of the iceberg. The spirits who had been waiting in the wings burst forth, alerted by Pheme's herald. The personification of each of the seven sins gathered, projecting a movie of damnation onto the cave walls. Starring Nico in the leading role, it featured his darkest thoughts and his most lurid daydreams.

In a mad fury, he raised a skeleton army that slashed its way through Camp Half-Blood, leaving every camper dead at his feet.

He sat on an obsidian throne before a fire that grew from a pile of bones—souls he had sacrificed on the pyre—while the spirit of Bianca rose from the earth. Her lips were stained with blood and she cursed him for calling her back this way.

His body and Will's entwined, their hands wandering in a way that made Nico's cheeks burn with the knowledge that everyone could see this, too. And then the Will in the picture pushed him away and melted into a crowd of faces that were all contorted in identical disgust.

Nico wanted to curl into a ball and block everything out.

More spirits joined the fray: Apate, goddess of deceit, catalogued every lie he'd ever told—*who could ever trust you after that?* Momus, god of mockery, started up a litany of criticism against him—*creepy, antisocial, a freak of nature.* Oizys, goddess of depression, prophesied a hopeless future for him.

*You're despicable. Worthless. Unlovable. You will always be alone, Nico di Angelo.*

How many times had he hidden himself away, believing those very words? Even before he'd ever encountered Oizys and the others, loneliness had practically been part of his identity—Nico di Angelo, the different one, the rejected one. It had been all too easy for the spirits of Night to turn his mind to despair. He'd already been halfway there.

'He's not alone!' Will's voice was weak and shaky, but it pierced the cloak of anguish that Oizys drew over Nico.

Something stirred in Nico's memory.

*'That's the problem with you,' Will scolded. 'You leave because you believe everyone is gonna reject you, even if they haven't. Maybe if you stayed, you'd find out that you're not alone.'*  

His eyes flew open.
'Nico, you were never alone. You—'

Will was cut off by a harsh whisper, although this one was softer, and Nico didn't understand the accusation: 'You flit from one handsome boy to another. Who can trust your pretty words when you speak them to everyone?'

Will made a choking noise and raised his hands to cover his ears. Nico understood then: it was Will the spirits were targeting. And maybe it was true, to some extent—his boyfriend was annoyingly prone to 'appreciating the scenery'—but Nico was surprised that Will secretly despised his own flirtatious nature. Not when it was essentially harmless—when it was so obvious that at his core lay a loyal heart.

Nico's eyes and ears were now open to all the painful secrets that were playing on the caves' cinema of shame. Percy and Annabeth in a violent fight. Thalia wrapped around a certain Roman ex-Praetor. Will ran the tip of a scalpel down his arm, not even flinching as blood blossomed on his light skin. Whether the images were real or imagined, Nico wasn't sure. It didn't matter—they were devised to strike where it cut the deepest.

And just as he'd been overwhelmed by the intensity of his own shame, his friends were each stuck in the quagmire of theirs.

Confronted with the image of himself standing on a blood-soaked battlefield strewn with mutilated bodies, Will trembled even harder than Nico had when he'd emerged from his spider prison. Percy stared in horror at a picture of himself at the vortex of a hurricane that consumed the world. Tears ran down Annabeth's face as she watched herself fall from a glittering masterpiece of a monument, dragging her friends with her as she tumbled from the spires towards a pit of fire. Thalia's fingernails dug into her cheeks at the sight of a car smashing into a tree, the driver—who had spiky black hair like hers—slumped against the steering wheel with blood trickling down her face.

Playing across this was a soundtrack of assassinations. Oizys called Will a coward and a weakling. Momus mocked Annabeth's ambitions. Pheme teased Thalia about her forbidden crush.

'I'm not alone,' Nico whispered. And he wasn't. They all had things to be ashamed of. They all had parts of themselves they wanted to bury where they would never see daylight—in the Caves of Night.

And watching some of his friends' twisted nightmares brought to life, he realised many of those things weren't unique to him after all.

'Nico, friend!' Bob urged. 'You must keep moving.'

Bob held his broom in front of him, crossed with Damasen's large stick to form an 'X' that kept the spirits physically at bay, like they'd promised. The sabre-tooth tiger prowled at Bob's heels, baring its teeth and snapping whenever a spirit got too close. But as Damasen had warned, they could not ward away the dark emotions the spirits had unleashed. Nor could they carry the demigods through the cave.

They had to pull themselves out of this.

'Will.' Nico placed his hands firmly on his boyfriend's shoulder. 'Remember how you ran into a Roman camp—into a whole freaking legion trained for war—with only two kids as back-up? That took guts.'

'I—'
'I don't care if you appreciate a decent hottie. Maybe you can even tell me who you find cute at Camp Jupiter and we'll compare notes when we get out of here. But we have to get out first. So snap out of it.'

Will raised his head. Tears clung to his eyelashes. Nico wanted to kiss them away. Instead, he lifted Will's arm and pressed his lips to the scar that ran from his elbow to his wrist—a scar Nico had always assumed he'd sustained in battle. 'We're gonna talk about this,' he said, wanting to reassure Will that he knew its true origin now, but wasn't condemning him for it, 'and it's gonna be okay.'

'I think that's my line,' Will said. It was a weak attempt at a joke and the laugh that accompanied it was thin and forced. Still, it was there. Will grimaced at the images still playing on the cave walls. 'I told you you weren't alone.'

'You were right.'

Will went to help Annabeth, who was curled up in a ball of misery. Nico moved on to Thalia.

Her eyes were fixed on a parade of people Apate accused her of abandoning—You led them to believe you cared, and what did you do?—while Pheme cackled for everyone to hear, You've been fantasising about a girl, an outsider, haven't you? Just wait till this gets back to your Hunters! Oizys foretold misery in her dolorous voice: It will never work; no one shall heal your immortal heart.

Nico wasn't sure where to start. It wasn't like he knew Thalia all that well.

He did know Reyna, though, and he was reasonably sure that was who Thalia secretly liked. He decided to start there.

'I got to know Reyna a lot when we were travelling together. I think you'd match, like Percy and Annabeth do. You guys could work.'

Thalia glowered at Nico. 'You don't know anything,' she snapped. 'Butt out! I don't need advice on my love life. Which I don't have.'

Her rebuttal sounded extremely familiar. Nico wondered where he'd come across the sentiment before. Then he remembered.

Diocletian's Palace.

Nico had pushed Jason's acceptance away when he'd first offered it. When you were convinced that something you felt was wrong, it was hard to believe that someone else might be willing to embrace it.

'Did you know your brother was the first person I came out to?' Well, he'd actually been forced to come out to Jason by a bully of a love god, but that wasn't really the point now. 'He was really decent about it. He let me decide when I wanted to tell anyone else. Even told me I was brave, though I sure as Hades didn't think so. We didn't talk about it, but having him know my secret and not judge it—I started thinking maybe it'd be okay to tell people after that.'

'Jason's a good kid,' Thalia said. Her eyes darted back to the cave wall. A blond two-year-old with electric blue eyes—the only feature the Grace siblings shared—reached out for her as she walked away. 'I left him behind. I thought he was dead, but I shouldn't have believed my mom. I should have found him. I left her behind, too. I left so many people.' She turned back to Nico. 'I left Bianca in the junkyard of the gods.'

Nico swallowed hard. 'Maybe you did, but that wasn't your fault. And Bianca—she didn't blame
you.'

Thalia was silent. Nico didn't know if he had gotten through to her, but at least she was no longer clawing at her cheeks. Meanwhile, Will had spoken to Annabeth and together, they had lifted Percy out of his nightmares.

'We need to keep moving,' Nico said to all of them.

Slowly, painfully, they did. The taunting of the spirits didn't get any easier to bear, but Nico urged the others on every time they flagged, beaten down by the whispers and visions. Damasen led them along a wet and boggy path that ran uphill, such that they were practically crawling away from the spirits that trailed behind them.

Finally, they entered a wide cavern that was covered in swampy marshland and lit by a bright blue flame on a central altar. The spirits hissed and fled back down the path they'd come. For the first time since entering the Caves of Night, everything was blissfully silent.

'Are we—out?' Annabeth's voice was thick with exhaustion.

Bob shook his head. 'Not yet. But this is a rest stop.'

'The shrine of Eleos,' Damasen announced. 'Goddess of compassion.'

The puddles beneath their feet stung when they splashed through. Nico could tell from the faint, woeful hum that the marsh was fed by the River of Acheron, but the waters that pooled here sounded more remorseful than tormented.

The shrine sat on a circle of hard rock, rising several inches above the marsh. Behind the altar was a temple with an entrance so low that Nico, who was the smallest of the group, would have to crouch to enter it.

'Is the goddess here?' Will asked as they approached. 'Should we, um, make a sacrifice?'

'She won't appear,' said a soft voice. A tiny girl dressed in peacock blue emerged from the temple. A thin veil obscured her face. 'She has rarely stirred since the days of Athens.' The girl placed her palm on the altar. 'The world is somewhat lacking in compassion these days.'

'Is that why her shrine fell to Tartarus?' Thalia asked. Maybe she was thinking of Geras, ousted and banished when old age became reviled.

'It has always been here,' Damasen said. 'Eleos is a child of Nyx. A disappointment, rather like myself. I chose peace instead of war. She gives respite to the weary instead of suffering.'

'Yes,' said the girl in blue. 'I am her attendant. Eons ago, I was brought here on the Acheron. I have tended the shrine ever since.' She inclined her head towards Nico. 'Do you remember me, Nico di Angelo?'

'Er, no. Sorry. I don't think I've been here before.'

'No,' sighed the girl. 'No, you have not. But I touched your mind. I gave you peace.'

With her palms facing up, she spread her fingers towards the cavern ceiling. A sprinkle of water fell out of nowhere. Tiny droplets landed on their heads, as cool and refreshing as summer rain.

Nico remembered then the same touch during his first, despairing crawl through the Caves of Night.
A brief respite, not enough to undo the damage of the spirits, but just enough to hold his mind together. It was a baptism of mercy, descending when he had needed it most.

*This* was the true nepenthe, a more powerful restorative than any potion they could ever manage to brew.

This girl had given it to him and he hadn't even known.

'Why?' he asked her. 'Why did you help me?'

'Perhaps because I, too, am a child of the Underworld. Perhaps as a child with two fathers, I empathised with your pain. Or perhaps it was because we share a name.'

She lifted her veil.

Her eyes burned with the same bright blue flame that lit the altar. In their flicker, Nico could sense the mark of their father—a half-crazed spark that hinted at wild ideas and intense emotion. 'I am the daemon Angelos.'

'Wait,' said Percy, scratching his head. 'What do you mean two fathers?'

Annabeth elbowed him. 'Isn't it obvious?'

'Well, yeah, I get that she's got two dads. I was just wondering, if Hades is one of them, who's the other?'

Nico nearly rolled his eyes—Percy's blunt nature became less appealing the older Nico got—but he found he was actually curious about the answer. He knew by now that the gods weren't as straight-laced as the 1930s society in which he'd grown up (or even certain communities in the twenty-first century), but he'd never suspected his father of having a fluid sexual orientation. Apollo, sure—there couldn't be any immortal more flamboyantly bi than Will's dad. Hades, on the other hand, always struck Nico as old-fashioned, both in his tastes and his morals.

Then again, if ancient Greece had accepted alternative sexuality, that would make the attitudes of the current millennia new rather than old.

'Hermes,' Angelos said carelessly, ignoring the stunned expressions around her. 'I have also been called Angelia—daemon of messages and tidings. It's been a while since I've had anyone to proclaim to, though. And on that note—hang on for a second.'

She disappeared into her temple and came back out with a bowl in one hand and a looking glass in the other. She placed the bowl on the altar and motioned for them to gather around her.

'Your friends on the surface await you,' she said, pointing into the mirror. The reflective glass shimmered and resolved into a pretty, tanned face with kaleidoscope eyes.

'Piper!' said Annabeth.

'Annabeth? Oh my gods, you can hear me? Are you okay? Is everyone there? No, wait, I can see them, too—what's happening?'

'We're fine—well, maybe not *fine*, we're still in Tartarus, but we're all here and we're alive, and we're headed for—'

The serious, square jaw of Jason Grace pushed into the frame. 'Is everyone okay? Did you save
Percy?'

'Hey bro,' said Percy.

'Thank the gods—wait, you remember me?'

'I even remember our last bet about where Nico would spend the year. You owe me fifty bucks, dude.'

