The Necklace of Harmonia

by shiiki

Summary

After an eventful summer, Annabeth Chase is on her way to boarding school for the first time. With her friends Thalia and Percy close by, she's looking forward to spending the year in New York. But soon, she finds herself dealing with unfathomable dreams, tangled plots, and a mysterious necklace that keeps finding its way back to her. Worse still, her father wants her to move to the most dangerous city in the country. The choices Annabeth faces this year will have her questioning the meaning of friendship, loyalty, and family. And most of all, just what it means to keep a promise. An alternate PoV retelling of Percy Jackson and the Titan's Curse. Part 3 of the Daughter of Wisdom series.

Notes

When I call this an alternate PoV of Titan's Curse, I use the term very loosely. In actual fact this follows Annabeth over the course of the entire year between SoM and BotL. I pretty much rolled my love for complex subplots, little canon details, obscure references, and boarding school adventures all into one. And this kicks off at least a two-part in the series (the Annabeth version of BotL follows closely, and I've been working on both drafts close together so that I can keep the continuity). So yeah … this is a long project, and I'm enjoying it immensely! I hope you will, too!
Annabeth dreams about a very distant past.

My dream started like this.

I was standing under a threatening ceiling of sky. Around me, slabs of black marble fell in a haphazard circle. They made a loose ring around a central agora like the amphitheatre at my summer camp. An audience sat on the chipped boulders and cracked rock, their eyes fixed upon a semi-circle of seats in the centre of the ruins. They were a motley group of twelve: from the tiny brunette with soft, glowing eyes on the far right, whose feet barely scraped the ground, to the bearded man near the middle with a rough, sun-kissed face and wrinkles around his sea-green eyes. They were the same shape and shade as my best friend, Percy Jackson's, and nearly as alluring.

Dead centre of the group sat a handsome, bronze-skinned man in a chiton woven of pure gold. The lady next to him wore a dress of rich, peacock blue and a stern expression under her crown of dark hair. Their seats were raised just slightly above the others'.

Zeus and Hera, king and queen of Olympus. And the remaining ten seats were filled with the rest of the Olympian council.

They were all looking towards the western horizon. We must have been high in the mountains because the constellations were sinking down to us, like the world was being compressed by sky. An undercurrent of nervous anticipation flowed among the audience—a crowd holding its collective breath as they waited for a wrestler to deliver a death blow.

The howl was so loud, I nearly jumped a foot in the air. It was a roar of outrage and helplessness, echoing through the stars.

The sky jerked like it had been caught mid-fall, and retreated, rising back to a normal level. The sensation of being trapped in a shrinking box dissipated.

'It is done,' boomed Zeus. 'Bring the next supplicants forward.'

I took a seat on a marble slab next to a pretty girl with wavy, honey-blond tresses that made me think of Silena Beauregard, the camp counsellor for cabin ten. She was biting her fingernails as she leaned forward, watching the two bulky guards who now led a group of six girls towards the council.

I did a double-take. The guards had over fifty hands apiece, maybe even a hundred! Only a few of their hands were holding their prisoners; the others were fidgeting, playing with little objects, and even braiding the wispy tufts of hair that sprouted from their heads.

As far as I knew, no one had seen a Hekatonkheire—a hundred-handed giant—for two thousand years, let alone two of them.
'Daughters of Atlas,' Zeus addressed the prisoners. Five of the girls were dark-haired with maple skin. They moved with a fluid grace that made me think of the nymphs at Camp Half-Blood. They made it seem like they were dancing with the Hekatonkheires, instead of being marched to a tribunal.

The last girl was pale, with syrupy curls that fell loosely around her shoulders. She was the only one bound in chains, which held her hands behind her back and dragged from her feet. Her loose, white chiton was dirty and torn, its vine-like sash hanging crookedly around her waist.

'Your father has been punished for his crimes,' Zeus said. 'What have you to say for yourselves?'

'We played no part in the war,' said one of the sisters. She tossed her long, black braid over her shoulder in a proud, almost defiant manner.

'It is true, Father,' said an auburn-haired goddess three seats to Zeus's right. She looked no older than twelve, but she spoke with the confidence of an adult.

Of course, Artemis wasn't really twelve. She could choose to look any age she wished. Why she'd picked a twelve-year-old's appearance was beyond me. Nobody took you seriously at that age. I should know. I'd been twelve only two years ago, and I'd had the toughest time convincing people—namely my mentor, Chiron—that I was old enough for a quest.

'These maidens remained neutral despite their father's ... unsavoury behaviour,' Artemis said. 'They have done nothing to merit punishment.

'They're his kids!' bellowed a beefy god with a skinhead, and tattoos running along his enormous biceps. Possibly my least favourite of the gods, Ares was the only one clad in Greek armour. He had a spear on him as well, which he was now using to dig dirt from under his fingernails. 'Throw them in the lock-up with him. Or better yet, chuck them in a pit of vipers! Let's have a battle to the death!'

My mother, Athena—though judging from the time frame of the dream, this was way before I was born—gave him a withering look.

'Punishment dealt without cause is not justice,' she told Ares sternly. Her gaze rove over the five maidens, who stood straight-backed and tall. I didn't think I'd be that calm if I were standing trial before a bunch of all-powerful Greek gods, but the sisters' faces bore no trace of anxiety. 'Father, if they had indeed done nothing, it would behove us to be fair.'

'Athena is right.' Zeus's glare quelled a grumble from Ares. 'We will not punish the children for the misdeeds of their parents.'

'Daddy's pet.' Even when muttering under his breath, Ares's voice was loud enough to carry across a football field.

'Precautions should nonetheless be taken,' Zeus continued. 'Neutral though the Hesperides have been, I insist that they prove their loyalty.'

Hera snapped her fingers. 'I have it, husband. Place them in my garden.'

'Your garden?' Hermes, thin and gangly in his brown chiton and winged sandals, scratched his head in confusion. My heart swooped when his face turned towards me. His slanted, impish eyes were very much like his future son's—Luke, who had been my friend, until ... until he'd changed.

'My wedding gift from Grandmother,' Hera said.

'Wait, isn't that, like, at the edge of western civilisation?' Apollo's golden garb was even brighter than
Zeus's, strategically draped to show off his finely chiselled body. 'You want to prove their loyalty by keeping them near their dad? Is that, er, wise?' He glanced at Athena.

'It is, actually.' Athena made a steeple with her fingers. 'No one can relieve Atlas's burden without chaining themselves in his place. There is little risk that his daughters would release him. It would crush them if they tried. The garden will serve as yet another barrier between him and anyone who seeks to help him. To prove their loyalty, the Hesperides can report to us anyone who approaches their father. And their proximity to him will remind them daily of the punishments that await those who dare to oppose the gods.'

'Very well, Hesperides,' Zeus announced, 'your sentence is as follows: to guard the garden of Hera on the border of the world-ocean, next to the Mountain of Despair.'

With this pronouncement, the Hekatonkheires led the four nymphs away, leaving the last, caramel-haired girl in chains. Next to me, the fingernail-biter resumed her nail-chewing in earnest.

'As for this sorceress,' Zeus said, and the magnanimous look he had adopted for the Hesperides now sharpened into a hostile glare, 'she was not neutral in the war. Calypso, daughter of Atlas, you are charged with conspiring with the Titans under the leadership of your father, applying sorcery to undermine the gods, and deploying magical servants in open warfare. How do you plead?'

Calypso straightened as much as her heavy chains would allow. 'I do not deny these charges. But Lord Zeus, I beseech you to be merciful. I have merely the misfortune of being caught on the wrong side of a war. Filial piety would have me obey the commands of my father and general.'

'Filial piety.' Ares snorted. 'Like you didn't enjoy summoning those air spirits to badger Dad.'

Calypso glared at him. 'What would you know about it? You weren't even born yet.' She turned back to Zeus. 'Have I not shown my repentance during the postbellum amnesty? Have I not tended your gardens and babysat your children?'

She looked like she had refrained from adding a none-too-complimentary adjective before children. This was probably wise, given that said children were currently sitting on her jury.

My honey-haired, nail-biting neighbour covered her face. Beneath her pale hands, her cheeks were a dull pink. Maybe she had been one of Calypso's babysitting charges. I didn't recognise her, but the gods had a lot of kids.

Zeus frowned. 'The fact remains that you fought against us in the war. All the Titans and their supporters have finally been punished. To let one of their army off scot-free would set an ugly precedent.'

'Father, she is only a maiden,' Artemis said. 'She is young——'

'Geez, sis, she's not one of your Hunters. She's older than us,' Apollo pointed out.

Artemis gave him a withering look. 'Young compared to her parents. She did as she was told.'

'If we did as we were told,' Poseidon reminded her, 'we'd still be living in the belly of our father.'

'She has had ten years' reprieve while we sorted out our lives after our victory,' Hera agreed. 'It is time to mete out punishment.'

'I would not see a maiden cast into Tartarus!'
Tartarus! The marble seat beneath me felt like ice as I thought of the pit where Kronos and the other Titans resided. I could almost sense its dark, sucking breath, like I had the one time I'd come close to its edge. The girl next to me shivered, as though she, too, sensed its dark pull.

'I will not throw her into Tartarus,' Zeus conceded. 'There must, however, be punishment. Solitary confinement, perhaps. A prison.' He looked at Calypso and the hard lines on his face softened slightly. 'I do not forget your services, sorceress. It will not be a harsh prison. But a prison it must be.'

He pointed at Hephaestus, the only god on the male side of the semicircle who hadn't yet spoken. 'You're the inventor. Invent a place to hold her.'

Across the semicircle, in the seat facing Hephaestus's, the most stunningly beautiful goddess rose to her feet and clapped her hands together in excitement. Aphrodite's eyes gleamed as she said, 'I have a better idea—doesn't she come from a desert island? It'd be perfect! Just think of all the twists you could invent with a lonely maiden, pining away in solitude …'

Zeus shrugged. 'Just see to it. And the sprites she summoned in the war—make sure they're all destroyed.'

'I'll do it!' Ares was cheerful again at the prospect of destroying something.

Calypso's face went white. Her mouth opened, but no sound came out. After a moment, she closed it, looking pained and helpless. I guess she realised she was in no position to bargain, not when her own sentence had already been lightened.