'Excuse me?' Nico interrupted.

'Damn, if there was one good thing about you losing your memory—'

Annabeth cleared her throat. 'Can we talk about how we're getting out of here first?'

A sheepish grin spread across Jason's face. 'I'll go get the others,' he said. He disappeared, but they could hear him shouting, 'Guys! Piper's got Percy and the others in her dagger!'

'The others,' huffed Thalia. 'Good to see you, too, little bro.'

'We've found Thanatos,' Piper said. 'Leo and Reyna got us transport and we're on our way. We'll get the Doors of Death to you by tomorrow, we promise!'

'That's good,' Annabeth said. 'We're headed to the heart—well, where we're pretty sure the Doors will show up, anyway.'

'So, say, twenty-four hours?'

Annabeth looked at Bob. 'Can we do it?'

'Time is difficult in Tartarus,' Bob admitted. 'But I think yes.'

'Twenty-four hours,' Annabeth told Piper.

'I'll keep looking in Katoptris, anyway,' Piper said. 'It's been showing me—well, I was really worried for a while. But it's so good to see that you're okay. I really—'

Her image froze like a bad FaceTime connection. The mirror went black. Angelos tapped at it, then shrugged. 'I may have forgotten to charge it. Like I said, it's been a while.'

'It's fine,' Annabeth said. 'We know we have twenty-four hours to get to the heart of Tartarus.'

Angelos considered this. 'You are close,' she said. 'Do not rush to your destination. More challenges await you. You will need to rest to face them. For a sacrifice, you may rest here at the shrine.'

'What sort of sacrifice?' Percy asked warily.

'Cloth and hair,' Angelos said. She smiled at the surprise on their faces. 'It is how Eleos has always been honoured.'

She indicated the bowl she had laid upon the altar. Nico, Percy, and Annabeth drew their swords. They each sliced off a section of their hair, along with some cloth from their shirt sleeves. Angelos emptied their offerings into the blue flame, which shone white for a few seconds. Another light sprinkle of cleansing rain showered down, returning the fire to its original blue.

'Eleos accepts your offering,' Angelos announced. Five sleeping bags popped out of the swamp.
They were only standard-issue camping gear, but right now they looked as inviting as a luxury hotel bed.

Angelos looked apologetically at Bob and Damasen. 'I'm afraid we aren't set up for Titans and such.'

Damasen shrugged. 'We will keep watch,' he said.

'I will leave you to your rest,' Angelos said. 'But first, I shall bear you each a tiding.'

She turned first to Bob and Damasen. 'When it comes to a choice between choosing who you are and letting the world dictate your identity, remember that archetypes may survive indefinitely, but immortality has its drawbacks.'

Angelos looked at Thalia next. 'Moving on is not the same as leaving someone behind. If you do not wish to remain motionless, you must accept what is in your heart.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Thalia demanded.

'I bear the messages,' Angelos said impassively. 'I do not interpret them. That's up to you.'

She inclined her head towards Annabeth. 'Many a prophecy has hinged upon you. Now your ingenuity will be called upon yet again. It will be up to you to ensure the pattern no longer repeats.'

Annabeth's eyes widened. Percy's hand tightened around hers.

'And you have changed much in your time here,' Angelos continued, addressing Percy. 'It has shaped you, and you will shape the journey—what you have been seeking will be at the heart of it.'

From the blank look on his face, this was as much a mystery to Percy as it was to Nico.

To Will, Angelos said, 'The light shines brighter when it emerges from darkness. Do not be afraid to embrace the darkness within you.'

Finally, she held Nico's gaze. 'Your struggles are a gift. You understand compassion because you understand pain. Don't bury it away again, little brother.'

Angelos looked nothing like his sister, but at that moment it was Bianca's ghostly face he saw, shining with fierce, determined pride.

*Don't hide from the world, little brother. Live. Make me proud.*

It had taken him a long time to internalise Bianca's parting words. Even now he wasn't sure he'd managed to live as she'd asked him to.

Percy, Annabeth, and Thalia settled into their sleeping bags and fell asleep right away. Nico thought of the charge Angelos had laid on him. He remembered the promise he'd made just hours ago. He didn't know if this was the most appropriate time to keep it, but he decided to try anyway.

'Hey,' Will said when Nico pulled his sleeping bag over to him. 'Some trek, huh?'

Nico ran a finger along the scar on Will's arm. 'Do you want to tell me about it?'

Will stiffened. When he spoke, it was in a careful, brittle tone so unlike his usual sunny self. 'I wasn't trying to kill myself or anything, if that's what you're thinking.'

'I wasn't thinking that.'
Just after the Battle of the Labyrinth—do you remember that? Well, it was the first time I'd ever seen so much death. All those friends I couldn't save... we buried them and we were supposed to go back to our regular activities after that. I was supposed to help everyone go back to normal.' Will started slowly, but now the words came spilling out in a babbling rush. 'Apollo cabin always leads the singalong, you know. And we'd just lost our head counsellor in the battle. I, um, had a bit of a crush on him. I was alone in the infirmary, and I—well, I don't even remember what I was thinking. Maybe I wanted to stop thinking about it. Or I just needed to feel something other than sad. The scalpel was just there.' Will hung his head. 'It was stupid, I know.'

'It's not stupid.' Nico took a deep breath. 'I never told anyone this, but... I used to take pomegranate seeds and go into a death trance just to get away from my memories of Tartarus.'

'I can understand that. Especially now.' Will gave a shaky laugh. 'I'm an idiot, Nico. I actually thought coming back down here would help you. I thought you needed to face it again. I guess I did it again—and this time I ended up cutting us both because I thought it would help.' He traced his scar sadly. 'I tried to force you to deal with thing my way. I'm sorry.'

'No, it's not the same. Facing Tartarus isn't like hurting yourself. I think—I think the reason why Tartarus is so awful is because it's made of our own darkness. Like—gods, I don't know how to explain this properly. I always zone out when Chiron talks about it.'

'Like how the gods are part of the collective unconscious?' Will suggested. 'They embody what we believe.'

'Exactly. It's all the worst stuff we believe about ourselves.'

'I don't know how anyone wouldn't go crazy confronting that,' Will mused.

'Unless they knew they weren't the only ones with problems.' Nico twisted the skull ring on his finger. 'I wish I'd known you had stuff you couldn't talk about, too.'

'I didn't tell you before because—well, you've got so much sadness already. I didn't want to add to it. I didn't think anyone would ever find out.'

'And I didn't tell you about the pomegranate seeds because I didn't want you to worry.'

Their eyes met and they started to laugh.

'I guess we should've depended on each other more,' Will said.

'If I've learned anything from passing through the Caves of Night twice, it's that it's easier to be strong for someone else than for yourself.'

Will touched his cheek. 'You are incredibly strong, Nico di Angelo.'

Nico kissed him. 'We can be strong together.'

Nico imagined the goddess Eleos drawing a gentle blanket of mercy over them while Angelos tucked them into a bed of compassion. With his head nestled against his boyfriend's shoulder, he finally fell asleep.
So, a few notes on this one. First, I know I’ve touched on some really difficult issues in this chapter and I really hope I’ve treated them sensitively. It is not my intention to hurt anyone with my portrayal of mental trauma, bullying, or self-harm. This is probably the most personal piece of fictional writing I’ve ever written and while a lot of my own experience made its way into writing the chapter, I am aware that everyone’s experience of mental trauma is different, and I don’t wish to belittle anyone else’s. If you’ve felt that I dealt unfairly or insultingly with anything here, I hope you’ll feel comfortable enough to tell me why and I am happy to discuss our different experiences. I also hope my readers have exercised their judgement in choosing whether to continue reading and I haven’t caused anyone undue harm with triggers and whatnot. May I offer you all a big hug after all that angst? *hugs*

And on a lighter note … I went all out with the spirits in this chapter! I figured, why not make use of the insanely many that Greek mythology has to offer? Of course, I embellished a lot, but hey, RR gave us a great example of how to make up stories for the Greek myths, right? You can read more about each of them here:

- **The unnamed cymbal-hand girl** who guards the Cave of Night;
- **Pheme**;
- **Apate**;
- **Momus**;
- **Oizys**;
- **Eleos**;
- **Angelos** (who incidentally is recorded as Zeus and Hera’s daughter—but hated by Hera, but also called **Angelia**, who is named as a daughter of Hermes … I think you can probably understand why I integrated both myths!)
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

The demigods need to make it through more barriers standing between them and the heart of Tartarus.

Chapter Notes

I hope the last chapter didn’t put too many people off the fic! :( I promise the trigger warnings are all over now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

XV
PERCY

Percy felt the heartbeat of Tartarus before he saw it.

The cave walls shook with an ominous rumble. Under their feet, the ground—now a slippery, membranous skin—pulsed and spat them out the mouth of the cave.

The harsh redness of Tartarus's sky scorched Percy's retinas. He didn't remember it being so bright before, but then after the pitch black of the arai's forest, the inky pit of Chaos, and the dim interior of the Caves of Night, his pupils must have acclimatised to darkness.

Several hundred feet to their right, the wailing Acheron poured into a rapid river that snaked around the rim of a vast valley, blocking their path forward. The waters disappeared into the horizon, but Percy didn't need to see the rest of the river to know that it had no end—the river made a perfect circle around the heart of Tartarus. Little watery fingers branched from the opposite bank and dipped into the ground, tributaries feeding subterranean capillaries that bulged and shrank with the systole and diastole of each heartbeat.

The whole valley was a funnel, a basin into which the rest of Tartarus drained.

'How do we get across?' asked Thalia.

Percy cocked his head and listened. The roar of the water was a cacophony of wails, moans, and screams. The Acheron was the nearest source for this rushing river, but all five poured into it at some point. If they kept walking along the river's edge, Percy had no doubt they'd come to the others in turn.

Either way, the rushing river was an impassable barrier. Swimming was out of the question—they'd just be swept away in the vicious current, dragged down to join the chorus of tortured, despondent, and forgotten souls. Percy also knew without asking that there wouldn't be a bridge anywhere.

'Sideways,' Bob suggested, pointing to the left, where the river disappeared into the shadow of the
jagged mountains. There was a point, maybe half a mile down, where Percy thought the flow sounded different, like it might be rippling across shallows. Wading through the deadly, dissonant rush of water wasn't the best solution but it was preferable to being fully immersed in it.

'Sure,' he said, and explained this plan to the others. When he was finished, he added, 'I think that's our best bet.'

Small Bob—now back in housecat form—bounded ahead of them as if he endorsed this idea. He paused, made a raspy retching noise, and coughed up something round and hairy.

'What's that?' said Will.

'Hairball.' Bob shrugged. 'He is a cat.'

Small Bob batted his paw at the ball, pretty nonchalantly considering it was literally his own solid puke. The hairball rolled over to Annabeth's feet.

'I don't think it's just a hairball,' Annabeth said. She bent to pick it up. 'He swallowed a spider.'

'Are you telling me that's her?' said Thalia. 'Gross.'

'No, I don't think so. But look—there's silk trapped inside the cat hairs.'

She played with the ball as they hiked around the curve of the river. She seemed as fascinated with it as she was with the stuff she'd been studying in her environmental design course this semester. (Percy had heard plenty about that.)

'It's a perfect blend,' she marvelled. 'The strong draglines are woven into catching threads so it's got tensile strength and cohesion. I bet none of the artificial fibres we have even come close. It's amazing. If I could replicate the bonding, imagine what sort of structures I could build!'

'Amazing,' Nico repeated flatly. 'Yeah, it's amazing when you're the one trapped in it.'

'Yeah, I'd rather not think about that either,' Thalia said darkly.

'Sorry.'

Annabeth's hands didn't stop fiddling as she walked. She'd somehow crafted herself gloves from the cat hairs, allowing her to actually tease apart the silken fibres without getting her fingers stuck to it. Percy wasn't sure she was even fully aware of what her hands were doing. Judging from the intent look in her eyes—that piercing stare that practically glowed with an inner light—her mind was racing with further speculation on the subject.

It was such a familiar look that Percy could almost hear the accompanying commentary. He could picture Annabeth sprawled out on his bed with textbooks strewn around her, talking a mile a minute about organic edges, sustainable binding, and topographical manipulation.

'A lot of the buildings had rigid designs because people only thought within the confines of the material's own geometry. But the really talented architects found ways to design structures in harmony with nature instead of dominating it.'

Not that he really understood the stuff she went on about (any more than he understood the properties of magical spider silk now), but he was always content to lie on his back next to her and listen to the sound of her voice.
A wave of homesickness nearly knocked him off his feet. Or maybe it was just the *ba-boom* of the pulsating heart messing with his walking pace.

'What?' Annabeth said suddenly.

'What, what?'

'You're looking at me funny.'

'I—nothing. I just love you.'

'Save it for later, will you?' muttered Thalia. 'If I have to listen to you being sappy, *I'm* going to barf up a hairball.'

'Oh, sorry, forgot you Hunters are violently allergic to romance,' Percy shot back.

He expected Thalia to shoot him one of those *I'm the daughter of Zeus and an immortal Hunter and I'm this close to using you for target practice* glares she'd perfected over the years. He did not expect her to look away with splotchy colour rising in her cheeks.

Percy suddenly remembered something he'd seen briefly in the Caves of Night. He hadn't thought much of it—he had enough demons of his own to deal with, thank you very much—but it hit him now. They'd all had their shameful secrets out in the open.

And Thalia wasn't as immune to romance as she was supposed to be.

Will coughed delicately. 'Um, should we be worried about those *those*?' He pointed up at a towering cliff face.

Balancing on little outcrops of rock were a bunch of pig-faced creatures with big furry butts. They were a mishmash of different animals—attached to the body of a hare was a poofy squirrel's tail and the head of a boar, complete with tiny piggy eyes and a grin full of sharp teeth, but with rounded weasel's ears and a protruding muzzled snout like a mole. Little puffs of smoke rose from under their paws, making Percy think of Leo Valdez and the way his hands occasionally caught fire.

Annabeth gasped. 'Muscaliets!'

She might as well have said *muskateers* for all the sense it made. 'English, please?' Percy said.

The first creature leaped from its perch. Will notched an arrow to defend them from the attack, but Thalia grabbed his arm.

'No!'

Percy was shocked to see tears in her eyes. 'What—'

The muscaliet cannonballed into the river with a hiss of steam. For a second, it bobbed on the surface, then it disappeared—not sinking, but actually dissolving into the water. Percy gaped as the other muscaliets on the cliff followed suit, like a line of dive-bombing lemmings.

'They're gone,' Nico said. 'Their essence—it's fading from thought.'

'Is that what this river does?' Percy asked with a shiver. Just what they needed, another Lethe-like stream.

'No,' Damasen said. 'It is because the muscaliets have been forgotten.'
'What do you mean, forgotten? They're right here!'

'They're—they were an endangered species,' Thalia said quietly. 'We—the Hunters—are charged with protecting them. The world doesn't have a clue they still exist. Once they get killed—well, all monsters go to Tartarus. But not all of them come back.' Her fingers clenched around her bow, like she was itching to shoot at whoever had sent this flock here. 'These must have been last ones on earth…and they're gone.'

'They've lost their purpose. It's like Pan,' Annabeth said. 'Or the elder Hekatonkheires. No one is left to believe in them, and they don't have an identity any more.'

They watched the last muscaliet take its graceful, fatal dive into the river. Nico raised his sword and murmured a few lines of an ancient burial rite. Percy found a handful of loose, black grass and tossed it into the water. It wasn’t any ritual he knew, but it just seemed wrong to stand and watch the muscaliets evaporate from existence without acknowledging their passing in some way.

They came to the shallows shortly after. Here, the river bed was just visible under the grey surface of the river. The water swept around uneven piles of Stygian rock, gurgling in little eddies in the lee of their obstructions.

Some of the rock stuck above the surface, forming a haphazard path that they might possibly hop across. Small Bob leapt onto the nearest one, eyed the next—about ten feet away—and sprang for it. He just missed it, his hind legs slipping into the stream, and he let out a piteous howl.

Bob splashed straight in after him, rushing to scoop him up. The Titan's skin bubbled and warped where the water touched it, like he'd been immersed in acid.

'Bob!' Annabeth cried.

Percy didn't really think about what he did next. There was simply a desperate compulsion to help Bob, accompanied by a fierce tug in his gut, and he was pushing at the water, forcing it to part around Bob.

It was more difficult than any other liquid he'd ever controlled, and that was saying something. In his career as a teenage demigod hero, he'd raised hurricanes, squeezed water from stone, and even parted the Lethe like he was Moses at the Red Sea. This took all that effort combined and then some. The river resisted stubbornly, fighting him for every drop. His entire body trembled with exertion.

But the waters parted. First in a circle around Bob, then inch by inch to form a narrow channel down the middle.

'Go!' Percy panted.

His friends didn't waste any time. Bob grabbed his cat and lumbered across to the far side. Thalia, Will, and Nico followed close behind, with Damasen bringing up the rear.

'Annabeth, go!' Percy gritted out. 'I'll be right behind you.'

'You're coming with me,' Annabeth said. She looped an arm around his waist and dragged him forward.

He had to admit he needed her help. Percy had borne the weight of the sky on his shoulders once—an incomparably heavy anvil that threatened to crush his puny mortal body. Keeping the two sides of his river channel apart wasn't quite as exhausting, but he thought it might come close.
With Annabeth's help, he stumbled over the shallow river bed. Ten feet, twenty…

Their friends were reaching out to them from the other side. They were almost there.

Five feet from the edge, Percy's stomach groaned and he knew he wasn't holding the water back for much longer. Behind them, the river had already begun to pool over the path he'd created. Little splashes spat at their legs and dotted acid holes in their pants. Annabeth grimaced when it touched her skin, raising ugly red welts on her calf.

Percy tried to push her away from him and force her ahead. At least she could get to safety.

'I'm not leaving you, Seaweed Brain.'

'You're impossible.'

She just gave him a withering look. He'd known her long enough to translate: So are you, and I love you, too.

Percy gathered the remnants of his strength. He scooped Annabeth up, ignoring her cries of, 'What are you doing, Percy?' Then he released the load of water and concentrated, as he had once done in the Lethe, on a single thought: dry.

The river sloshed back into place, swirling around his ankles. It circled his legs like poisonous chains, full of the burn of the Phlegethon and the pinch of the Cocytus and the fierce sucker-punch of the Styx. The Acheron howled and lapped painfully at his shins. Below the surface, the Lethe was a quiet but insistent undercurrent that tried to drag him away.

It hurt worse than a manticore's sting. But he stayed dry. His skin stayed whole.

He hugged Annabeth close to him and waded the last five feet—it might have been fifty, for the effort it took—against the strong current. Strong arms grabbed at them and pulled them out of the river.

Percy crawled out onto the bank and promptly collapsed.

OoOoO

He came to with a splutter. His throat was on fire, like his own saliva was oil and every swallow a spark.

'What happened?' he croaked.

'You over-extended, duh,' Thalia said, rolling her eyes. 'You're just as bad as Shadow Hero and Wonder Healer over there.' She jerked her head towards Nico and Will. 'Boys.'

'Hey!' said Will.

'It was necessary,' said Nico. 'But Shadow Hero has a better ring to it than Death Boy.'

'Ouch,' said Will. 'That hurt, Death Boy.'

Annabeth looked like she had something to add, but she just shook her head and sighed. 'Seaweed Brain,' she scolded. Her eyes were soft.

Damasen glanced at Bob with a deep crease in his bushy red brows. The Titan shrugged. 'We are here,' he said solemnly.
They were at the top of a small rise. The massive valley unfolded before them, a mottled purplish landscape of bumps and ridges, streaked with thin red and blue rivulets running just under the surface.

'It looks the same,' Annabeth said, 'but it feels different.'

'No monsters?' Percy suggested. The vast cardiac valley—wide enough that the outer rims blended into the blood-red horizon—wasn't dotted with Gaia's army this time, which was reassuring. On the other hand, he couldn't spot the Doors either.

Maybe they just weren't near enough. He didn't recall the exact moment when they'd become visible last time.

Annabeth shook her head. 'That's not it.'

Percy looked down into the curved bowl of Tartarus's heart, at the undulating waves of the ground, which pulsed in a steady rhythm. It was the same creepy embodiment of the god of the pit. But there was also something warped about it, like this horrifying image was an illusion disguising what really lay at the heart of Tartarus.

Percy remembered facing the nauseating knowledge that they were mere fleas on the pit god's skin. At the time, this had seemed to be the worst possible interpretation of the place—true hell was simply the mind and body of a diabolical monster.

That was before being treated to the accusatory home videos of the Caves of Night.

Once, Percy had lifted the lid of a coffin to find the distorted face of someone he'd known. Traversing the Caves of Night was like lifting that lid again, only to find himself instead of Luke lying there, but with the same cold, hard visage.

Yes, Tartarus was hell in the sense that it was what you imagined evil incarnate to be. But scratch the surface—literally and figuratively—and the real horror was what actually brought Tartarus to life. The internal organs of this place was fuelled by human vice.

His own vice, not to put too fine of a point on it.

Now that he realised this, Percy was uneasy about what might actually await them at the heart of the pit.

*You have shaped the journey—what you were seeking will be at the heart of it.*

Yeah, Angelos's tidings didn't exactly fill him with the warm and fuzzies either.

A malodorous belch of wind followed them into the valley, sending a rancid, hot gust whipping through it. The descent was treacherously steep. The ground rose and fell in an unstable rhythm, the resounding base pulsating through his body like it was trying to force his heart to beat in time with it. Percy's feet stumbled over throbbing clots every other step. These blockages clogged the path, as though Tartarus had ingested too many greasy monsters over the years and his arteries were paying for it now.

They didn't speak much as they navigated their way down, too intent on finding their footing. Percy copied Annabeth at first, who had the genius idea of using her sword as a hiking pole to stabilise herself. At least, it seemed like a genius idea until Percy accidentally stabbed a vein and sprayed them all with a Phlegethon fountain.
By the time they reached the flat bowl of the valley, Percy was drenched in sweat (and liquid fire) and breathing as heavily as if he'd been speed-climbing up the Camp Half-Blood lava wall rather than picking his way downhill.

The centre of the valley was scarily empty. The mountains that encircled the tight drum-skin of the purple heart like a funnel seemed to reach all the way to the poisonous clouds, making it unimaginable that they'd just hiked down from that height.

'I don't see any Doors,' said Will. 'But on the bright side, no monsters either.'

'Seriously, man,' Percy said, 'are you trying to jinx us? First rule of any quest—commenting on the absence of monsters leads to monsters showing up out of nowhere.'

'Not here,' Damasen said. 'This is a dangerous place. Monsters stay away—usually.'

'When there are no Doors,' Bob corrected. He scooped up Small Bob, who had been about to poke a claw into a throbbing vein. 'If your friends have not sent it yet, there is no reason for monsters to come. Once they arrive, though…'

Percy had a disturbing image of a horde of monsters thundering into the valley like an invading army. He didn't bother to ask how they'd know the Doors were here. The way these things went, Tartarus probably ran advertisements for stuff like that, like a TV infomercial announcing, 'We interrupt your regular regenerating to bring you a shortcut to the mortal world. Call now to book your spot! And as a bonus, we'll throw in a bunch of demigods for the first ten callers!'

A question he'd never thought to ask before nudged at his brain. 'How do monsters regenerate usually?'

Thalia arched an eyebrow. 'You did see those bubbles in the ground earlier, didn't you?'

'No, I mean, how do they come back to our world? When there's no handy shortcut like the Doors of Death, that is.'

Damasen shook his head. 'I have never left since my father locked me here, Percy Jackson. My fate was to spend all eternity here until my name faded from the thoughts of mankind.'

Bob scratched his silver beard. 'Thoughts,' he said, like this was the answer.

'We believe in them,' Annabeth reasoned. 'Or the world does, anyway. When enough people believe in them—or what they represent—we give them the power to return.'

Percy got a sudden vision of a group of kids standing in a circle, clapping their hands and chanting, 'We do believe in monsters! We do believe in monsters!' He suppressed a grin.

'Be nice if Hazel and the others could just wish us back up there,' Will commented.

'It's not that simple,' Annabeth said. 'Monsters—and gods—are archetypes. They're, well, they're like ideas.'

'And you are not monsters,' said Bob. 'Or gods.' He looked at his own hands. 'Or Titans.'

'Our paths are not like those of mortals,' Damasen agreed. 'You have the power to take your fate into your own hands. We, on the other hand, are part of a pattern. The world gives us our purpose.'

'But you chose, Damasen,' Annabeth reminded him. 'You broke the pattern.'
'And it saved us from being eternally stuck on my father's armour,' said Damasen. 'I do not know if it will be enough to carry us to the mortal world.'