Zeus called the session to a close and dismissed the council. Most of the Olympians took their leave in typical godly fashion—that is to say, vanishing in a supernova. Only Hephaestus, Aphrodite, and Hermes were left, putting their heads together to discuss Calypso's imprisonment. Murmurs rose among the watching crowd as they began to debate the trial and the verdicts.

My nail-biting seatmate got to her feet and ran forward to the three remaining Olympians. They were speaking in low voices, so I could only hear snatches of their conversation—'… house arrest … phantom island … impossible to find …'

Aphrodite waved her hands in excitement, interjecting with phrases like, 'dramatic twist,' and 'entertainment of the century!' In my previous encounter with the goddess of love, she'd waxed poetic over the opportunities my love life (not that it existed then or now) could present for entertainment. I didn't think Calypso was going to enjoy whatever Aphrodite had in store for her.

The gods didn't turn my honey-haired neighbour away when she approached, so I figured she must be a minor goddess or something. Aphrodite put her arm around Honey-hair's shoulder and whispered something in her ear that made her blanch and pull away. Hephaestus waved his hand towards Calypso. Honey-hair went to her and led her away, chains and all.

Curious, I followed them down a crooked path that led to the bottom of the mountain. It brought us to a sheltered cove lined by eucalyptus trees. The sea stretched out before us, wild and empty. On the rough sand in the cove lay a little raft. Calypso looked to her companion with hopeful eyes.

'Are you going to spring me?'

Honey-hair shook her head. 'I can't. They told me to wait here with you. Hermes will come in a minute.'

Calypso pouted as she reassessed the raft. 'Were we not friends once, Nia?'
Nia chewed on her fingernails, which must be bitten to shreds by now. 'We were—we are! Callie, you know I don't want this. But what can I do? Zeus commanded your imprisonment. You did fight on the wrong side. What can you expect?'

'He was my father. How could I go against his wishes?'

'And my father's orders are to enforce your imprisonment. Do you expect me to go against his wishes?'

'Your father,' Calypso said bitterly. 'Right. You know, one day you'll learn your parents aren't all you make them out to be, either.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

Calypso shook her head. 'Never mind. You say you're my friend. Will you do one thing for me?'

'I can't free—'

'I know.' Calypso cast her eyes back up the mountain. She pursed her lips and made a little bird call, somewhere between a whistle and a song.

A round, red ball rolled out of the bushes and came to a stop at Calypso's feet. It uncurled into a tiny fox-like creature, no bigger than my palm. It tiptoed to Nia and sniffed at her ankles.

'Please take her,' Calypso said.

Nia bent to pick up the fox, who immediately nuzzled her with its protruding nose. Nia stroked its silky, reddish-brown fur. Her finger trailed its long, bushy tail. 'What is she?'

'A fox spirit.'

'What do you want me to do with her?'

Calypso glanced quickly up the mountain again, as though afraid the gods at the peak would see. 'Hide her. I can't let her be sentenced with me. Or worse—' She sighed. 'It wasn't their fault, you know. I summoned them. I can't save all my sprites, but her … look, I promise she won't do anything to the gods. You won't get into trouble, I swear on the Styx. Just take her. Keep her safe.'

Nia stared at the fox, who was now trying to burrow into the crook of her arm. It was so cute, the thought of putting it to death made a lump rise in my throat. Evidently, Nia agreed. She tucked the fox into the folds of her chiton.

Hermes came strolling into the cove a moment later, accompanied by Aphrodite. The latter beamed at Calypso, which was a strange thing to do when you were about to send someone away to life imprisonment.

'It won't be so bad, love,' Aphrodite said. 'You're going home, after all. And if you're good—'

'I get parole?'

Aphrodite laughed. 'We could see about some visitors. In fact, I have just the idea.'

Hermes rolled his eyes. 'Ready?'

Calypso didn't bother to answer this. Hermes led her to the raft. Her chains clanged as she hopped on and he pushed it out to sea.
I watched her sail off into the distance. Oddly, the clanging noise didn't stop even after the raft carried Calypso away. In fact, it was growing louder, more insistent, like someone was banging on a frying pan close by …

I woke with a jerk. The dream was so vivid, it was a while before I adjusted to my surroundings—the soft sheets of my bed and the blanket I'd thrown off while I tossed in my sleep; my bedroom, smelling of the essential oils my stepmother used in the house; the dagger on my nightstand, its celestial bronze blade glowing faithfully.

And the clanging that wasn't part of my dream after all, but someone banging on my window.

I got out of bed and hurried to it.

Outside, her face illuminated by the bright moonlight, was my friend, Thalia.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know, I ripped off the structure from the opening chapter of SoM. *sheepish look* And I totally fudged the timeline for the original Titan war because … well, it's not like any of the Greek myths make chronological sense. So I'm claiming artistic license. Let's just say the gods took a nice long party before getting to the punishment and sentencing bits. I mean, they had a ten-year war that is so sparse on detail (seriously, try digging up material on what actually went on in the ten years of the Titanomachy!)
Abraham Lincoln Burns Some Ants

Chapter Summary

Annabeth and Thalia subvert a Titan war-op.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I hadn't seen Thalia since the last day of camp. Although I'd invited her to stay with me in the two weeks before we started school, she'd gone off on her own to sort some things out. We were supposed to be meeting in a few days at our new school in Brooklyn.

What was she doing here, in Richmond, and at this hour?

I quickly unlatched my window to let her in before she ended up smashing a hole in it. Thalia climbed into my room.

'Hey, Annabeth,' she said casually, as though it was perfectly normal for her to appear at my window in the middle of the night.

I probably shouldn't have been surprised. Thalia was all about the unexpected. From her forbidden birth to her return from treedom (both long stories), everything about Thalia was totally unpredictable.

'What are you doing here? Not that I'm not happy to see you, but—' I glanced at the clock on my wall, 'it's three in the morning!'

'I need your help,' Thalia said. 'I found something big. You gotta come!' She grabbed my arm and pulled me to the open window. I stuck my head out and peered into the yard.

'I don't see any—whoa!' Sitting on its haunches in my back yard was a wolf the size of an SUV. Something big was an understatement. 'Thalia, what in Zeus's name—'

'That's not what I meant.' Thalia stomped her foot impatiently. 'I rode Remy here. The thing you need to see is somewhere else. We need to go quick. Come on—I'll explain on the way.'

She swung herself out of the window and landed neatly on Remy the giant wolf's back. I hesitated for a second—I was still in my PJs, for Olympus's sake! But then I grabbed my dagger and my Yankees cap—the two trusty items I wouldn't leave behind on any adventure—and followed Thalia.

Riding Remy wasn't like riding a Pegasus, or even a centaur (and yes, I've done both). For one, there was hardly anything to hold on to. The wolf's powerful haunches rose and fell under my butt, jerking me side to side as he ran. I copied Thalia, gripping fistfuls of his shaggy silver fur to keep my seating, but it definitely wasn't a comfortable ride.

'How did you ride this thing all the way from L.A.?'

'I came up from Charleston,' Thalia corrected. 'I was there to—well, it doesn't matter. I found Remy and I was going to ride all the way up to Brooklyn, but he took a detour and brought me to—well,
you'll see soon. When I realised we were in Richmond, I had to come find you.'

Remy took us down a route I recognised, heading towards the James River. He slowed just before coming up to Browns Island and approached a building I knew to be the Civil War Museum. It was lit up, which was strange at this time of night. Through the panelled glass windows, I could see the shadows of people moving around inside.

Some of whom had shapes that were decidedly unhuman.

'Monsters!' I hissed.

'Monsters,' Thalia said, nodding. 'It's crawling with them. But also---' She pointed to the shadows that were unmistakably people. 'Demigods and monsters, together. It's got to be something to do with Kronos.'

She was right. The evil Titan lord might still be a disembodied spirit in the pit of Tartarus, but Luke had been assembling an army of demigods and monsters for him over the last two years.

Could Luke be in the museum?

I knew now why Thalia had come to get me. We slid off Remy's back and approached the museum doors.

'I could sneak in and have a look around, see what's going on.' I held up my Yankees cap. It had been a present from my mom, and it made the wearer invisible.

'I already know what's in there,' Thalia said. 'I snuck in earlier, before I came to get you. There's another way in.' She dragged me away from the doors. 'Wait here, Remy. Stay out of sight.'

We crept along the side of the building until we came to a grate in the wall. Thalia put her hands on the bars and gave it a tug. It came away easily to reveal a dark ventilation shaft. Thalia got to her knees and crawled in. I crept in after her, pulling the grate closed behind me.

The tunnel led to the ceiling of an exhibition room, which was filled with panel displays and glass cases of old relics. It was also crawling with ant-like creatures the size of police dogs, who marched into the room like soldiers on six sturdy legs.

'Myrmekes!' I gasped. 'What are they doing?'

My question was answered soon enough. Our position above the room gave us a good vantage point of all the exhibits. The Myrmekes moved single-file towards a glass-panelled display of old swords. Someone had etched out a rectangular hole in the case. A boy stood next to the display, reaching inside and pulling out swords to hand to the Myrmekes. I recognised him as Phineas Jordan, a demigod who had led a revolt at camp last summer, trying to gather followers to join Luke's army. Each Myrmeke came forward, plucked a sword from Phineas with its pincers, hefted it onto its back, and proceeded out the door. It was a like a production line in a factory.

'What do they want with old Civil War swords?' I asked, puzzled. 'It's not like they can—'

The air in front of the display warped like I was looking into a funhouse mirror. I blinked. Inside the glass case was no longer just a collection of swords, but a full range of other Greek weapons: spears, javelins, shields, catapults—all made of celestial bronze. The Mist must have been obscuring it before; it wasn't always easy to see through the magical substance that hid mythological stuff from mortal eyes. Now that I saw the stash of weapons for what it was, it was only too clear why Kronos's servants were after them.
'If Kronos's army get their hands on these, they'll be armed to the teeth,' I said.

Thalia nodded. 'We have to stop them.'

'Where are they going?'

We crept along the ventilation tunnel in the same direction as the Myrmekes. The next room was a vehicle exhibit, boasting replicas of warships, battle tanks, and—for some weird reason—nineteenth-century automobiles. Another half-blood was stationed by one of the warships, sorting the weapons into neat piles as the Myrmekes deposited them onto its deck. I didn't know this guy. He was tall and reedy, with lacklustre brown hair and scarcely a patch of skin on his pale face that wasn't covered in freckles.