'It will be!' Annabeth said fiercely. 'We're not leaving you behind again.'

'Yeah,' Percy said, even as he recalled, with a sinking feeling, the way they'd operated the Doors of Death last time. How would they press the button on the Tartarus end this time?

Maybe they'd get lucky. Maybe with Thanatos in charge this time, there'd be a cheat code or something. And at least they wouldn't have to fight off the army of a vengeful earth goddess in the process.

It was at that moment the universe decided once again to say, _LOL, NAH!_

A streak of black lightning sizzled across the sky, striking the valley dead centre. It was still several hundred feet away, but Percy could see the elevator doors inching their way along the black bolt like someone was lowering it laboriously on a set of invisible cables.

Seconds later, the monster invasion he'd pictured earlier came charging into sight. The seven of them ran for the Doors, but the monsters were fast. They swarmed from almost every direction, except the one Percy and his friends had come from.

Kampê soared over their heads and landed with a thump that rivalled the thunderous heartbeat of the valley. Every one of her heads, from the snakes in her hair to the beasts on her belt, bared their teeth at them.

'Percy Jackson!' she said. 'We have come!'

And then Percy realised that the monsters that had gathered all had something in common.

Standing between his group and the descending Doors of Death was every monster he'd ever fought from the time he'd arrived at Camp Half-Blood. Yep, there was the Minotaur, his bull head as ugly as ever. An entire phalanx of hellhounds—but unfortunately no Mrs O'Leary to help him out. Gods, was that Medusa hiding behind her grisly sisters? (It was just as well he couldn't see her face.)

They all sported cruel, mocking grins, as if to say, _You wanted your memory back, didn't you? Let us help you with that!_ 

_What you were seeking will be at the heart of it._ Great. He'd managed to bring every monster from his past down on himself and his friends.

'It's not your fault,' Annabeth whispered, like she'd read his mind. 'It's Tartarus—he's toying with you.'

'Tartarus isn't just the body of a god,' Percy said. 'It's us. It's who we are inside. I saw it in the caves. I—I'm not a good guy. And this—it's _my_ past.'

'We were _all_ in the caves,' Annabeth said. 'We all saw things—Percy, I told you, that was only one version of you.'

'No one's all good or all bad,' Will added. 'You saw everything we had to hide, too.'

'Yeah, and you didn't drag us here, you know,' Thalia said. 'We came because you're our friend. Even when you're being an idiot.'
'And these guys?' Annabeth jerked her head towards the monsters. 'I was there with you for most of it, Seaweed Brain.'

Nico glared at a beast with a thorn-studded tail and the disgruntled, bespectacled head of a man—Dr Thorn, the manticore who'd once attempted to kidnap him; Will aimed an arrow at the flock of cawing, razor-clawed Stymphalian birds that had previously attacked Camp Half-Blood; Thalia pursed her lips at a wide-mouthed lion with steel fur; Damasen stared down a pack of multi-limbed giants; Bob's fingers tightened around his broom as he locked eyes on the golden-haired Titan that resembled him.

Annabeth was right. These monsters might have emerged from Percy's past, but he hadn't fought them alone the first time. They were part of his friends' histories, too.

And Annabeth… Percy thought about her volunteering first to brave Tartarus with him. He thought about her holding on to him at the edge of Chaos. He thought about her refusing to leave his side in the river.

She knew him at his best and his worst. She knew the measure of his soul. And she still thought there was something worth fighting for. Someone worth fighting with.

'We'll do it again together,' she promised.

'Seven against seventy. Our odds suck.'

'Yeah,' said Nico grimly, 'but I think we've faced worse.'

Thalia raised her bow. 'We'll fight through them.'

'Together?' Annabeth said.

'Together,' Percy agreed. He drew Riptide.

As one, they charged.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is brought to you courtesy of several adventures I had clambering in the mountains of the Lake District back in May this year. Including fording a fast-running river unexpectedly and stumbling downhill on a rainy day. I highly recommend it as writing inspiration. No better way than to pinpoint the challenges of crossing a harsh landscape than actually tramping around in nature!

A few disclaimers—I am not an architect, nor have I ever studied architecture, so most of Annabeth’s architectural ‘expertise’ comes from stuff I’ve managed to glean from listening to TED talks and scouring Google for course outlines on environmental design and organic architecture. I plucked pretty liberally from various websites for inspiration in this chapter. And I didn’t make up the information about spider silk either! It really is pretty amazing stuff in engineering terms, and I figured Annabeth the aspiring architect would appreciate it once she wasn’t paralysed with her arachnophobia.

The muscaliet is a mythological creature from medieval times.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Our heroes reach the Doors of Death and are faced with the last hurdle: how to get out. Who will be left behind to send the lift back to the mortal world?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

XVI
ANNABETH

The odds were definitely not in their favour.

Annabeth had heard that line somewhere—she vaguely recalled some movie everyone had been crazy about last summer—and it definitely applied to their situation now.

Still, like she'd said to Percy, they'd faced these monsters before (albeit not all at once) and she'd been in plenty of impossible fights. Three against three hundred on the Williamsburg Bridge came to mind. Though that was with an invulnerable Percy.

He was definitely not invulnerable now.

But she hadn't come all this way only to fail this close to the Doors of Death. Piper and the others had promised to get the Doors to them, and they had done so. Annabeth had promised they'd be there to meet the Doors, and so they would.

Now your ingenuity will be called upon yet again. It will be up to you to ensure the pattern no longer repeats.

Annabeth hadn't yet figured out what the daemon meant. She did know how to craft a quick battle strategy, though.

'We need to spread them out!' she yelled to the others. 'Divide them so they can't concentrate their attacks!'

'I'll take the birds,' said Will. 'Time for a rematch.'

He stuck two fingers in his mouth and let out the loudest, shrillest taxicab whistle Annabeth had ever heard him produce. She could practically see its vibrations ripple through the air. Nearly all the Stymphalian birds fell to the ground in shock. So did half the monsters.

'Holy hippocampi,' said Percy, rubbing his ears. 'I bet you never have trouble getting a cab downtown.'

'Don't waste it,' Thalia ordered. 'Attack!' In a flurry of gold and silver arrows, she and Will made short work of the birds.

'We will take the big ones,' Bob said with a decisive sweep of his broom. He barrelled towards the
tallest monster: Hyperion, blazing in bright gold. Small Bob bounded alongside him and together they ripped through an entire pack of Gegenees on their way. The ogres wailed as they went from being six-armed giants to total amputees.

Damasen launched himself at Kampê as she came swooping in, spitting a stream of ancient Minoan that didn't sound like praise for Will's virtuoso whistling. Foul-smelling acid splattered the ground beneath them. The red giant's beefy arms closed around Kampê's multi-headed waist and tackled her to the ground. He wrestled her as if she were the Maeonian drakon he'd slain daily for thousands of years.

The monsters, once their eardrums had recovered from their shock, came at them in earnest. There were so many of them! Laistrygonians hurled fireballs from across the valley. Dracaenae slithered over the bumpy ridges with their teeth bared. Gryphons dive-bombed them from the air.

A hydra thundered towards Annabeth, acid shooting from at least five heads. One of the steaming jets sizzled over her and she barely ducked in time. She ran, dodging more corrosive missiles while trying to find her footing on the undulating terrain.

A swollen, pulsing vein caught her foot and tripped her. Annabeth face-planted—which turned out to be fortunate when the air burst into flame where her head had been a split second ago. A giant with skin that looked like it had been painted with Cheez Whiz let out a satisfied burp.

Annabeth scrambled to her feet. She was caught between the hydra and Cacus the fire-breather. Great. One monster could liquefy her; the other could fry her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw flashes of the battle raging in the valley. Nico was locked in combat with a manticore. Will shot down a nest of basilisks swarming him. She didn't see Percy, but she heard him yelling, 'You want a fight? Come and get it, then, Bull-Head!' The army of monsters were keeping her friends so busy, she couldn't count on back-up anytime soon.

'How'd you like to be cooked, demigod?' Cacus sniggered. 'Fried? Barbecued?' He opened his mouth to deliver another spurt of fire. At the same time, one hydra head bore down on her. Acid glistened green on its pointed teeth.

Annabeth swung her sword and sliced off its head. She dove out of the way of Cacus's flaming breath. It hit the hydra right in its stump.

With an angry howl, the hydra turned its remaining heads towards Cacus.

'It was an accident!' Cacus protested. A river of acid engulfed him. When it cleared, all Annabeth could make of him was an orange lump of smoking Cacus-and-cheese.

'Goddamn Canadians!' Percy cursed as he ran by, pelted by fireballs from the Laistrygonians.

'Over here!' Annabeth hollered at him.

One look and Percy understood. He swerved and turned around to run at the hydra. The Laistrygonians' fireballs soared into a pack of telekhines and vaporised them.

'Missed me again!' he taunted the Laistrygonians. 'You guys suck at dodgeball!'

Annabeth decapitated two more hydra heads; Percy took care of the others. Right on cue, the Laistrygonians' missiles slammed into the stumps and sealed them off. The hydra flopped to the ground and disintegrated.
'Nice one!' Percy yelled. He jabbed at the ground and directed a Stygian spray at the Laistrygonians. They howled as it pelted them in the eyes. Annabeth and Percy took the chance to stab them in the back.

Five more monsters down. What was it now, fifty to go?

They turned their attention back to the battle. Damasen had won his fight with Kampê and now had the giant Antaeus in a headlock. Bob was holding his own against three enemies at once: he lambasted the bear twins, Agrius and Oreius, with his broom like they were naughty children, pausing only to poke the Cyclops Polyphemus in the eye with the spear end. Meanwhile, an army of hellhounds had turned on the gryphons, directed by Nico and his Stygian sword. The Clazmonian sow weaved crazily among them; Annabeth was stunned to see Thalia on its back, clinging tightly with her knees as she fired a quick succession of arrows into a coven of empousai. Small Bob snarled as he grappled with the Nemean Lion. The latter's mouth opened wide to bite the sabre-tooth tiger's head off, but Will shot an arrow straight into its maw.

A deafening clang reverberated through the air. The Doors of Death had reached the ground at last. The monsters' battle line—what remained of it, anyway—broke as those who weren't currently engaged in a fight raced hungrily towards it.

'No!' Annabeth cried. 'We have to get there first!'

Percy took her hand and they scrambled over the bumps and ridges of the heart. They weren't going to make it; the monsters were closer. Already the first of them had reached the silver-panelled elevator. The triple-torso-ed giant Geryon lassoed a ranch rope to one side of its black frame, securing it to the ground. Lashing down the other side was the lizard-like old waterbed salesman, Procrustes. Annabeth's wrists smarted at the mere memory of those ropes stretching her out once upon a time.

A trio of snake-headed ladies in gaudy flower prints rushed for the Doors. One of them had a flimsy scarf wrapped around her face, bandit-style, except it had a gap for her fanged mouth rather than her eyes.

The silver panels slid open, but before Medusa and her sisters could get in, a fat woman with thick snake coils in place of legs tried to slide ahead of them.

'No cutsies!' cried one of the Gorgons, shoving Echidna out of her way. 'We got here first!'

'Show some respect for your elders!' Echidna chided.

'Elders? Pah! Who made you older?'

Geryon tied off his ranch rope and inserted himself between the squabbling ladies and the Doors. 'Just who was doing all the work here, then? What didja think, the Doors just lash themselves down, huh?'

'Oh, right, take all the credit, you old cowherd,' snapped Procrustes.

'Shu up, Crusty.'

'It's big enough for all of us!' Medusa shouted. 'As long as someone stays to hold the button.'

'You can stay—you've already got your finger on it!'

Thank the gods for monster squabbles. Their bickering over who had to hold the Doors for the others
gave Annabeth and Percy a chance to catch up. Percy broke up the argument by opening up a fountain in the monsters' midst. Jets of Tartarus river water shot out in all directions like a lawn sprinkler. Crusty got a blast of Lethe and wandered away, looking dazed. Geryon cursed as he was doused by liquid fire. A shower of Cocytus set the two Gorgons weeping. Echidna screamed as she was hit by Stygian water. Medusa snatched her scarf away from her face and flung it aside, where it lay sizzling in acidic Acheron.

'Look away!' Annabeth cried.

'Don't worry, I got this!' Thalia galloped up, still on the back of the Clazmonian sow. Her arrows flew straight and true, slamming through all three of Geryon's chests at once. She leapt off the pig just before it ploughed into the remaining monsters at the Doors. They scattered like skittles toppled by a bowling ball. Thalia activated her shield, Aegis, and thrust it at Medusa.