'How much more is there?' he yelled to Phineas.

'Enough to make the boss happy when you get them back to home base,' Phineas called back. 'Sure you can magick the lot?'

"Course I can."

'There's got to be at least twenty Myrmekes,' Thalia whispered. 'What's the plan?'

I thought quickly. Two against twenty as an impossible fight. It would have to be something stealthier.

'Create a distraction,' I decided. Maybe if we made it seem like there were more of us attacking … I tried to recall if there had been anything in the rooms we'd passed that might do the trick. My gaze fell on a sign on one of the display panels. Most of it was too small to read, but the name Abraham Lincoln was highlighted in large, black text.

There was a statue of Lincoln outside the museum.

'I have an idea,' I said.

I led the way back out of the shaft. The statue, featuring Lincoln and his son on a bench, was in the central courtyard. There were also a couple of other sculptures—a cannon, a pyramid of iron spheres, and a giant anchor as big as Remy. I approached the Lincoln statue, hoping my plan would work.

'Um, hey, Mr Lincoln,' I said. Thalia gave me a what-in-Hades-are-you-doing look. 'President Lincoln?'

The statue stared blankly back at me.

What was it that Lincoln used to be called? It seemed like ages since I'd attended history class, but we'd definitely covered this …

'Honest Abe!'

Lincoln's eyes flickered to life. He cocked his head to one side, considering me solemnly.

Bingo. Last year, a grown-up son of Hephaestus had told me about statues all over the country that were actually carefully-placed automatons. Now that I'd found one, it was just a matter of getting him to help.

'Um, we need help, Abe,' I told him. 'Can you …'
Lincoln's eyes shifted diagonally downwards to his sleeve. In the stone, someone had carved the Greek letters Alpha and Kappa, followed by the number 62.

'Oh. Command sequence AK-62! Attack the museum!'

Lincoln sprang to life. He made a clonking noise as he marched stiffly across the courtyard to the granite cannon. Lincoln's son hopped off the bench as well and ran to the pyramid of spheres. He tossed one over to his dad. Lincoln caught it and loaded the cannon. He aimed it at the museum and …

*BOOM.*

The cannonball slammed into the museum's wall and smashed right through the brick.

As though performing a well-choreographed routine, Lincoln's son continued to lob cannonballs over to his father, who fired an onslaught worthy of the Union Army. Bricks crumbled. Windows shattered. From inside the building came the yells of Kronos's demigods, along with a panicked, chittering noise that must be the Myrmekes. One well-placed shot sent a Myrmeke flying out of the hole in the building. It landed with a thump in the courtyard.

'Uh oh,' Thalia said, as the Myrmeke rolled back onto its feet and spotted us. With a shake of her wrist, the silver bracelet she wore blew up into her shield, Aegis. She covered us just in time, as the Myrmeke let loose a sizzling spray of foul-smelling acid. Thalia pulled a collapsible Mace canister from her pocket. It expanded into her spear. She chucked it at the Myrmeke, but it bounced off the ant's armoured body.

The Myrmeke bore down on us. Up close, the sharp pincers protruding from its mouth glistened with acidic drool.

Something slammed into the Myrmeke from above. A little metal ball, which must have been made of something stronger than iron—Adamantine, maybe—cracked the ant's tough shell. The Myrmeke exploded into monster dust.

We turned to see Lincoln's son with his arm outstretched, like he'd just hurled the cannonball straight at the Myrmeke.

'Thanks!' I shouted.

'Get them!' Thalia hollered, as the other Myrmekes swarmed out of the building after their fallen friend. Inside, the two demigods shrieked for them to come back. Thalia grabbed an Adamantine ball from the pyramid (which was really more of a cuboid now) and launched it into another Myrmeke.

We started pelting the cannonballs as fast as we could at the swarming ants, but they came at us faster than we could throw. Acid sprayed liberally from their clicking mouths, dousing the courtyard in poisonous green goo.

'There's too many!' I yelled. 'We need more firepower!'

As if I'd issued an official command, Lincoln turned to me and saluted. He marched forward into the swarm of Myrmekes and flung himself on top of them. To my horror, the statue exploded in a column of fire.

The Myrmekes nearest to him burst into flames. Apparently those armoured shells weren't fireproof. The ants who had escaped the blast scuttled back.
'Now!' Thalia cried. She renewed her cannonball assault. Lincoln's son took over the cannon. Remy came charging out of nowhere to join the fray. His powerful jaws clamped down on a Myrmeke and he shook it violently, like a dog with a chew toy. The Myrmeke dissolved into monster goop.

'We have to get the weapons!' I reminded Thalia. 'Come on!' Leaving Remy and Lincoln's son to decimate the rest of the Myrmeke army, Thalia and I raced inside the building. It wasn't difficult to find the vehicle exhibit. The cannon had blasted a hole straight through to the room. We burst in on the two demigods, who were frantically loading the warship with as many weapons as they could heft into it by themselves. Phineas Jordan had an armful of spears. Freckle-Face was struggling with a heavy mace that was as big as his head.

'Drop those weapons!' Thalia yelled.

The weapons spilled from the boys' arms, clattering to the floor. I guessed it was the sight of Medusa's head on Thalia's shield rather than Thalia's command that did it. She strode forward menacingly. Both boys stumbled back against the warship.

'T-Thalia,' Phineas spluttered. His eyes darted to his companion. 'Do something!' he hissed.

Freckle-Face held up his hands as if to ward Thalia off.

Thalia raised her spear.

I sensed the prickle of the impending attack a split second before the hiss of acid reached my ears. Without thinking, I tackled Thalia sideways, out of the way of the stinking spray. It narrowly missed us, shooting past our shoulders to burn a hole in the military tank display.

One of the Myrmeke had escaped the massacre outside. It clambered through the hole in the wall, mandibles clicking furiously.

The distraction it provided gave the demigods the time they needed. Freckle-Face shouted an incantation in Latin and threw a handful of cards into the air. A bright green symbol flashed over our heads—a circle around a Y-shaped pinwheel.

'No!' Thalia ran forward, but it was too late. The entire ship, weapons and all, vanished along with the boys.

'Thalia, look out!' I screamed. The Myrmeke was charging straight at her. She spun around and met its attack with Aegis.

Giant ants were evidently not afraid of Medusa. Maybe those armoured shells were enough like stone that the threat of being turned to actual stone didn't faze them much. The Myrmeke smashed into Aegis with a loud clang. Thalia barely held on as it slammed her backwards into one of the old-fashioned cars. The door popped open and she fell inside. The Myrmeke twisted its head from side to side, trying to get at Thalia around her shield and the car's walls.

'Hey, Stink-Breath!' I grabbed a Confederate helmet hanging off the tank display and chucked it at the Myrmeke. It bounced harmlessly off the ant's shell, but it got its attention. The Myrmeke turned. Seeing me as easier prey, it left Thalia.

I jammed my Yankee's cap firmly on my head and vanished. It was a battle strategy I always used with Percy. I'd disappear, confusing the monster, while Percy distracted it with taunts. Meanwhile, I'd sneak around and attack it from the back.
Executing this strategy now proved to be more of a challenge. For one, I couldn't simply jump the Myrmeke; my dagger wouldn't pierce its protective armour. For another, Thalia wasn't Percy. He and I had been fighting together for two summers; we knew each other's moves. Thalia had only just returned from her stint as a pine tree two months ago. She stared, nonplussed, at the spot where I'd been. It was a moment before she recovered her senses and leapt out of the car.

Meanwhile, the Myrmeke was shooting acid like an ugly old machine gun. It splattered the walls behind me, causing them to hiss and melt.

'Annabeth!' Thalia shrieked in horror. Maybe she thought the Myrmeke's acid had disintegrated me.

I didn't want to yell and give away my position. Besides, I didn't exactly have much breath to reply, seeing as it was taking all my battle reflexes to keep the Myrmeke from scoring a hit. The floor was a minefield of bubbling acid. I barely skirted the dangerous patches as I dodged and ducked my way out of firing range.

Thalia swung herself up onto one of the remaining warships. I heard her banging about on it, muttering, 'Come on, come on, there's got to be one!'

My sneaker skated on a patch of acid. The rubber soles melted, leaving my socks exposed. I slipped and something snagged my PJ bottoms. A moment later, something sharp pierced my ankle.

Immediately, my leg went numb. I crashed to the ground, landing painfully on my side, though fortunately not in a pool of Myrmeke acid.

Unfortunately, the Myrmeke was now standing over me. Having scored its lucky hit, it knew I was there even if it couldn't see me. My left side was paralysed from the waist down, leaving me with one less limb to fight with. The giant ant head turned from side to side, trying to figure out where to strike its invisible prey.

I did the only thing I could think of: I swung my dagger up into its unprotected underbelly.

At the same time, Thalia gave a triumphant yell. A bronze cannonball came hurtling from the warship.

Whether it was my stab or Thalia's unerring aim, I didn't know, but the Myrmeke collapsed. It disintegrated with a hissing noise, covering me in a shower of stinking, rust-coloured ash.

'Eurgh,' I said, brushing myself off. I pulled off my cap just as Thalia leapt down from the warship.

Astonished, she cried, 'Annabeth! You're alive!' She clapped a hand to her forehead. 'I forgot you had that invisibility hat.'

'Sorry I didn't warn you,' I said. 'It's just, Percy and I always—I mean, I'm used to that strategy.'

'You and Percy, huh?' Thalia smirked.

My face heated up, although there really shouldn't have been anything to be embarrassed about.

'We're just used to fighting together!' I pushed myself to a sitting position. My left leg still had no feeling in it. 'Help me up, will you?'

Thalia put an arm around my waist and heaved me to my feet. I stood on my right leg, my paralysed left one dragging uncomfortably.
The exhibition room looked like a real war zone, with half the displays toppled and the other half eaten through by Myrmeke acid. Through the large hole in the wall, I could see into the other room, where the glass cases were all smashed and the floor was littered with Civil War relics that had spilt out. Among them were the Greek weapons that the demigods hadn't managed to steal. The security alarms had gone off in a high-pitched wail. Sirens blared in the distance; the police would be here soon.

'We'd better get out of here,' I said.

'We can't leave the weapons for the Titan army to come back for,' Thalia said.

'How are we gonna carry them?' I gestured impatiently at my leg. 'I can barely move!' I wasn't even sure I could get myself out of here before the cops came.

Right on cue, Remy trotted into the building.

'Good boy!' Thalia said. 'Get the weapons!' She helped me over to the antique car, opened the door to the passenger seat, and pushed me inside. 'Get in!'

'Thalia, this is a replica! We can't actually drive it!'

She ignored my protests. The police sirens got louder as she and Remy loaded the back seat with a jumble of celestial bronze weapons. When they'd gathered up all of them, she jumped into the driver's seat and raised her spear out of the window, towards the ceiling.

My eyes widened as I realised what she was about to do.

Lightning arched across the ceiling and electricity shot down through Thalia's spear to the hood of the car. It jolted to life.

Thalia put her foot down and we shot forward through the hole in the walls, out of the building. Remy bounded along at our side. The car trundled through the courtyard, past loose cannonballs and the scattered remains of Myrmeke armour. Lincoln, I noticed guiltily, lay in pieces among them. His son gave us a salute as we passed.

We sped through a gap in the approaching police cars, to the astonishment of the emerging officers. I wondered what they saw. How would the Mist distort a nineteenth-century automobile with a giant wolf escort?

Thalia didn't let up on the gas all the way up the Downtown Expressway—though since the car was running on electricity, 'gas' probably wasn't the right word for it. We zipped along the roads back to my house, followed by Remy and the distant wail of sirens. Thalia slammed on the brakes just outside my house. She got out of the car and started shoving the weapons out onto my empty drive.

'You take the weapons,' she said. 'I'll take the car and lead the cops away.' She frowned, watching me hobble out, unsteady on my right leg. 'Remy,' she said to the wolf as he came panting up the street, 'stay and help Annabeth, then come find me, okay?'

Remy licked Thalia's hand and turned to the pile of weapons. He snatched up a whole bunch of spears in his mouth as easily as if he were fetching sticks, and turned to me expectantly.

Thalia got back into the car and took off with a screech of rickety wheels. The sound of the approaching sirens faded as she led the cops off on a wild goose chase.

I sighed, grabbed a pair of bronze longswords to use as crutches, and limped over to my front door.
The spare key was under the mat. I unlocked the door and Remy deposited the spears on the steps. They lay half in, half out of the door.

This wasn't going to work. There was no way Remy would fit through my front door.

'Okay,' I said, shuffling inside on my sword-crutches. I settled myself on the ground and dragged the spears indoors. I'd figure out how to get them up to my room later. 'You bring them over, I'll pull them in.'

Between us, we'd managed to get most of the weapons through the front door when I noticed that someone was watching us.

Sitting at the top of the staircase, peering at me and Remy through the banisters, were my stepbrothers.

Chapter End Notes

The description of the Civil War Museum is loosely based off past exhibits that might have been there in this time frame. I've never been there, so I can't say how accurate my portrayal of it is, but there is a statue of Lincoln and son at the Tredegar Museum. Along with a canon and a pyramid of something that looks from Google Images like it's a pile of silver balls.

Question for this week … anyone can guess the identity of Freckle-Face? (It's a minor detail that won't give anything away, so send me your guesses and I'll tell you if you were right!)
Chapter Summary

Annabeth heads off to her new boarding school.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the bad pun in the chapter title. I couldn’t resist. :P

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once upon a time, when I'd been my stepbrothers' age, I'd sat on a staircase landing with my favourite cousin, eavesdropping on our parents. The memory assaulted me out of nowhere. It had been years since I’d thought about Magnus, but that Thanksgiving I'd spent with my dad's family in Boston, we’d been inseparable.

Maybe it was because Magnus and I must have looked very much like Bobby and Matthew did now: identical faces sticking through the banisters, with eyes as big as saucers. I wondered how long they'd been watching me. It was miracle neither of them had raised a ruckus to wake my stepmother yet. My dad had been away this past week at a conference in San Francisco, and I'd been tiptoeing around Janet in his absence. I imagined her reaction if she discovered I'd brought a stack of bronze weapons—inconveniently disguised as museum artefacts—home in the middle of the night. She'd probably accuse me of stealing them.

Which I had … but for a good reason! Plus, it wasn't like they were actual Civil War relics. Janet couldn't possibly understand, though.

Bobby's mouth opened. Quickly, I put a finger to my lips.

Matthew clamped a hand over his twin's mouth. They looked at each other, then at me, and mirrored me with a finger over each of their own lips.

Relieved (and somewhat surprised), I beckoned for them to come downstairs. Fortunately, they did so without their usual elephantine tread.

'You got a dog?' Bobby whispered. He gazed longingly at Remy.

'Wolf,' I corrected. 'And no, he's a loan. He's not staying.' He'd lope off to find Thalia once his task was complete. I hoped so, anyway. Never mind trying to explain him to Janet—where would I even put him?

Bobby looked crestfallen.

'You can pet him if you want,' I offered.

Bobby's hand darted out to stroke Remy's head before I even finished my sentence. I hadn't realised he was so crazy about dogs (or wolves). Luckily, Remy didn't seem to mind the attention. He stood
patiently as Bobby scratched behind his ears and rubbed his coat the wrong way.

Matthew tugged on my sleeve. 'Where did the guns come from?'

'Um …' The Mist must have disguised the weapons for them. How much did the twins know about my heritage? I'd never bothered to find out what my dad and Janet had told them about me. I decided to go with a watered-down version of the truth. 'They're in disguise. I'm hiding them from—er—bad guys.'

Matthew touched the shaft of a spear almost reverently. In a solemn voice, he asked, 'Annabeth, are you a superhero?'

'What makes you say that?'

'You go to a super-secret summer camp,' he said. 'And Daddy says you're a demigod. That's code for "superhero", right?'

He looked like this would be the coolest thing ever. It gave me a funny feeling in my chest—a little proud to be given this distinction, and a little sad I had to burst his bubble.

'Not exactly.' I explained quickly about my mother, Athena, and her status as a Greek goddess.

'But you can do all the cool stuff!' Bobby paused in his attentions to Remy. 'Like Perry the Platypus!'

It took me a while to figure out what he meant. My knowledge of children's cartoons wasn't exactly up to date. I thought Perry might be from some TV show the twins had been glued to last week … some spy character that did judo, maybe? 'Sort of.'

Bobby and Matthew exchanged gleeful looks. 'Cool!'

I shushed them before their voices could travel upstairs. An idea had just formed in my head. 'Do you guys want to help me with my super secret mission?'

They both nodded immediately.

'I need to get all of this upstairs to my room, but I can't move my leg because I got hurt in a fight.' I tested this carefully by grabbing the stair rail and hauling myself into a standing position. My leg was still useless, but some feeling was coming back into it. The skin around my ankle was tender, like a bad sunburn.

Matthew nodded sagely. 'Like when Perry got bitten by the lobsters.'

'Exactly,' I said, although I had no idea what he was talking about. 'So I need your help to bring them upstairs. And it's a big secret, so we have to make sure your mom doesn't wake up and catch us. Do you think you can handle it?'

They both lifted their hands in a double-fisted gesture that I guessed they'd seen in their cartoon.

It took a while to get the weapons upstairs. Bobby and Matthew had to carry each one between them. I was surprised by their commitment to the task. I guess presenting it as a super-secret spy mission had really galvanised them.

After about an hour, the Myrmeke poison wore off, so I was able to bring the last armload of spears up myself. A pink streak of dawn was coming through the window by now. It wouldn't be long before my stepmother was up.
'Remember,' I told my stepbrothers, 'it's a big secret, so you can't tell anyone. Do you think you can go wait in your room until breakfast-time and pretend you were sleeping?'

They nodded and mimed zipping their mouths shut before scampering down the hall to their bedroom.

I brought the spears into my room … and almost dropped them in shock.

Thalia was perched on my desk, next to my open window.

'Zeus, Thalia!' I rolled the spears into a corner and shut the door. 'I take it you didn't get caught.'

'Of course not. I ditched the car in a golf course. Bet we make the morning news.' She looked me up and down. 'So your leg's okay?'

I nodded. 'The paralysis was only temporary. Do you want breakfast? I could sneak it up to you. Actually, if we hide you until my dad gets back, you could even stay and drive up to school with me on Monday.'

Thalia considered this. 'Nah,' she said. 'I just wanted to make sure you're okay. I'll see you in Brooklyn.'

'But we didn't get to—'

'We'll talk at school,' Thalia promised. She jerked her head towards the weapons. 'Thanks for helping with those. You're not in trouble with your parents, are you?'

I shrugged. 'My dad's away. And my stepbrothers actually helped me get them in here without my stepmom catching us, so I'm in the clear. For now.'

'Great. I'll see you soon.' Thalia left the way she'd come, out my window and onto Remy's waiting back. They leapt the yard fence and disappeared.

+++ Two days later, my dad drove me north to my new boarding school in Brooklyn. I sat in the passenger seat of his VW, twisting the golden Harvard ring on my camp necklace while he tried to make conversation. I was still pissed off that he'd gone and spent the week at his conference in San Francisco. It had left us with practically no time to spend together during my fortnight home. What was the point of me coming to Richmond if he wasn't around?

As we crawled past Washington D.C. on the slow-moving parkway, my dad sighed. 'I guess you'd have preferred to fly up.'

I shrugged. The last time I'd been on a plane, I'd been with Percy and our satyr friend Grover, escorting one of the most dangerous weapons in Greek history from L.A. to New York. I wouldn't recommend travelling with someone who's been issued a flight ban by the god of the sky himself. Percy had nearly squeezed my arm off at take-off. He'd made us so nervous, Grover had eaten all our drink cups (the plastic had given him a terrible stomach ache later on).

My dad shook his head at the bumper-to-bumper traffic. 'It'd only take an hour flying, you know.'

I guess the fact that he was taking the time to drive me up to New York instead of shipping me off as an unaccompanied minor was something. I dropped the silent treatment. 'Airport security would add another two hours at least.'
'Not if you had your own plane.' A gleam of excitement came into his eyes.

'Dad! You don't have a plane stashed somewhere, do you?'

'No, but I do have a pilot's license. Haven't I mentioned it before?'

'No. When did you get that?'

'Several years ago. I spent some time studying military aviation at West Point. We were there for a summer. I thought maybe we could have … well, that's neither here nor there now.'