The Gorgon reared back in shock. Possibly the sight of her own ugly face was too distressing for her. Annabeth wondered if she'd actually looked in a mirror before.

Percy reacted first. Riptide came swinging down on Medusa's neck for the second time in history.

'Percy, look out!' Annabeth ran her sword through one of the Gorgons, but the other one gored him with her tusk. 'Percy!' Blood poured from his arm. He swung Riptide anyway. 'Die, Beano!'

'It's Steno!' cried the monster in outrage, before exploding in a cloud of sulphurous mist.

'I'm okay!' Percy gasped, clutching at his injured arm. 'Get the Doors!' Thalia got there first and jammed her fist on the button. 'How's this thing work?'

'Not yet!' Annabeth said. 'The Doors will close if you hold it down.' She jammed her foot in between the silver panels to hold them open. 'And then someone—one of us has to—' Her voice caught in her throat. This was it—the final hurdle, and the one she had not yet found a solution to. All the way through Tartarus, she'd been so focused on surviving each step that she hadn't thought ahead enough to the inevitable problem at the end.

'Hold the button for twelve minutes.' Echidna's glare was pure venom. The Styx fountain had left pock marks on her cheeks. 'Not that any of you will have the chance to—aghhh!' A red-boulder-sized fist slammed into her out of nowhere and she reeled back.

'Hello, sister.' Damasen's voice was almost pleasant. 'It's been a while.'

'You man-loving fool,' Echidna snarled. 'Do you think you're a match for me? I am the mother of monsters!' Damasen didn't dignify this with a response. He simply grabbed Echidna by the tail and swung her around like a lasso. Her shrill scream pierced the air, then cut off abruptly when Damasen released her and she sailed right into the Gryphon-hellhound mêlée. The mother of monsters disappeared into their whirl of teeth, fangs, and claws.

'Get to the doors!' Damasen bellowed.

Will and Nico limped towards them with their arms around each other's shoulders. Annabeth couldn't tell which of the pair was supporting the other. Bob and his cat ran up to help them along. The monsters that were left followed hot on their heels.
Before they could close the distance, a fissure opened in the ground. Thalia threw up her shield, probably anticipating another deadly fountain.

What rose from the earth was worse: a young man with sandy hair and a long claw scar running diagonally down his right cheek.

Annabeth's breath caught in her throat. She heard her own voice come out in a strange, foreign whimper.

'It can't be,' Thalia whispered. 'Why—how can he be here?'

Luke turned to Percy and addressed him directly. 'Don't you see, Percy? This is your journey. You came to Tartarus to find yourself. And here I am.' His voice, high, cold, and cruel, emanated from the air rather than from his mouth. It seemed to be cobbled together from harsh whispers, dragged with great effort from the furthest corners of Tartarus.

'No—you're not—I'm not—' Percy threw his hands up to ward Luke away.


But that couldn't be right. Kronos was supposed to be fractured into so many pieces that he could never reform at all, let alone take Luke's form.

Then again, Bob and Damasen were supposed to be decorations on Tartarus's armour, their souls lost to Chaos. Annabeth had already seen so many impossible things down here. What was one more?

'What did you think you would find at the heart of Tartarus, Percy Jackson? All these monster—' Kronos spread his hands, although the monster army was already mostly decimated, and what remained of it edged away from the Titan. 'Me.' He crossed his arms over his chest and appraised them with eyes of gold steel. 'All part of who you are. Who are you, in the end? What are you?'

Ghostly shades danced in the space between them like a movie on fast-forward. It was Eris and Chaos and the Caves of Night all over again, dredging up the worst acts of a man's life through the lens of fear and hate. It was The Life and Times of Percy Jackson, starring Luke Castellan—no, starring Kronos! Luke, or maybe it should be Kronos! Percy. In this version, Percy's power was completely unchecked, greater and more terrible than he'd ever been.

Toilets exploded, only in this blast, everything collapsed—Clarisse was buried in the Camp Half-Blood outhouse; the Argo II blew apart and sank; his and Annabeth's apartment crumbled into rubble. Earth and sea shook in a wild frenzy—Mount St Helens erupted into a sky of ash; hurricanes ravaged Manhattan. Water burst from the orifices of fossilised shells, but also living creatures—monsters, though Annabeth could easily imagine them to be humans, too, and it was not water that spouted from their ears and mouths.

The worst part: none of it was accidental, the slips of a young demigod unaware of the true extent of his powers. This was the unrestricted madness of a man fully cognisant of the damage he could do and wreaking it intentionally on his enemies. This Percy stood calmly in the centre of each scene of devastation, orchestrating the chaos with calculated malice.

It settled into a final, still frame that settled over Percy himself, superimposing frosty golden eyes and a dangerous expression onto his face. Kronos!Percy's lip curled in a cruel, satisfied smile. The most terrifying part was that this look was not completely foreign to Annabeth. This was the Percy who had choked Akhlys in her own poison, slayed Arachne without a trace of remorse, and vowed a terrible vengeance upon Gaia.
Riptide trembled in Percy's hands, so violently that Annabeth feared he would drop the sword at any moment. It was this small gesture of fear that reminded her that the Percy standing next to her was real and complicated—a whole person with a dark side that he struggled to control.

And for better or worse, he was her whole person. He always had been.

She reached over and closed her fingers over his.

'Percy,' she whispered. 'Percy, you're not him.'

'I'm no different,' he said miserably. Dark shadows swam in the haunted seas of his eyes. 'I've done terrible things. I turned into a—a monster. Like Luke.'

Annabeth cupped his face in her hands, the way Piper had once done to force reason back into her scattered mind. She made Percy look straight at her. 'You listen to me, Seaweed Brain. You never went as far as Luke. And even if you did—Luke chose right in the end. You know that. You were there. Don't let Kronos get into your head!'

Percy's expression cleared. 'Annabeth,' he said. 'You're right.'

'Of course I am.'

'No.' The deep rumble of Bob's voice boomed across the valley. 'Not Kronos. You are not my brother!'

Small Bob leapt onto Kronos's back, claws outstretched. In Luke's form, Kronos should have been flattened when the sabre-toothed tiger pounced, but he remained upright, shaking furiously in an attempt to dislodge the enormous cat from his back. Small Bob held fast, his claws digging into Kronos's skin.

Kronos howled with pain, but it wasn't the inchoate cry of a tenaciously reforming Titan, or even a human scream. It was deep and full and reverberating, shaking the ground itself and causing the scarlet clouds to thicken like congealed blood.

Bob swiped at Kronos with his broom. The spear point should have cut through Kronos's body. Instead, Kronos spun like a top, and both broom and cat were sucked into a whirlwind that seemed to be all gnashing teeth and flashing blades. When it settled, he was no longer Luke nor Kronos, but the armoured vortex of Tartarus himself.

'My cat!' Bob cried. Silver tears glinted angrily in the corners of his luminescent eyes.

'A pest,' boomed Tartarus. 'Exterminated now. Like you all will be shortly.' He surveyed them with his swirling abyss of a face. 'Mortals,' he chortled. 'Such malleable minds. How far can they stretch before you break?' Between his massive purple claws was something mangled and unspeakable. He dragged it out like an elastic band, longer and longer until it broke with an ominous snap. 'Perhaps I will keep you alive for a while longer to find out.'

'No thanks,' Percy said, as if Tartarus's last mind game hadn't twisted him up inside at all. 'Our heads are a no-stretching zone.'

'Yeah,' Annabeth added, trying to sound braver than she felt. 'We've handled everything your little universe threw at us.'

Damasen caught Annabeth's eye and shook his head as if to say, stop, let me handle this. He stepped forward. 'Really, Father, playing with demigods? Has your life gotten so mundane?'
'You!' Tartarus's eyes narrowed. 'I will destroy you. Like I did before. You and your pesky Titan friend. And this time, I will swat your demigod pets, too.'

'Yes, well, that didn't go so well last time, did it?' Damasen said. 'Because here we are again.'

With that, he lunged at his father. The air around Tartarus buzzed and shimmered like he was trying to revert to an unbridled vacuum, but Damasen's strong grasp held Tartarus's physical form in place. Bob leapt over the fissure and landed a square punch to Tartarus's head. His knuckles came away bleeding, but grim satisfaction flooded his face.

Together, the Titan and the giant wrestled Tartarus back from the Doors, giving Will and Nico the chance to cross the fissure and join the others. Will and Nico hobbled straight into the lift and collapsed on the floor, clearly wiped out by their previous fights. Thalia, standing with one foot blocking the door, drew her bow and took aim.

'I can't get a clear shot,' she said. 'Do you think they can take him out? What happens to Tartarus if, well, Tartarus is killed?'

'They won't be able to,' Annabeth said. She watched Damasen and Bob grapple with Tartarus, torn between running to help and the knowledge that she'd be more likely to accidentally stab her friends than to contribute to the fight.

Tartarus's initial shock at being jumped by the two deities had worn off. He was actually laughing, almost playfully, as they rolled around in a blur of flailing limbs, like a father roughhousing with his kids.

'This is it, then, isn't it?' Thalia asked. 'Someone has to stay and—and send the rest of you home.' She slung her bow over her back and went to the elevator button.

'Oh no, you don't,' Percy said. 'I'm sending you all back. No, don't start Wise Girl.' He held a finger to Annabeth's lips, stalling her protest. 'I was the one who dragged you all down here.'

Annabeth shook her head fiercely and said, 'We chose to come.'

'I can't leave anyone behind!' Percy insisted. 'Not again.' His eyes flickered to the trio of fighters. 'I have to stay with them. But you guys can have a chance. I can hold it for twelve minutes. Please—'

'We're not leaving you,' Thalia snarled. 'Why do you think we came in the first place?'

Damasen gave a colossal roar and slammed Tartarus so hard, he skidded back five feet. The earth shuddered and the fissure in the ground widened. Damasen pushed Bob away from the fight, yelling something Annabeth couldn't hear. Bob broke away and ran back to the Doors.

'Friends! I will press the button!'

'Bob, no!' Percy said. 'I owe you from last time.'

'We owe you from last time,' Annabeth corrected.

Bob nudged Thalia out of the way and took her place at the button. 'This is how it was,' he said simply, with a brief glance at Damasen, locked in battle with Tartarus.

'But—'

Bob looked at them sadly. 'Patterns repeat,' he said. 'Stories don't change after all. Perhaps it is
simply our fate. For us, escaping this place is an impossible thing.'

'No!' Annabeth refused to believe it. 'You've already done the impossible. You escaped Chaos. You won't be stuck repeating the same pattern as before.'

Stuck.

The answer came to her in one brilliant flash, as clear as the lightning that streaked down with the Doors.

'Get in the lift,' she ordered. 'All of you.'

'Annabeth, no,' Percy said, his eyes wide. He thought she meant to stay behind with Damasen. 'You can't do this.'

Thalia must have thought the same thing. 'We won't let you! If someone needs to stay—' She gulped and looked at her hands. 'If someone needs to stay,' she repeated more firmly, 'it should be me.'

Annabeth cut her off before she could argue further. 'Don't worry,' she told them. 'I have a plan.'

'Annabeth…'

'Trust me.' She gave Thalia and Percy a shove towards the elevator. 'Hold the door and wait for me.'

She sheathed her sword and ran towards Damasen and Tartarus, shouting for the giant to come back. The cat-hair gloves she had woven earlier were still in her pocket, along with the ball of spider silk. She pulled the gloves on and fingered the ball. It was tiny. Would it be enough?

Against all odds, Damasen forced Tartarus into the fissure. For one insane, hopeful moment, Annabeth thought he had won. But then she saw one hooked claw emerge. Tartarus would be climbing out any second, angrier and more dangerous than ever.

'What are you doing?' Damasen growled. 'I sent Bob to help—'

'I need the silk,' Annabeth gasped. 'From Arachne's web. You wound it on a stick—'

Damasen pulled the thin branch he'd used to de-lint them from the inside of his shirt.

'I can get us all out,' Annabeth said. 'Bring that, and come with me.'

Damasen's eyes narrowed. 'I trust you, Annabeth Chase,' he said, and it was a mandate as well as an affirmation.

Together, they sprinted for the Doors. 'Cut the ropes!' she ordered. 'Everyone, get in!'