It must have been the summer I'd turned eleven, right after the year I'd tried—and failed—to live at home. I thought guiltily of the many unanswered letters I'd received from my dad that year. For all I knew, he could have written about flying aeroplanes in one of them.

Most of those letters had gone straight into the fire. Our relationship had been rocky since I'd run away from home at the age of seven and taken up residence year-round at the demigod training camp run by Dionysus and Chiron. My attempt to go home when I was ten hadn't helped—I hadn't even lasted a semester before calling Chiron in tears. I'd only really reconnected with my dad last year, after Percy talked me into it. I'd even spent the whole of seventh grade in Richmond.

Though I'd never admit it to him, I was glad Percy had convinced me to give things another try. My dad wasn't such a bad guy.

I wouldn't be spending this school year in Virginia, though. Thanks to a deadly prophecy hanging over Thalia, Chiron didn't want her far from camp. She was going to boarding school in Brooklyn. I'd promised to stick with her, which was why I was now on my way to St Catherine's Girls' Academy.

My dad had gone into a detailed exposition on planes. 'It's amazing, the evolution of military planes since World War I,' he was saying. 'Although I still find the old models fascinating. And there's so much critique about their relative importance in the war. The Sopwith Camels were definitely critical in swinging the tide in the Battle of Ypres, for instance. That was my conference presentation last week, you know. And would you believe, a fellow there said he could put me in touch with someone about getting some genuine Camels.'

I was surprised when he glanced over at me. He seemed to have forgotten my presence during his monologue. 'Maybe next summer I'll teach you how to fly. Unless you already learn at that camp of yours.'

'Er, no. Well, not planes. We have pegasi, but—'

'The flying horses?'

'Yeah. I don't think they're anything like planes, though.'

' Hmm.' My dad tapped his chin with one finger. I got the sense that he was trying to map out the aerodynamics of a winged horse.

We pulled into the parking lot of St Catherine's Academy in the late afternoon. My new school was on the west side of Brooklyn, just over the Staten Island bridge. Its neat grid of buildings was tucked away in the tidy village of Bay Ridge, only several blocks away from the nearest metro station. This gave me hope that Percy might be able to visit from time to time. We'd promised to keep in touch over the school year, especially since we'd be in the same state now.
The parking lot was full of girls running back and forth between their cars and the dorm buildings, lugging their trunks and suitcases. Their parents followed them with expressions that ranged from bemusement to exasperation. Red brick walls formed an inverted u-shape around the parking lot, with five storeys' worth of frosted double-hung windows overlooking the cars. Signs were plastered on the outer walls, with arrows pointing to a white door in the left crook of the U. A few older girls in uniform stood around carrying placards that said things like, WELCOME NEW ARRIVALS, and THIS WAY TO REGISTRATION.

I grabbed my duffel bag from the trunk and joined the crowd of girls and parents heading for registration. My single camp bag felt conspicuously tiny compared to some of the suitcases the other girls were dragging around. How much stuff did people bring to boarding school? After years living in a shared cabin at camp, I hadn't acquired much in the way of personal belongings. Besides, you learn to travel light as a demigod. My first quest, we'd lost our knapsacks in a bus explosion. My second, our duffels had drowned in the Sea of Monsters. I was used to making do with only the essentials—and sometimes without even those.

Thalia was waiting for me outside an office marked NEW STUDENTS—REGISTRATION. Next to her, in a motorised wheelchair, was a familiar middle-aged man with a scruffy brown beard.

'Chiron!' I cried, delighted. I dropped my bag and ran to hug him. 'What are you doing there?'

'Annabeth, my dear!' Chiron patted my back fondly. His rumpled tweed jacket smelt of strong black coffee. 'And Professor Chase.' He shook hands with my dad. 'Good to see you both. As to what I am doing here—well, Thalia needs to be registered by a legal guardian.'

Thalia shrugged. She looked out of place in her black leather jacket with the rock band buttons. Even though few of the girls were actually in uniform at the moment, there seemed to be some unspoken casual dress code of A&F hoodies and distressed denim—whether that meant miniskirts or flared jeans. My old jeans, patched in places where they'd been clawed by monsters, actually fit in unintentionally well.

Thalia had even fewer belongings than me—nothing but a sling bag hanging off one shoulder. I didn't remember her carrying anything when she'd showed up at my place two nights ago. She must have stuffed her things at one of our old safe houses before coming to find me.

We went into the office, where a harried-looking woman was handing out forms. Her nametag read MRS RED—or maybe it was REED.

Mrs Red/Reed fired off instructions at us like bullets: 'Standard details—student names, parent contacts—yes, I know it was in the application forms, but we need the paperwork. And there's a separate form to sign for weekend home privileges.' She stuffed the papers into our hands and waved us off to a counter, where several parents were signing stacks of forms while their daughters stood gabbing in the corner.

'Weekend home privileges?' I asked.

'It seems boarders are allowed to go home on weekends if they do not live too far away,' Chiron said. 'Thalia will, of course, be returning to camp. We have lessons to conduct.'

Thalia made a face as he filled in THALIA BRUNNER on her form. I realised I didn't actually know Thalia's real last name. She'd never used it in front of me. If she ever introduced herself in full, she called herself Thalia, daughter of Zeus.

Like me, Thalia had run away when she was a kid. Unlike me, she'd never gone back until this
summer. Of course, she had a better excuse—spending six years as a pine tree tends to limit your opportunities to travel. I remembered that Thalia had intended to find her mom in L.A. She still hadn't told me how that had gone.

'Richmond is probably a bit far for Annabeth to travel every weekend,' my dad mused. 'Maybe on a long weekend, though. What do you think, Annabeth?'

'Sure,' I said. 'But I could go to camp on the other weekends, couldn't I?'

My dad nodded and signed my form.

Mrs Red/Reed glanced quickly over our completed forms, plopped a school stamp on them, and slid them into an in-tray marked INTAKE—FOR SCANNING. She typed something furiously into a computer, scanned the screen, and said, 'You'll be in Claymore House. I'll have someone show you to your dorms. Wait by the door.'

'Well,' My dad scratched awkwardly at his chin. 'Do you—er, I guess you don’t need much help settling in?'

'I'll be fine. Thanks for driving me up, Dad.'

He smiled faintly. 'I will miss you, you know. I’m sorry I had to run off to San Francisco last week. I just couldn’t miss the opportunity.'

'It's okay,' I said, even though it wasn’t really. My dad gave me a clumsy hug, mumbled something about writing, and headed back out to the parking lot.

'That appears to be my cue to leave as well,' Chiron said. 'But first—' He reached under the seat of his wheelchair (which disguised not only his true form, but any saddlebags he carried with him) and brought out a sealed envelope. 'Mortal money,' he said, handing it to Thalia. 'For school supplies. And emergencies.'

I gave Chiron a much warmer hug than I’d given my father.

'Are you going straight back to camp, Chiron? How did you get here? You didn't, er—' I lowered my voice, 'run, did you?' As a centaur, Chiron could travel great distances in the blink of an eye. Just last summer, he’d gotten us from Miami to Long Island in four hours flat.

Chiron laughed. 'I could have, but no. Argus is waiting for me in the van. He’ll be bringing you girls back to camp each weekend; he may as well familiarise himself with the route.'

'Thalia Brunner and Annabeth Chase?'

We waved goodbye to Chiron and turned to face our guide.

She was tall and wiry, with strong, solid legs that marked her as a serious athlete. Her hair, so fair it was almost white, was tied back in a loose ponytail with a single plait winding through it. A smattering of freckles ran across the bump on the bridge of her large nose. Her eyes were the most striking of all her features—so pale the irises were practically invisible. Like the school guides in the car park, she wore a white polo shirt emblazoned with a large, maroon 'C' over a matching pleated skirt.

'Hi!' she said cheerily. 'I'm Izzy. Which of you is which?'

Thalia and I introduced ourselves.
'Great,' Izzy said. 'Do you want to get the rest of your stuff, and then I'll show you to your dorm room?'

'We've got our stuff,' Thalia said.

Izzy’s eyes travelled curiously over the sling bag Thalia carried and my lone duffel.

'Our parents are sending the rest of our stuff later,' I said quickly. 'We thought it’d be easier to move in without loads of stuff. And the info pack said we could get our books and uniforms at the campus store?'

'Oh, yes, I'll take you by later, if you like.' She led us down the hall and up a flight of stairs. 'So you're both starting eighth grade?'

'Yeah,' I said. Thalia just looked at Izzy blankly, like she was speaking a foreign language. I guess this was all completely new to her. It had taken me a month last year to get the hang of everything after being out of the school system for six years. And that had been for day school. Now we were going to be in school twenty-four/seven.

When was the last time Thalia had even attended school? Even before Zeus had turned her into a tree, she'd been a runaway like me—for longer than me, in fact. It was possible she'd never even been enrolled in school before.

'I guessed you'd be,' Izzy continued. She was either unaware of Thalia's discomfort, or tactfully pretending not to notice. 'You look a bit old for eighth, but they wouldn't put you in the Junior Halls if you were ninth-graders. The senior dorms are in the other C.'

'The other C?'

'Oh, all the buildings here are C-shaped—for "Catherine", you know. So we've got the dorm C's, the sports C—that's across campus—' She pointed out the window. I saw a flash of orange across the grassy lawn as a fox chased a rabbit through the bushes. 'The science and the arts C's for class, and the C-drangle, which is really the courtyard between all the C's, but one side faces out so the quadrangle is really C-shaped anyway.'

'I see,' I said. A voice in my head that sounded suspiciously like Percy chortled, You C? I almost rolled my eyes. 'Sorry, bad pun …'

Izzy winked. 'And then each house has a separate dorm, so there's Richards C, Baxtor C, and of course, Claymore C—that's us. The double C, they like to call us.'

'Uh, cool.'

She led us out a side door and across a connecting bridge into a different building—or another 'C', I guess.

'And here we are—Claymore C, west wing.'

We turned down a long, curved corridor with doors on either side. Each had a large bronze number hanging over a peep hole. Some of the doors were propped open as girls ran up and down the corridor, moving everything from stacks of clothes to heavy furniture into their rooms. Several of them waved to Izzy as we passed.

Izzy consulted a list of room allocations. 'Room C-twelve. All the way at the very end. Near my room, incidentally. I'm hall monitor, so I have a single, but everyone else gets a double.'
Our door had a sheet of paper tacked up under the bronze '12'. BRUNNER/CHASE was scrawled on it in magic marker. Izzy tore it off and crumpled it into a little ball, which she tossed into a trash can.