She didn't look to see if they obeyed. Tartarus had hauled himself out of the fissure. Each footstep he took towards them drew splintered scars in the ground. Annabeth grabbed the stick of Arachne's web from Damasen. She attached the strands of her own ball to it.

'Playtime's over,' Tartarus growled at Damasen. 'Glad to see you aren't entirely useless at fighting. But this game is getting monotonous.'

'Fight me, then!' Annabeth challenged.

Tartarus's laugh sounded like the chorus of a firing squad. 'You? As easy as swatting a gnat, puny demigod.' To prove it, he flicked his gnarled hand at her the way you would shoo a pesky fly.
This was the moment she had to get absolutely right. Annabeth feinted to the right, in front of the elevator button. Tartarus's hand came up to smack her and she flung the skeins of Arachne's sticky silk between them.

'It would hold fast even the most powerful god,' Arachne had said. 'I defy any of them to escape its pull!' Annabeth was counting on that now.

The silk connected with Tartarus's fingers just before he slapped the spot where her head had just been, and landed on the silver button. Annabeth fell to the ground, her heart racing at her narrow escape.

But she'd done it.

The Doors of Death began to close.

Tartarus tried to pull his hand away. Annabeth saw confusion flicker across his face when the silk held fast. Rage was hot on its heels, but she didn't stop to watch. She picked herself up and dashed for the Doors.

For one terrifying moment, she thought she was going to miss it, that the panels would slam shut and leave her behind to face the incensed god she'd just tricked. But of course her friends would never let that happen. Percy stood in the centre of the Doors, reaching out both hands to her. He pulled her safely into the elevator, into the circle of his arms.

The Doors slid shut, catching the end of her ponytail in it. It didn't matter. She was inside. They were all inside.

Bob and Damasen shouldered one panel each, holding them firmly shut. The elevator began its rattling, earth-shaking ascent. A tinny voice from an invisible speaker crooned absurdly about taking chances and jumping off the edge.

Annabeth's pulse wouldn't slow down. She'd taken an insane gamble. If she had miscalculated, if Arachne's silk didn't hold, if Tartarus was just too powerful...well, then they would die here in this elevator, lost in the limbo of whatever happened when the button was not held for twelve minutes. She would have forfeited all their lives for the chance that all of them could make it out.

But if it worked...

If it worked, nobody would be left behind.

The seconds dragged by with nothing to mark them except her own furious heartbeat. The elevator shuddered like it might jerk them all into a million pieces at any moment.

*Just a little longer, just one more minute.* She repeated it like a prayer in her head, as if the mantra could buy them the twelve minutes they needed. Her eyes locked arbitrarily on the silver sweat beading on Bob's forehead as he and Damasen held the Doors in place. It rolled off the bridge of the Titan's nose and splashed to the floor, inches from Annabeth's own face. She must have sunk to her knees at some point, although she couldn't recall when. The air in the elevator had a crushing weight to it, like the number of molecules in it was multiplying and expanding into all the available space.

Annabeth had read about scuba divers who rose to the surface too quickly, rupturing their lungs when the air pressure changed too abruptly. It probably felt something like this—the swell of her chest as her lungs fought with the outside air to expel carbon dioxide; the dizzying pinch in her back of her nasal passages; the thundering of blood in her ears.
'Thirty seconds,' Bob murmured.

She didn't think she'd last ten. Bob was nothing but silver spots dancing in a sea of black. Percy's arms had fallen away from her. She couldn't pinpoint the moment they had gone slack.

Annabeth wasn't entirely sure she didn't dream the soft ding. The world became a kaleidoscope of sound and colour. A flash of light reflecting off glass. Someone's strangled yelp. A single calf-brown eye. Bob's soothing rumble: 'We are friends!'

Soft hands brushed the hair from her forehead. Someone tipped a glass against her lips. Annabeth's mouth, expecting liquid fire, tried to object, but the nectar that slipped down her throat instead was tart, sweet, and refreshing, like ice-cold cherry lemonade on a hot summer's day.

Her eyes flew open.

'Thank the gods!' said Piper.

It took Annabeth a moment to adjust to the scene. They were in a large cavern so dark that made her think at first that they hadn't left Tartarus after all. The only light came from the headlamps that Piper and the others wore, flashing bright beams like aerial spotlights off the cave walls whenever they moved.

Bob and Damasen stood by the Doors with their hands held above their heads in a gesture of surrender. Facing them were Jason, Frank, and Tyson, all armed and ready for a fight.

'Stop!' Annabeth called to them. 'Don't hurt Bob and Damasen—they got us out!'

'They're—oh,' Frank said. Jason lowered his gladius.

'We are friends!' Bob said again.

'Friends?' Tyson asked. He hadn't relaxed his grip on his club.

'Yeah,' Percy croaked. Grover was crouched next to him, supporting his shoulders. 'Hey, G-man.' He craned his head to look at Tyson. 'You okay, Big Guy?'

Tyson dropped his club and tackled Percy in a bear hug. 'You are okay, brother!'

'Ow—yeah—ribs, Tyson—'

'We came to save you!' Tyson announced proudly. 'Leo made a good ship! It breathes fire!'

Leo looked up from where he was helping Will regain consciousness and aimed an air-fist-bump towards Tyson. 'Festus is versatile, mi amigo.'

'And we found Death and made him send his Doors to you,' Tyson continued.

Annabeth noticed the slender figure then, standing slightly apart from the others with his arms crossed. She had never seen Thanatos before, and she was struck by how finely chiselled his pale face was. She didn't know what she expected Death to look like, but it was a little disconcerting to find that he was actually, well, hot.

Frank went over to him as Reyna and Hazel pulled Thalia and Nico from the elevator, leaving it empty.

'Thank you,' he said to Thanatos.
Thanatos inclined his head slightly. 'I trust the debt is repaid,' he said, arching one elegant eyebrow.

Frank nodded solemnly. Thanatos's eyes drifted to Frank's breast pocket. His lips quirked in what might have been a smile. Then he and the Doors disappeared.

'Where are we?' Annabeth asked.

'Kilauea,' Piper said. 'In Hawaii.'

'What?'

'Correct me if I'm wrong,' said Percy, 'but isn't Hawaii, like, an island? Where the beaches and palm trees?'

'It's a volcanic island—a whole lot of them, in fact,' Jason said. 'We're inside a lava tube.'

Percy made a face. 'You're telling me we're inside a volcano? Great. The last time I was in one of these—'

'Stop complaining, Fish Boy,' Jason said. 'Would you rather we left you in Tartarus?'

'Don't know what you're complaining about, anyway,' Leo said. 'Volcanoes are awesome!'

'Good for forges,' Tyson agreed.

Hazel coughed discreetly. 'Ahem. Kazumura Cave is also the deepest cave in America. We figured the furthest underground we could get, the better our chances of projecting the Doors into Tartarus. This was easier than going all the way to Epirus.'

'Good call,' Nico said, coming round at the same time that Grover muttered, 'Of course it had to be underground.'

'Thanks, guys,' Annabeth said. The warmth spreading through her might be a side effect of the nectar Piper had fed her, but she thought it was more than that. They'd escaped Tartarus. Her friends had come through for them on this end—and she hadn't expected to find all eight of them banding together from the four corners of the country. For a girl who'd grown up believing herself unwanted, the reminder that she did have a family she could count on would never cease to be an incredible gift.

And now she had two more people—Titan, giant, whatever—to add to that expanding family.

Annabeth got to her feet and held out her hands to Bob and Damasen.

'You were right, Annabeth Chase,' Damasen said. 'And you wrote us a new fate.'

Bob's grin was so wide, it practically split his face in two. He pulled her into a hug, and then did the same with every other demigod, even the ones he'd only just met.

'Hawaii,' he mused.

'Sun, stars, and sky,' Percy told him encouragingly.

'It's in the west,' Nico added.

Bob laughed. 'I have not been Lord of the West for a very long time, friend Nico. But this is good.'

'Which way do we go?' Damasen asked.
'We can leave together,' Annabeth said, but Damasen shook his head.

'We will make our own paths now, Annabeth Chase. You have given us that gift.' He looked like he quite relished the idea.

'Down that tunnel,' Jason said, pointing. 'That's the way we came.'

Bob nodded. 'Farewell, friends!' he said. 'The sky is waiting.'

He took Damasen's hand and together, the Titan and the giant loped off up the tunnel.

Annabeth wasn't sure how the people of Kilauea would feel about two immortal beings joining their community, but the Mist would probably take care of that.

She put her arm around Percy and looked at all her friends.

'Let's go home,' she said.

Chapter End Notes

No, this is not the end. Two more chapters to come! But yes, the story is wrapping up. Hope you've all been enjoying the ride!
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Thalia has a difficult decision to make.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

XVII
THALIA

Thalia hated flying.

Fortunately, the weird amphibious contraption Leo Valdez had cooked up wasn't flying so much as it was skimming the surface of the Pacific Ocean. It didn't feel all that different from sailing a ship, though Leo insisted they were airborne. He had tried to explain how it worked, but only Annabeth seemed able to make any sense of his spiel about Festus, a New Rome limo, and hydrofoils. Or care about it, for that matter. Everyone else was more interested in trading stories about their respective journeys.

Piper related the rescue team's story: how she and Jason had rushed to Camp Jupiter, just as Frank, Hazel, and Reyna finally convinced the senate to support the quest. ('It was really Reyna's doing,' Frank admitted. 'You should have seen her—lost her temper spectacularly and chewed them all out. They gave us everything we requested for after that.') How they'd driven the senate limousine to Indiana to find Leo, who'd hacked location services on Thanatos's iPad to track him down. How Tyson and Grover had found them in Cleveland and insisted on helping. ('Tyson sat on Death!' Leo marvelled. 'It was totally awesome!') Between Piper's Charmspeak and Frank calling in an old favour ('We did free him from captivity once,' Frank reminded Percy), Thanatos hadn't needed all that much coercion to help them out. After that, it had been a matter of deciding where to set up their rescue base. Leo and Tyson had gone straight to work fixing up the 'Festusmobile' so that they could race to Hawaii.

'And this little beauty was born,' Leo said proudly.

Thalia looked appreciatively around the lower deck room they'd gathered in. The décor definitely had a strong Roman theme. The leather seats were a deep, Camp Jupiter purple, and the mahogany bar running along the wall had $SPQR$ carved into it.

'Talk about travelling in style,' Thalia murmured.

Reyna shrugged, glancing at Frank and Hazel. 'Perks of the praetorship. You get access to the best limos. Though I think this is the first time anyone's ever converted it into an amphibious vehicle.'

'And here leading the Hunt only gets me a solo tent and maybe a ride in the moon chariot once a decade.'

Reyna looked away and Thalia bit her lip, cursing herself inwardly for bringing up the subject of the Hunters.
She remembered the shadow that had flickered across Reyna's face when they'd arrived at the Festusmobile and Thalia had to tell Leo to chart a course for Seattle so that she could pick up her Hunters from Amazon headquarters. It was like shutters going down, erasing any trace of the emotions simmering beneath Reyna's usual stoic façade.

Thalia felt like an idiot.

Her brain wouldn't stop replaying the moment she'd first opened her eyes in the Kazumura Cave to find Reyna's face filling her vision, more expressive than Thalia had ever seen it. In all the time Thalia had known her, Reyna had always been controlled and guarded, approaching the world with a cool logic that belied her young age.

Seeing a crack in that careful composure had sparked something deep in Thalia's heart—something she couldn't quite define. Reyna hadn't cried in exuberant relief at their return, the way Piper or Tyson had, but the emotions written plainly across her usually reserved face seemed to shout even louder to Thalia: You're here. That's all that matters.

It dragged her thoughts back to certain fantasies the spirits of Night had gleefully splashed over their cave walls. Fantasies in which Thalia had very deliberately made Reyna come undone. In a very different way, of course.

It was hard to hide from it now, after she'd seen her own feelings plainly in Tartarus. They were no longer secrets, those brief forbidden fantasies she'd always pushed away as quickly as they'd crept into her mind. Her own actions over the past few years stared accusingly at her. Visits to Camp Jupiter—always justified as scouting missions or drop-ins on Annabeth and Percy—that were more frequent than should have been warranted. Excuses to team up with the Amazons, lately always timed so conveniently to when Queen Hylla had her sister visiting. Coffee dates with Reyna to 'gather intelligence', even after Reyna ceased to be praetor—and even though little of what they shared over a good strong espresso ever made it back to Artemis.

The whole time they'd made their way out of the lava tube, Reyna hadn't let go of Thalia. Maybe it was completely innocent—after coming out of Tartarus, all five of them had needed support to stumble along—but Thalia couldn't shake the idea that the gentle pressure of Reyna's arm around her, the soft press of fingers into her elbow, and the scalding brush of skin against skin meant a little more than supportive friendship.

Thalia cursed herself again for letting things get this far. All this time she'd been playing with fire—fanning a spark that once kindled, she had no choice but to stamp out.

After all, she wasn't free to love.

Across the table, the others were now recounting the journey through Tartarus. Will was just explaining their fight against the *arai*. Thalia grimaced as she remembered the feel of every arrow she'd ever shot at a monster piercing through her body.

'Annabeth was hurt?' Tyson said as Will described their injuries. The Cyclops's eye filled with tears.

Annabeth patted his hand. 'I'm okay, Tyson. Will healed me—healed all of us.'

'How?' asked Hazel, her eyes wide. 'It sounds like it was almost impossible.'

Will turned his palms face-up, staring at them as though he still couldn't believe what they had managed in Tartarus. 'I don't know,' he admitted. 'I mean, I've done small things before, but this was kinda insane.'
Nico reached over the table and took Will's hand. 'Tartarus brought out your true strength,' he said. 'You're a healer, Will. And you were right all along—facing ourselves down there made us stronger.'

The room fell silent as they all took in the enormous weight of Nico's words.

'Well,' Percy said at last, 'I can tell you how he managed it.'

Everyone turned to look at him.

'You can?' Will said in surprise.

Percy nodded, a sly grin on his face. 'It was just a little…wait for it…' He paused for effect.

Annabeth elbowed him in the ribs. 'Just tell us,' she complained.

'Will power!'

Leo let out a bark of laughter and high-fived Percy, while everyone else groaned at the bad pun.

Piper pelted both boys with a handful of peanuts.

Thalia rolled her eyes. Her gaze landed back on Reyna, taking in the small smile on her face. For no reason at all, it made her breath catch in her throat. Thalia's face flushed with embarrassment. Fortunately, no one seemed to notice, though if this kept up, she thought she might spontaneously combust soon.

'Excuse me,' she muttered, getting up and squeezing past Annabeth and Nico to leave the table. 'Just gonna go up on deck for a bit.'

The moon was just beginning its slow climb over the ocean when Thalia emerged onto the breezy upper deck. It was shaped like the back of a dragon—it might even be part of Leo's bronze dragon itself, with those wings on either side powering them forward. Thalia leaned over the side. Her new reflection stared back at her, glowing in the moonlight.

She hadn't really had the chance to take in the changes adding six years of age had wrought to her physical appearance. There was some softening of her features—her face seemed less angular, her body's curves more developed. When she squinted, she saw the slightest hint of a wrinkle forming over her forehead, like a line that had been traced by repeating a facial expression over time. Her eyes retained their shape, but they seemed to be set deeper in her face, thrown into sharper focus.

Subtle changes, but after years of seeing the same unchanging features in the mirror, this new face was an unfamiliar stranger. Not an unwelcome one, though. This girl—this woman—looked settled, comfortable, like someone who had grown into her own skin. She looked like the kind of girl who could grow old alongside someone like Reyna, laughing over their deepening wrinkles and white hairs as the years passed.

Her mind flashed to a long conversation she'd once had about life and love with a greying couple in the Midwest, caretakers of Artemis's Waystation. A pair of former Hunters who had renounced immortality for love.

When Thalia had renounced love for immortality (well, the actual contract involved a renunciation of men, but love was kind of embedded in the fine print), the thought that she'd ever want to reverse it hadn't crossed her mind. She'd embraced the Hunters after Luke's betrayal, and she could still remember the sense of peace that had washed over her once she'd committed herself to the Hunt, knowing that no man would ever hurt her again. Leading the Hunters seemed like her destiny, one that she'd resisted initially, but eventually come to accept.
Was it possible that you could have more than one destiny in your lifetime? That destiny might not be a final destination, but a journey?

Hemithea and Josephine might have chosen to leave the Hunters to find their answer to that question, but was it a question Thalia had the right to ask?

Thalia wasn't just any Hunter; she was their leader. Leaving had greater consequences for her. Never mind that she would essentially be breaking a contract with Artemis (and while her Lady was pretty reasonable as far as deities went, she was still a goddess, and you offended the Olympians at your own peril). Zoë Nightshade had led the Hunters for nearly three thousand years; how could Thalia abandon them after a paltry six?

Thalia let out a growl of frustration. Why did all her choices have to involve leaving people behind?

Soft footsteps announced Reyna's arrival seconds before her reflection appeared in the water next to Thalia's.

'Nico was just telling us about Geras,' Reyna said, waving a hand at their reflections. 'Sounds like he was a real creep.'

'Yeah, well. Men.'

Reyna pursed her lips. 'I think it's just people in general, when they want to have power over you.'

'Isn't it your sister who believes in having power over men?'

'Well, there's a reason she's the Amazon, not me.' Reyna crossed her arms. 'I think Hylla sees it as payback, in a way. Turning the tables so that women are on top. But what I really wanted—what I really want—is to be on equal footing with anyone I work with, male or female. When I was praetor, I wanted to lead alongside someone who valued me as an equal, and whom I valued as well.' Her arms fell back to her sides. 'Frank's a decent guy. So's Percy. And Jason—well, he was the first guy to show me equal partnership could be possible.' Her lips twisted in a wry smile, as though recalling her previous crush, which Thalia had heard about, but never really discussed.

Thalia felt a sudden, irrational urge to cuff her brother around the head.

On the heels of it was an old memory of being held at knife-point in an Amazon stronghold in San Juan: a kidnapping attempt flipped upside down when the girl she'd knocked out and abducted (all for a good cause, of course) had turned the tables on her. Reyna had pressed Thalia's own knife to her throat and demanded to speak to Artemis's lieutenant, and Thalia's first thought had been, I've met my match!

She wondered now, if the Hunters had found Reyna early enough, would Reyna have ended up like her?

Would it have made a difference to their friendship—or whatever this was—now?

'Are you going to be in trouble for this?'

It took her a moment to realise that Reyna was asking about her new appearance.

'I dunno. I didn't exactly ask permission to go, so I'll probably have to answer to that first. Though Artemis likes Percy well enough, so she might let me off the hook for helping him. But this—' she gestured to her face, 'I don't know. None of us are older than sixteen. Maybe she'll just age me back down. Or turn me into a deer. Or kick me out. I could go join Hylla.'
There was a few seconds' pause before Reyna asked, 'Would you?' Her voice had a faint edge to it, as though she was trying to hide how much Thalia's answer mattered to her.

Thalia met her gaze steadily. 'No.'

'You guys could work,' Nico had said in the Caves of Night. Thalia's heart did a series of somersaults as she allowed herself to consider the possibility.

'Will she be waiting for you in Seattle?'

Thalia shrugged. 'I guess she'll summon me when she wants to talk about it.'

It was as if Artemis had simply been waiting for her to reach this conclusion. The words had barely left Thalia's lips when a shadow cut through the reflection of the moon and their wavering images on the sea surface. The silver carriage appeared out of nowhere and descended in a graceful arc to land on the surface of the ocean without a single splash. Hitched to the front of it, beating their hooves against the empty air, were four golden-horned deer.

'I think that's my ride,' Thalia said, trying to hide the nervousness creeping up her throat. 'Sorry.' She wasn't sure what she was apologising for—leaving in the middle of their conversation? Everything that she was leaving unspoken? A relationship that could never happen?

Reyna shook her head. She watched wistfully as Thalia leapt the rails of the Festusmobile and landed in Artemis's moon chariot.

'Story of my life,' she said lightly. 'I find someone, but they're never mine to keep.'

Thalia blinked, and the next thing she knew, the moon chariot was gliding smoothly across the sky. Thalia gulped and forced herself not to look down, focusing instead on the auburn-haired girl who sat facing her with her arms crossed like a petulant twelve-year-old.

She hoped Artemis wasn't in an irritable mood. Thalia had only been summoned into the moon chariot once before, and that was when Artemis had needed to deliver a dire (and garbled) warning about giants, a dangerous gamble, and a vague instruction to find the Amazons. She'd been on the verge of that split personality disorder the Greek-and-Roman schism had created then.

'My lady.' Thalia couldn't exactly kneel in the narrow chariot, so she settled for bowing her head respectfully.

'Thalia.' Artemis stroked the fur of something on the seat next to her. Thalia's eyes widened when she recognised it: the fuzzy body of a hare with a long, fluffy squirrel's tail. Its head, half-boar, half-rodent, rested on the seat, weaselly ears drooping on either side.

The muscaliet lay completely still, without the slightest rise and fall of its chest.

'I saw in Tartarus—' Thalia began.

'Yes,' said Artemis sadly. 'This was the last one.'

Thalia clenched her fists.

'Lycaon killed it two days ago. Unfortunately, they've been fading from human consciousness since the Middle Ages. It doesn't even have a decent Wikipedia page left. Now that the last one is gone…' Artemis turned sorrowful eyes on Thalia. Guilt rippled through her as she remembered the muscaliets leaping into the rivers of Tartarus.
'I'm sorry,' Thalia said. 'We were supposed to protect it.'

'Yes.' Artemis raised her eyes to the stars. 'And it is too late now to give them a place among the constellations.' The muscaliet's fur shimmered, and then its body vanished. 'It will be as if they never existed.'

'If I hadn't—if I'd been hunting Lycaon's wolf pack—' Thalia swallowed hard. Was this her fault, for leaving her duties behind?

'You are sorry about the muscaliets,' Artemis observed, 'but not regretful of your decision.'

'Percy—' Had she traded Percy's life for the existence of a species? Thalia realised guiltily that even if she had to choose again now, she would still have done the same thing. Add one more black mark on her performance review. 'Is this where you punish me for breaking my oath?'

Artemis regarded her sternly. 'If I thought you had indeed leapt into Tartarus in direct betrayal of your oath, we would not be having a chat about it.'

'I guess you could always turn me into a muscaliet. Give them a new lease of life.'

'Don't tempt me, Thalia.'

'Sorry.'

'Percy Jackson,' Artemis mused. 'A fine man, indeed. I find I cannot fault your loyalty to him. I myself have honoured men in the past who have proven themselves worthy—Hippolytos, Orion… well, perhaps that one was a mistake.' Her mouth twisted wryly. The former male Hunter had been responsible for the deaths of a dozen Hunters and Amazons, and Thalia knew Artemis greatly regretted being incapacitated when he'd attacked.

'Reyna took him out,' Thalia recalled.

'So she did.' The edges of Artemis's mouth quirked. 'I must admit, even though I don't approve of your distraction, I can't fault your taste.'

Thalia's face grew hot. 'I didn't mean to—'

'But it didn't start there, did it?' Artemis sighed. 'Do you know why I recruit my maidens before they reach their teens, Thalia?'

'Before we get distracted by boys. Or love, I guess.'

'That's one reason, yes. But besides that, the young don't realise that living forever has its costs. They are like us immortals—they haven't been among mortals long enough to grow attached. The Hunt gives them a family and companionship in a safe haven where their happiness is not defined by men. In exchange…well, I think you have recognised there is a sacrifice to be made, and the older you are when you make it, the costlier it is.'

Artemis was right. When Thalia had joined the Hunters, it had been like escaping a world that had taken everything from her: her brother, her first love, her confidence. Those first few years leading the Hunt had been idyllic—daring adventures, female solidarity, great triumphs against men and monsters.

Then she'd found Jason again—no longer the two-year-old she'd lost, but all grown up—her age!—and growing older each year. It had truly hit her then what immortality meant. Maybe she'd given up
the love of men, but that didn't mean she didn't still have something precious to leave behind.

Meeting Reyna only escalated her dilemma. The Roman praetor kept ambushing Thalia's thoughts, like a recurring dream she couldn't quite shake. She'd see Reyna's sharp eyes in the stare of her sister Hylla's; she'd encounter a formidable opponent and Reyna would spring to mind; she'd voice an opinion and realise that Reyna's beliefs had snuck surreptitiously into her own.

When Emmie and Jo had shared their story—ending in them living together, maintaining Artemis's Waystation in Indianapolis—she'd briefly entertained a tantalising image, quickly quashed, of herself and Reyna in their place. She'd started to wonder if her fateful decision to take Artemis's pledge had simply been another impulsive choice in the spectacular series of impulsive choices that made up the life of Thalia Grace: running away, following Luke into a dragon's cave, fighting solo on Half-Blood Hill…

'I just have to learn to deal with it, right? I mean, I'm—' Thalia bit her lip before the word stuck could slip out. She corrected herself instead with, 'sworn to lead the Hunt forever. That's my destiny.' She hoped she didn't sound too bitter. Artemis wouldn't appreciate her lack of gratitude.