'If you need anything, I'm just two doors down.' Izzy pointed to a door with a large smiley-face poster that screamed: NEED HELP? ASK YOUR HALL MONITOR! She fumbled in her pocket for a large key ring, found the right one, and unlocked our door.

The room was kind of dusty from being shut up all summer. It was carefully divided into two sections, with a bed, closet, desk, and chair on each side. The beds had mattresses and pillows, but no sheets or covers. Thalia and I exchanged a glance. I hadn't thought to bring bedding, and I was pretty sure she hadn't either, unless that sling bag of hers had magical proportions. The desks were bare except for two plastic welcome packs, each with a set of keys sitting on top of it.

There was one large window, the kind that you could lift up to let in the breeze, though it was shut at the moment. Even so, it wasn't enough to block out the drone of cars from the motorway outside. If you looked past the six lanes of busy traffic, there was a spectacular view of the bay.

Thalia picked up the welcome pack, sweeping some of the dust motes into the air. They swirled in the centre of the room, shimmering colourfully in the sunlight. My eyes had to be playing tricks on me, because it was almost like there was a rainbow in the dust flurry. In it, the vague outline of a skinny, messy-haired boy took shape.

I realised with a jolt of panic what was happening. It was an Iris-message—the holographic calling system used by the gods (and occasionally us demigods) to communicate long-distance. And on the other end was my best friend, Percy.

Thalia reacted first. She pushed me in front of the materialising image and leapt over to the door. Grabbing Izzy by the arm, she turned her around to face the corridor.

'I've got lots of things to pick up from the camp—I mean, the school store. Chi—my, um, dad—gave me cash to get whatever I need. Can you help me with that?'

She practically frog-marched Izzy out of the room, slamming the door shut behind her. I heard Izzy's bewildered reply and Thalia's manic chatter echo down the corridor.

Safe for now. I faced the Iris-image to find Percy blinking at me. He was sitting cross-legged on a dark blue bedspread with a picture of a bright orange-and-white cartoon clownfish under his butt. In his hands was a slim, golden ballpoint pen, which he was twirling around his thumb and index finger. I recognised it instantly—it wasn't really a pen, but his cleverly disguised sword, Riptide.

'Hey Annabeth,' he said.

'Percy!' I whispered, not wanting anyone outside to overhear. 'Oh my gods, are you crazy? You can't just call me at school—there's too many mortals around!'

'Er, okay, yeah, I don't really have that many drachmas anyway, but I just wanted to make sure you got to New York okay and everything.' He was babbling and his face had gone crimson. He gave me a sheepish grin.

My heart was still going doubly fast from the near miss with Izzy, but I couldn't help returning his grin. 'It's okay,' I said. 'Thalia distracted the hall monitor.'

'So you're both here? In Brooklyn, right?'

'Yeah, in Bay Ridge.' I glanced out the window, where the blue streak of Upper Bay wavered
beyond the motorway. 'I can see the bay.'

'That's cool. New York's the best. So, no monsters?'

I wanted to tell him about the Myrmekes at the Civil War museum, but we didn't have much time. I didn't know how long Thalia could detain Izzy at the store. Besides, anyone could come by and poke their head in at any moment.

'Nope. For now, anyway. Look, Percy, I have to—'

'Yeah, yeah, no, sorry, I know, you gotta go—um,' he ran his fingers through his hair, making his bangs stand up, 'it's good to see you anyway. I mean, I know this isn't the same as actually seeing you—' I thought of Izzy and the C buildings and got the sudden urge to giggle, 'but, uh, you know what I mean.'

'I know. Good to see you, too, Percy. Thanks for IM-ing. Just, er, write me or something next time, okay? I'll send you my address.'

We smiled at each other, and then Percy cut the connection.

I sat down on my bed. Between the close call with Izzy and the briefness of our conversation, Percy's 'welcome' to New York probably could have gone a lot better. All the same, it was a while before the broad grin on my face faded.

Chapter End Notes

Perry the Platypus is, of course, from the cartoon Phineas and Ferb. There was originally a Kung Fu Panda reference in there, until I realised that show came out a year after.

What do you guys think of Annabeth’s new school? I warned you I’d be indulging my love for boarding school novels, didn’t I? I practically inhaled them growing up—Malory Towers, The Naughtiest Girl, St Clare’s … and of course, Harry Potter. Yes, I know those are all British, but I promise I did look into what the American counterparts would look like! It’ll be even more fun next chapter—well, the chapter title I planned is The School Bully Wears My Breakfast, so that gives you an idea of what hijinks Annabeth is about to get up to! :)

The School Bully Wears My Breakfast

Chapter Summary

Annabeth faces her first hurdle at boarding school: the popular girls.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thalia was up before me on our first day of school. She was standing by her desk when I woke up, her still form casting a long, thin shadow across the carpet. She’d raised the window high, filling the room with the fresh, leafy scent of fall.

'Hey.' I sat up and rubbed sleep out of my eyes. 'What time is it?'

Thalia moved slowly, like a tree unfurling its branches. There was a book open on the table in front of her, a battered-looking book with a green, leather-bound cover. She slammed it shut when she saw me looking at it.

'It’s nearly seven,' she said. 'You should probably get up. Izzy said breakfast is at seven-thirty.'

I got out of bed and dragged myself into our shared bathroom. 'What time did you get up?'

'Earlier than you, Hypnos,' she teased. I heard her moving about the room, throwing open the closet doors and tossing things out onto the floor. When I came out of the bathroom five minutes later, freshly showered and with my hair wrapped in a towel, she had changed into our school uniform—a simple white blouse and the pleated maroon skirt Izzy had been wearing the day before, complete with a matching blazer emblazoned with the ubiquitous 'C'. She was staring with distaste at her reflection in the full-length mirror on her open closet door. The last piece of the uniform, a maroon tie with blue and gold stripes for our house colours, was twisted in her hands, as if she was contemplating using it as a garrotte.

She looked distinctly odd in the uniform. I’d never seen Thalia in anything but her trademark black shirt, jeans, and leather jacket—except maybe the Camp Half-Blood orange once or twice last summer (and she’d ditched those t-shirts pretty quick). The preppy schoolgirl look fit her like a Hallowe’en costume—an exotic ensemble worn for laughs on a special occasion.

Thalia bunched up her tie and shoved it in her blazer pocket. She tugged irritably at the crisp collar of her blouse and scuffed her feet together. Although her school-issue white sneakers were brand new, the sides already bore light brown streaks. A thin, muddy line ran along the edge of one sole.

I glanced at the open window. A dirty shoe print on the sill confirmed my suspicions.

'Where did you go?'

Thalia looked up from her mental condemnation of the St Catherine’s dress code. 'Oh, I, er …' Her scowl faded into a sheepish smile. 'Nowhere. Don’t worry, no one saw me sneak out. Or back in.'

'Thalia—'
She crossed her arms and lifted her chin challengingly. ‘What, you gonna lecture me about rule-breaking?’

As if I would. Where had Thalia gotten the idea that I put so much stock in the rules? I mean, it wasn’t like school rules were as important as, say, making an oath on the Styx. And let’s face, it, even the gods had broken those. Thalia and Percy’s existence was proof of that.

‘No. I was gonna say, next time tell me so I can come with you.’

Thalia’s face broke into a grin. ‘You bet. Come on, hurry and get dressed. I’m starving.’

+++ St Catherine’s dining hall was like camp’s, except with three rows of twelve tables—for the three houses, I guess—and they were made of wood, not stone. Well, the hall also wasn’t open-air like our pavilion, but the ceiling was remarkably high, giving it a cathedral-like feel. In the spot where we had a bronze brazier for offerings to the gods, there was a long buffet station where lunch ladies (or I guess they were breakfast ladies now) ladled out generous portions of beans, eggs, and toast. Thalia and I each grabbed a serving tray from the stack at the end of the buffet station and joined the line of girls queueing for their breakfast.

After loading my tray with hot food, a bowl of cornflakes, and a glass of orange juice, I was passing the condiment station when a tall girl jostled my elbow. Juice sloshed out of my glass, spilling over my shoes.

‘Oops.’ The girl smirked at me. She had the same uniform as the rest of us, but something about the way she wore it make her look like she’d stepped off Aphrodite’s fashion plate: the extra cinch on her blazer that pulled it corset-tight around her waist; the sheer stockings beneath her crisply ironed skirt that were obviously more expensive than anyone else’s; the gleam of a golden tie-pin above the red-and-green trim of her tie. Yet it was Clarisse, the Ares counsellor from camp, whom she reminded me of. Flanked by two equally-immaculate cronies, she stood sizing us up in the exact same way Clarisse eyed a new kid she wanted to intimidate.

‘Why, you—’ Thalia growled, looking ready to drop her tray and punch the girl in the face. It was a look that made most people nervous, and had even sent some Ares kids skipping over to the other side of the strawberry fields when she turned it on them.

But this girl didn’t know about Thalia’s prowess at pulverising monsters, or that she could call down lightning. And in fact, Thalia didn’t look as forbidding as usual. The maroon uniform seemed to shrink her down, strip her of her usual, intimidating aura.

Fashion-Plate looked Thalia up and down, from her short, spiky hair to her untucked blouse and scruffy sneakers. ‘You got something to say to me, dyke?’

It probably wouldn’t make a great start to the school if a lightning bolt struck the dining hall. I balanced my tray on one hand and reached casually across Fashion-Plate to the condiment counter, pretending to search for a napkin. Predictably, Fashion-Plate’s attention shifted to me, noting with glee the precarious position of my breakfast tray. Her eyes gleamed.

‘Let me help you with that,’ she said in a falsely-sweet voice.

Bullies. They were all the same.

As she moved to flip my tray up into my face—no doubt intending to make it look like an accident to any adults watching—I shifted my hand. The entire tray of food upended in the other direction.
Fashion-Plate jumped back in horror, too late to avoid being doused not only in orange juice, but also the rest of my breakfast. Cornflakes dripped down her front, where a spot of milky orange was blossoming across her pristine white blouse. To my immense satisfaction, a splatter of eggs had even landed in her perfectly coiffed hair.

'Girls!' One of the breakfast ladies bustled over.

'Sorry,' I said, feigning wide-eyed innocence, 'it was an accident.'

'That’s a good look for you, Melanie.' Izzy came up to us, carrying a loaded tray like Thalia’s (and mine, before I’d ‘accidentally’ tipped it over Melanie). She handed it to me, a replacement. 'Come on, Annabeth, Thalia.'

Several people sniggered. Melanie threw me a hateful look as Izzy led us to the table on the far right of the hall. It was occupied by girls all wearing the blue-and-gold version of the school tie (which neither Thalia nor I had figured out how to put on).

'You don’t want to mess with Melanie Richards,' Izzy said. Her own tray was already on the table in front of her. I wondered how she’d gotten me a new one so quickly.

'I could’ve taken her,' Thalia muttered.

Izzy picked up her knife and started buttering a slice of toast as calmly as if we were having an inconsequential chat about the weather.

'It’s not whether you can. It’s whether you want to. And you don’t. Melanie’s dad heads the school board. The family practically sponsors Richards House.' Izzy jerked her head towards the tables on the far end. Melanie had stalked out of the dining hall, presumably to change, but her two cronies were shooting us occasional dagger glares. 'You don’t get into Richards House unless you’re a legacy—or loaded. They think they’re a cut above everybody else because their families have been coming here for generations.'

'What are the middle tables?' Thalia asked.

'Baxter House—they’re the brains. Half of them are scholarship students, all crazy smart. The seniors are all in AP everything, and some of the juniors already do advanced work. They’re all angling to get into the Ivy Leagues, you know.'

Thalia nudged me. 'Sounds like that’s where you oughta be.'

'Oh, are you good with school?' said another girl further along our table.

'No,' I muttered. Athena might prize knowledge and wisdom, but that had never translated into good grades for any half-blood as far as I knew. It didn’t mattered how smart I was. Doing well in school required reading and sustained attention, neither of which came easily to demigods.

'It’s not the end of the world.' Izzy’s friend scooted a bit closer along the bench and introduced herself as Marissa.

'Besides,' Izzy said, 'you’re in Claymore House. We’ve got better things to do than academics.'

'Are you two on athletic scholarships?' Marissa asked eagerly.

'Er …' Thalia and I exchanged uneasy looks. Neither of us was sure what strings Chiron had pulled to get us enrolled. Or I should say, what Mist he’d manipulated.
Izzy amended the question. 'What sports are your specialties?'

'Well …' All the activities we did at camp probably translated well enough into varsity sport. 'We do a couple. Fencing, I guess. And wrestling … volleyball … and, er, horseback riding.' Pegasi riding could count as equestrianism, right?

'Wow, your old school let you do all that?' Marissa sounded impressed.

Thalia laughed. 'My old school? I haven’t really been to school since I was ten—'

I kicked her hard under the table. A few more girls were listening curiously now.

'Her family moved around a lot,' I lied. 'She was, um, home-schooled. So was I—well, I did go to day school in Virginia last year.'

'Ahh, military brats,' said another girl wisely. She winked at us. I didn’t disabuse her of the notion.

'Well, you’ll fit right in,' Izzy said. 'Everyone here has to do at least one season of sort—on top of gym class, that is. But most Claymore girls do all three seasons. And half the varsity teams are from Claymore.'

'More like ninety percent,' Marissa scoffed.

'We have loads of sports, even if we don’t cover everything you’re into,' Izzy said. 'No equestrian teams, I’m afraid—the school doesn’t spring for it—but you can do volleyball in the fall season, and wrestling and fencing are both winter sports. There’s also crew and cross-country in the fall. And archery—we’re one of the few schools around that actually have an archery programme. That’s why I came here.'

Marissa gave Thalia an appraising look. 'You look like a runner. Do you do cross?'

'Marissa’s junior varsity captain for the cross-country team,' Izzy explained.

Thalia shrugged. 'I’m not bad,' she said. 'I'm cool with archery, too04.'

'Thalia’s a great shot,' I added. She’d skewered Percy and me when we practised last summer.

'We’ll have to get you on a team,' Izzy promised. 'You’re going to love it here.'

Feeling much more hopeful about school, I tucked into breakfast heartily.

+++ We didn’t see Melanie Richards again until just after first period English. By then, school had definitely taken an abrupt downturn. First we got demerits for failing dorm inspection (Thalia hadn’t made her bed), then for not wearing our ties (I wished Percy were here—I could have used his sailor's prowess with complicated knots), and another for personal untidiness (I’d forgotten about the orange juice stains on my shoes, and Thalia hated tucking in her blouse). Add to that an hour trying to decipher Mr Colbert’s tiny handwriting on the blackboard during English—the letters swam in and out of focus until I nearly threw my book across the room in frustration—and our lifted moods at breakfast quickly faded.

So when I ran into Melanie—quite literally—in the hallways as we tried to find our way around the Arts C, I was already in a bad temper. She banged her book bag into me so forcefully that I got shoved painfully into one of the lockers lining the walls.
The next moment, Thalia grabbed Melanie by the shoulders and slammed her against the lockers. Her other hand dove into her pocket, no doubt going for her mace canister.

'Thalia, don’t!' Even though Melanie deserved a good ass-kicking, it wasn’t worth it. I pulled Thalia off her. 'You can’t just attack people here,' I hissed in an undertone. 'They aren’t monsters.'

Thalia shot a contemptuous look at Melanie, who seemed stunned by the swiftness of her attack.

'I’d like to treat her to the sight of Aegis,' Thalia grumbled as we started back down the hall.

'It probably wouldn’t work anyway, not on mor—' I stopped. Izzy had just emerged from a classroom, and was now within earshot.

Behind us, Melanie’s friends crowded around her, asking if she was okay.

'She’s insane!' Melanie gasped. 'And that dumb blonde with her—'

I snapped.

I could rise above petty taunts and little shoves, but no one—no one, not even the Ares kids—insulted a child of Athena’s intelligence.

I turned and launched myself at Melanie. In one quick judo flip, I had her flat on her back on the cold concrete floor. Her two friends tried to haul me back, but I shrugged them off easily.

Thalia grinned and jumped in, yanking them both away from me.

I knelt over Melanie, pinning her to the ground, and raised my fist threateningly over her head. 'What did you call me?'

'N-nothing!' Like all bullies, she was a coward when actually faced with a threat.

'Don’t you ever—'

'Annabeth Chase! Thalia Brunner!'

The sharp voice of our homeroom teacher, Mrs Stimpson, rang through the hall. I released Melanie and scrambled to my feet. Thalia still had Melanie’s two sycophants in a headlock, one under each arm. She didn’t let go until Mrs Stimpson grabbed her by the ear and gave it a violent twist.

Mrs Stimpson took us both by the shoulder and marched us into an empty classroom. Her face was bright red as she spluttered, 'I have never—brawling in the halls like common hooligans—such behaviour—on the first day of school!'

The lecture went on for a while. We mumbled apologies and tried to look contrite, though it was hard to hide my satisfaction from knocking some fear into Melanie. As for Thalia, she was the most animated I seen her all day. Mrs Stimpson gave us a look that clearly said she had us pegged as troublemakers (yeah, what else was new?)

'I will let you off this time with just a demerit,' she said. 'But if I hear even the tiniest hint that you’re fighting with other students again, I’ll put you in detention and rescind your weekend privileges.'

She let us go at last, and we had to brisk walk through the halls (sprinting would have earned us yet another demerit) so we wouldn’t be late for pre-Algebra.

+++
By the time we got back to our dorm room that evening, I was exhausted and sorely regretting my decision to come to boarding school. If today was any indication, the school year was going to be absolutely miserable.

Thalia slammed our door so forcefully, it nearly popped off its hinges. 'This is total pegasus dung!'

'She’s an absolute Gorgon,' I agreed.

'I’m not talking about Melanie Richards,' Thalia said, throwing up her arms. 'This whole school business. All these rules and punishments and—it’s even worse than camp!'

I was taken aback. What did Thalia mean, worse than camp? Camp was nothing like school. How could she even compare them?

'Hello, what did you expect? It’s school—there’s gonna be teachers and stupid rules and classes and bullies … and this was your idea. You wanted to leave camp.'

'Not for this!' Thalia waved her arms around the room miserably. 'I didn’t know it’d be like this. I just—I couldn’t stay put there, not with everyone wanting me to be—with everyone expecting me to—'

She slammed her bag down on the table, knocking off the battered green book she’d been perusing in the morning. It fell open when it hit the ground and a few loose, colourful sheets spilled out. I bent to pick them up and froze when I saw what they were.

Staring back at me were the faces of Thalia, myself—and Luke. We were all younger—I was only seven—and we looked so carefree. One of the pictures was a long photostrip featuring us in various comical poses, pulling faces and mugging for the camera. I’d seen another picture like this a year ago. Luke had left it behind in his cabin when he’d run off from camp. The rest mostly showed two of us at a time: me and Luke sitting by a campfire; Thalia with an arm around me, shaking her other fist at the camera; Luke and Thalia with their heads bent towards each other, deep in conversation.

I’d taken that last one myself with an old camera we’d found in a bunch of supplies Luke had pilfered. We’d never had the chance to develop any of the photos, because Hades’s minions had found us the day after. The camera would still have been in Luke’s bag when we got to camp. After losing Thalia, though, it had been the last thing on our minds.

There was no way Thalia could have had these. Unless …

My hand shook as I held the photos out to Thalia. 'Where did you get these?'

Thalia’s stormy expression turned circumspect. She fidgeted with her bracelet. 'Um, when I went to look for my mom, I—well …'

'You said you weren’t going to find Luke without me! You promised!'

'I didn’t find him!'

'But you just said—'

'I—okay, look, Annabeth, don’t be mad. I went to Charleston, to the cave where I first met him. I just … well, I didn’t really mean to go, but I kind of just ended up there. And this diary,' she held up the book, 'was there. I recognised it. It was Luke’s. The pictures were inside. I think maybe he left them there as a message or something.'

She took the top picture from my hand and turned it over. The light in the room took on a harsh, grainy quality as I stared down at the single word scrawled on the back in Luke’s large, wide
Something constricted around my chest, pushing all my annoyance and outrage out of my lungs in one swift breath.

Had he written that before or after he’d tried to kill Percy, Grover, and me last summer on his cruise ship?

And if it really was a message, what did it mean?