'Is that what you want?'

'You're not going to turn me into a bear if I answer that wrong, are you?'

Artemis laughed. 'I think we've come a long way since those days. Times change. We have alliances with the Amazons now—we don't even present the Hunt as the only alternative for girls. I don't think we'll be able to compete so well for recruits if I don't relax the exit clauses a little. I mean, "eternal maidenhood or death"—I guess that's not as attractive compared to "rule all men and take over the world."'

'Exit clauses,' Thalia repeated. Did Artemis mean…?

'You would, of course, renounce immortality. That wouldn't change. And it would be final. If you choose to leave, you would never be a Hunter again.'

'Are you—are you offering me an out?' She'd spoken of it to Reyna in a blasé manner, but she hadn't really believed it would happen. And certainly not like this, as though the decision was in her hands. As though she had a choice in the matter.

Artemis cocked her head to one side and regarded Thalia steadily.

'But—I'm the leader. You can't—I can't just—'

The choice felt as impossible as the first time she'd received the offer to join, when she hadn't been able to fathom leaving Luke behind. That had been a mistake. Would choosing to leave her Hunters be one, too? It wasn't like she and Reyna already had something concrete, the way Emmie and Jo did. What awaited her if she chose to leave?

Possibility, her mind whispered. A chance at a future shared in a partnership of equals.

A future. It was something Thalia hardly ever spared a thought for in the past six years. When you had forever to live, the future ceased to mean anything important. But when she thought about Reyna, the word became a delicate crystal in her hands: momentous and fragile.

'What are you really afraid of, Thalia?'

'I—' She bowed her head. 'How do I know I'm not just rushing into another decision? Abandoning
another family to chase after something new?'

Artemis smiled. 'With age comes the tempering of impulsivity, I see.' She tapped her chin. 'How about this: stay with us until the Winter Solstice. Hunt the monster that extinguished the muscaliets. Discharge this last duty without distractions, and when you have completed this quest, you may return to your decision with a clearer head. And then if you so choose, I will release you from my service.' Artemis leaned forward and touched the reins of her chariot lightly. Her deer swooped into a graceful descent. 'Don't be afraid to move on.'

Thalia heard the echo of Angelos's proclamation: *Moving on is not the same as leaving someone behind.*

The moon chariot landed next to the Festusmobile.

'I will leave you for now. I believe our Hunters are waiting for you in Seattle.'

Reyna was still on the upper deck. She stared as Thalia hopped from Artemis's chariot to land cat-footed on the deck. Her expression was one Thalia would definitely factor into her eventual decision.

'That story of your life,' Thalia told her. 'Don't write off the ending just yet.'

Chapter End Notes

When I read about Emmie and Jo in *The Dark Prophecy*, I felt like it was a little nod to my one canon-unverified ship. It seemed like their existence was proof of a future for Thalia and Reyna. A lot of this chapter was heavily influenced by their story.

And on a different, unrelated note, yes, Cleveland is totally a reference to the SoM movie.
Chapter Summary

The demigods have a Christmas gathering

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

XVIII
PERCY

The Jackson-Blofis apartment wasn't spacious to begin with. Now, with nearly twenty people crowded into the living room, it seemed five times more cramped than usual.

None of the friends Percy had invited over for Christmas seemed to mind, though.

His mom and stepdad had pushed all the furniture to the walls so that their guests could sprawl on the floor, passing cookies, chips, and seven-layer bean dip around.

They were all here—Percy's closest friends, the ones who had voluntarily trudged through Tartarus with him, or travelled cross-country to get them out of the pit. Others who hadn't been directly involved, but were part of his weird extended family all the same.

On the couch, Jason and Frank were deep in conversation with Paul, looking for all the world like a triad of high school teachers. Piper, Calypso, and Rachel sat in a cross-legged circle around the two-foot plastic tree they were decorating. Hazel, Tyson, and Ella played patty-cake with Percy's half-sister Estelle. Thalia, Reyna, and Annabeth were having a discussion (Percy couldn't hear what the topic was, but he caught his name occasionally). Grover and Nico were locked in a debate on—of all things—reincarnation versus rebirth.

Percy himself was competing with Leo and Will to see who could build the tallest tower out of tortilla chips. He was losing at the moment—his stacks kept falling apart and he'd already started over from scratch several times.

Annabeth detached herself from Thalia and Reyna and came over to observe Percy's pathetic tortilla tower.

'You need a stronger foundation,' she said.

'How would you do it?'

She thought for a moment, then smeared bean dip across his chip base as a coagulant. He stacked a couple of chips card-house-style, and they held firm this time.

'Hey, no fair getting help from the architect of Olympus!' Leo complained. His tower was almost a foot tall. Percy had no idea how he'd managed it.

Will sneezed. Both his and Leo's chips went flying into the branches of the mini Christmas tree.
'Hey!' Leo and Piper cried simultaneously.

'Sorry!'

Piper brushed chips out of her tree. It was practically dripping with tinsel and overloaded with shiny baubles.

Leo raised his eyebrows. 'For a daughter of Aphrodite,' he commented, 'you're not doing a great job dressing that thing up, Pipes.'

'Don't call me that,' Piper snapped. 'And what would you know about accessorising, Mechanic-man?'

'I like it,' Calypso said. 'It's colourful.' She glared at Leo, who raised his hands immediately in surrender.

'It does need more white space,' Rachel mused. 'We could do a better job with a bigger tree.'

'Does it look like a bigger tree would fit in here?' Piper spread her arms and smacked Jason's calves, proving her point.

'Well, if it's a bigger tree you need, why don't you dress Thalia up?' Will joked.

Thalia flipped him a gesture that made Grover shoot her an accusing look and reach over to cover the eyes of the two-year-old in Hazel's lap. Reyna grabbed Thalia's offending hand and laced her fingers in it. Thalia grinned ruefully.

'Sorry, Paul,' she said to Percy's stepfather.

Paul accepted this with a shrug. 'I don't think Estelle's old enough to understand what that means. Then again, I'd rather she not copy that particular hand signal in public.'

'And I gave up being a tree for Lent,' Thalia shot at Will. 'Oh wait, it wasn't for Lent—it was to save your sorry ass.'

'THALIA!'

Percy laughed. Gaining back six years and resigning as a Hunter certainly hadn't made much of a dent in Thalia's feisty personality.

Estelle wriggled against Grover's hands, which were clamped over her ears this time. 'Tree!' she shouted gleefully, and stomped right through the collapsed chip towers and bean dip to Piper, Rachel, and Calypso's trussed up masterpiece.

Annabeth snatched up the plate of blue chocolate chip cookies—only one was left—before Estelle could trample it, too. Percy beat Leo to the last cookie and stuck his tongue out at his friend before popping it into his mouth.

'Real generous host you are,' Leo grumbled.

'Hey, all's fair in love and blue cookies!' Percy grinned. 'I'll get more,' he promised, taking the plate from Annabeth. He kissed her on the cheek and got up, brushing crumbs out of his lap.

His mom was bent over the oven when he entered the kitchen.

'You should come join us,' Percy said.
'I will,' said his mom. 'Once this last batch is done.' She eyed the empty plate he set on the kitchen counter. 'Looks like they're a hit.'

'Your cooking's famous,' Percy assured her. 'Thanks for letting us have the party here.'

'You know your friends are always welcome,' said his mom. 'And Paul and I love having you home. Especially after you've been on a quest.' She shook her head. 'Every year I think maybe this will be the year that you stop scaring me with your adventures, but it never ends, does it?'

Percy shrugged. 'We can always hope. I'm sorry I made you worry again, Mom.'

His mom made a little pfft noise and waved her hand dismissively. 'It wasn't your fault. And you're here now. You've always come back.' She reached up to muss his hair. 'Every time, you come back.'

He shifted guiltily, remembering the disastrous Iris-message a few weeks back, when he hadn't a clue who his family was. He was so sick of the way stuff kept coming up—it wasn't just his life it disrupted. There were his friends and family, too, who always got caught in the crossfire of his unpredictable life. He'd hurt so many people over the years, intentionally or not.

His mind flitted to Jessica. He hadn't really thought of her since their catastrophic date, which now felt like something from another life. He wondered how she was getting on with her goal of living a life uncomplicated by the gods. Maybe he should have invited her here as a sort of apology. Then again, given her distaste for her mythological heritage, hanging out with a group of first-generation demigods—not to mention a satyr, a Cyclops, and a harpy—probably wasn't her idea of fun.

'Do you think your life would have been better without all this mythological shit—er, I mean—stuff? If you didn't know it existed?'

'That's a tough question, honey. Do I ever wish things had been simpler? Yes, of course. And I won't deny that the mythological shit,' she winked at him, 'is complicated. But it's easy to blame the gods when really, that's just life. Life's complicated. You don't have to be a demigod for things to keep happening to you.'

He remembered then that her life had been pretty crappy even before she'd ended up a pregnant single mom with a child who had a big target painted on him. Still, could her life have been better if she hadn't met Poseidon, if her path had taken her straight to Paul and Estelle without the detours around a delinquent son and an abusive husband?

'I wouldn't give any of it up,' his mom said firmly. 'No matter how hard or painful it was, meeting your dad gave me one of the best things in my life—you. And I wouldn't trade you for anything. Nothing worth having is easy, Percy.'

Percy knew she was right. If there was one thing he knew from all the battles he'd fought, it was that they made him appreciate what he had so much more. The friends he'd made—so loyal that they'd voluntarily descended into a land beyond hell just for him. Those friendships had been forged in quests and tempered by trials into a bond as powerful as the celestial bronze of Riptide. Their last trudge through Tartarus had only strengthened it further.

And he thought of Annabeth. He could hear her laugh rising above the chatter in the next room. He'd known forever that he wanted to build something permanent with her. Now, more than ever, he wanted to seal the deal. His eyes landed on the thin, gold band on his mom's ring finger. If his memories ever got stolen again, he wanted official proof that could remind him of what Annabeth meant to him.
His mom seemed to read his mind. 'I think if you don't pop the question, she might very well ask you.'

'We haven't really talked about it. I mean, we're only sophomores, and I don't even know if I'll make it to graduation, with all the stuff that keeps happening—'

'But you'll get there,' his mom promised. 'You know, when you were a kid, I used to tell you that you could do anything. And you survived everything your world threw at you, you passed high school, and you found a whole family sitting out there.' She waved her hand towards the living room. 'Look at how far you've come, Percy.'

Again, she was right. The future stretched out in his imagination: college graduation, Annabeth in a wedding dress, babies with black hair and grey eyes.

Percy wasn't Rachel; his visions didn't predict anything. But he could work towards making them come true.

The oven timer went off with a *ding!* His mom pulled out the cookie tray and refilled the empty plate.

'Nothing's impossible, Percy,' she said.

Percy looked down at the full plate. It was his mom's enduring, edible reminder that little miracles could and did happen.

'Cookies can be blue,' he said with a grin.

'Exactly.'

And together, bearing the full plate of blue cookies, Percy and his mom made their way back into the circle of love and family in the next room.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

Holy crap, this is it! The LAST ONE, the end of this massive project that got way out of hand. I actually wrote this epilogue twice. The first version involved Percy and Sally and a long angsty conversation, but it refused to come together and I realised ... well, I needed everyone together for the final curtain call. So here they are. Thank you for sticking with this story. I've been blown away by some of the reviews I've received so far and I am so touched that you've taken the time to write such thoughtful and appreciative comments. Really, from the bottom of my heart, thank you!

I have to say one more enormous thank you to my betas, supernaturally-percyjackson and preciouschildrenofolympus for their help in whipping this monster of a fic into shape. They were an amazing team to have and I am so grateful for all the feedback they've given to help make this story better!

Also, if you haven't yet, go check out preciouschildrenofolympus's awesome art for the story here and here!
Okay I lied, one more thing. There were plenty of scenes and backstory and stuff that didn't make it into the final draft of the story, because, well, plot and themes and I had to keep the whole thing moving on. BUT I'm not quite ready to let this baby go, so I am planning to write up a couple of outtakes and if you guys are interested, I will post those here when they are ready. So let me know if that's something you'd like to see! :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!