It was probably stupid of me to hope that there was a chance Luke would return to us, after everything he’d done: poisoned Thalia’s tree, raised an army for the Titans, tried to steal the Golden Fleece for Kronos. But it still fluttered in my stomach like a feeble bird.

Thalia turned the photo over again so that our young faces laughed up at us. Luke’s face blurred. I swiped stupidly at my eyes.

‘I hate all of this,’ Thalia said quietly. ‘Luke—Kronos—damned prophecies …’

The mention of prophecies couldn’t have chilled me more thoroughly than if Thalia had dumped ice water over my head. Chiron had shared the prophecy Thalia was talking about with us at the end of summer—the full, terrifying thing, not just the few lines that had haunted me since I’d first heard them four years ago. It predicted a terrible fate for a child of the three eldest gods when they turned sixteen: they would die making a choice that either made or broke Olympus. This prophecy was the reason why Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades had made a pact not to have any demigod children any more—a Styx-sworn oath that Zeus and Poseidon had both broken.

Before Thalia had been de-arborified, we’d thought Percy would be the prophecy kid. As the son of Poseidon, he’d been the only child of the Big Three gods in existence. Now, Thalia was back. She was ostensibly eighteen if you counted chronologically, or somewhere between that and twelve if she’d only aged half as much as a tree. Either way, she would reach sixteen against all odds, just as the prophecy specified. We had no way of knowing if that line had already come to pass.

Any choice she made now could have consequences for us all. And Kronos wanted her to choose Luke.

I wouldn’t put it past a deity whose nickname was ‘the Crooked One’ to milk Thalia’s old connection to Luke for all it was worth (and judging from the wistful look on Thalia’s face when she looked at the old picture, it was worth a lot). I remembered what Luke had told us when we’d encountered him on our quest: ‘If Thalia were alive, she’d be on my side!’

The band around my chest tightened even more.

I couldn’t tell what Thalia was thinking. She’d gone impossibly still, rooted to the ground like a sturdy tree in the centre of a storm of contemplation. Then, with a loud snap that made me jump, she shut the diary and tossed it onto her bed.

‘I’m really tired,’ she said abruptly.

‘Thalia …’

‘I don’t want to talk about it.’ She kicked off her shoes and crawled into bed, not bothering to take off her uniform. ‘I’m really tired,’ she repeated.

And she pulled the covers over her head, effectively shutting me out.
It was probably no surprise that I dreamt of Luke that night.

Luke’s face was young and unscarred. With him were a girl and boy I had not seen since they’d embarked with Luke on his quest three years ago: Abby Markoff and Tyler Grayson, both of whom had never returned from the expedition.

They stood before a massive giant in a brown loincloth. The giant was at least six feet tall, standing stoop-shouldered under a twilit sky. The swirling palette of sunset funnelled into a vortex of cloud that rested above his shoulders, like he was a pillar holding up the ceiling. When he heaved, the sky shuddered with the motion of his torso.

I knew at once who he was: Atlas, the Titan whom Zeus had condemned to carry the sky, preventing it from crushing the earth.

'Take the deal,' Atlas bargained. 'Relieve me of my burden and I will bring you the apple you desire. You will never get past Ladon without my help!'

'We’ll take our chances,' Luke said.

He, Abby, and Tyler hurried past Atlas down the mountain. The winding path led them into a meadow so green it hurt my eyes to look at it. Flowers dotted the lush sea of grass, filling it with brilliant colour. The centre of the garden was dominated by a gigantic apple tree, at least twenty feet tall and filled to the highest boughs with solid gold apples that glowed in the red streak of the setting sun. It was a small patch of paradise that didn’t seem to be part of the mountain, but a separate world that existed out of space and time, surrounded by a wall of mist that obscured the horizon in every direction I looked.

Four nymphs uncurled from the foggy borders of the garden and stood in a row, observing Luke and his companions through heavy-lidded eyes. I’d seen them before—but hadn’t there been five of them at the Olympian war trial?

The Hesperides did not move to block Luke’s progress towards the tree. They didn’t need to. Lying at the base of the apple tree was a massive, copper-scaled dragon with a hundred heads. This had to be the Ladon Atlas had spoken of—the guardian of Hera’s golden apples.

'Okay, stick to the plan,' Luke told his companions. They nodded grimly, clutching their weapons.

Luke hung back while the other two approached the dragon. It opened its eyes—and I mean all its eyes, hundreds of them fluttering like a million beating wings—and growled. Abby and Tyler crept closer.

Ladon attacked.

Abby and Tyler were nearly instant dragon chew. I could tell they hadn’t expected the dragon to strike so quickly. They barely got out their shields in time.

Meanwhile, Luke skirted around the edge of the garden. Careful to stay out of striking range, Luke gazed at the top of the tree and whispered, 'Maia!' Wings erupted from his sneakers. He flew stealthily upwards. I had to admire his strategy—create a diversion and approach from the skies.

But a pair of demigods were no match for the ancient dragon. Ladon snapped Tyler’s shield into
pieces as easily as if it were cardboard. Two heads sank their fangs simultaneously into Tyler himself, ripping him to shreds. Abby’s scream was stillborn as Ladon crushed her under his massive claws.

Luke noticed none of this. He was concentrating on his prize, the apple on the highest bough.

The dragon took flight.

Ladon’s attack took Luke by surprise, but Luke’s reflexes were good, far superior to his companions’. He banked hard and went into a dive, narrowly avoiding Ladon’s outstretched claws. He landed hard on the grass and rolled to his feet. He started to run and tripped over the still bodies of his fallen friends.

’No!’ Luke recoiled from the bloody mess that had been Tyler. He spotted Abby and shook her urgently. She lay limp and pulseless in his arms.

Ladon came soaring in for another attack.

Luke didn’t run. His face was contorted in an ugly snarl. He drew his sword.

Not for nothing was Luke the best swordsman Camp Half-Blood had seen for three centuries. His craft was spectacular. But in one-to-one combat against one of the most ancient dragons in the Greek pantheon, he stood little chance. The dragon dodged and spat, avoiding his strikes. Even when Luke managed to land a blow, he was only a single sword against a hundred writhing heads. And he was tiring.

Still the four Hesperides stood watching, waiting.

Luke finally changed tactics. He lunged, aiming beneath Ladon’s nest of heads. I guess he was aiming for the dragon’s heart. Unfortunately, the move also brought him into range of the dragon’s deadly claws. He had only one chance to strike.

He missed.

Ladon’s claw raked across Luke’s face. He fell back, blood raining down his cheeks.

Ladon’s heads roared in unison, a clamour of triumph.

Luke swung his sword blindly. This time, it connected. A golden claw sliced off and landed at Luke’s feet.

But Luke looked like he was in terrible pain. His face was scrunched up. He squinted at the four nymphs through a curtain of blood.

’Help,’ he pleaded.

’We do not help,’ said the first Hesperid. ’We do not interfere.’

’Help,’ Luke said again. ’Please.’ He turned his head to the skies. ’Please … Dad.’

Miraculously, the dragon’s movements slowed. The mist around the garden closed in around Luke, shielding him from the Hesperides’ cold stares. A hush fell over the garden. I was strongly reminded of Santa Monica beach, where time itself had halted for one endless minute, the world perfectly frozen in a timeless icicle.

This sensation wasn’t as strong. Ladon was in fact still moving, just at the pace of a snail.
'He will not help you.' The voice was raspy and hoarse, like its speaker had not used it for centuries. Each word seemed to hurtle through the air like a hailstone. 'He has left you to die here.'

'Help me,' Luke whispered again.

'I will help you, little hero. I will give you one chance. I do not yet have the strength to stop time, but I can slow it enough for you to get away. Take your spoils and leave.'

'My quest—'

'Patience. What is a golden apple but a whim of the treacherous gods who have sent you here to face death? You will have a greater quest, my young hero. Now, take that claw and go before my power fades.'

Luke obeyed. He snatched up the dragon claw, wiped his face, and pushed himself to his feet. The winged shoes carried him out of the slow-moving dragon’s reach. Ladon did not pursue him as he departed the garden.

The voice followed Luke as he flew down the mountain path.

'Do not forget who has saved you. Do not forget, Luke Castellan.'

I watched Luke fly across the mountainside as night wrapped its inky shawl around him, closing in like the walls of a tunnel. When my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I saw him kneeling in the agora of black marble where the Olympians had once held their war tribunal. His face was illuminated by the soft light of a golden sarcophagus. He was no longer bloody, nor was he wearing his winged shoes. This was Luke as I’d last seen him, two months ago on the Princess Andromeda. And the sarcophagus … I had seen it on the cruise ship as well.

I knew what was inside that coffin.

'Twice.' It was the same cold, raspy voice, but it was stronger now, and more chilling. 'Twice you have failed, Luke.'

Luke shivered. 'I brought more half-bloods to your service, my lord,' he whispered. 'Surely—'

'And you are losing half of them to the maze. We need more powerful half-bloods. These weaklings will not suffice.'

'I—I will find them.'

'And the girl … she failed to come. I kept my side of the bargain, Luke. I hope you are not mistaken about your … friend.'

'No—I promise—I know her, she—if I can just go to her—'

'Fortunately, all is not lost. The Fleece has done its work. The great beasts are stirring from Tartarus. Our old allies are returning one by one. We will have our army. And my general will lead them into war once you have assembled them.'

'Yes,' Luke murmured. 'I won’t fail again.'

He rose to his feet, and if I had any hope of him reconsidering his allegiance to Kronos, it was dashed by the hard, determined look on his face.
Chapter End Notes

Abby and Tyler are borrowed from another story of mine, *Quest*. I may not maintain perfect continuity with that one, but I figured I’d re-use the names since they were already there.

I am aware that Percy says he couldn’t have tied the tie in *Staff of Hermes*. I just don’t buy it—he manages the ship perfectly in *SoM*, and let me tell you as a sailor, boats come with tons of complicated knots.
We Get An SOS From The Desert

Chapter Summary

An urgent call arrives during Annabeth's first weekend break at camp.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I was glad when the weekend finally arrived. Not only did it mean we'd made it through the first week of school (fortunately without any further demerits), it also meant we could go home. Well, to camp, which was as good as home.

It was with a light heart that Thalia and I signed ourselves out from campus after breakfast on Saturday morning. Argus met us in the same van he used to deliver strawberries to the city. He didn't say anything (the eyes on his tongue made him shy to speak) but he winked at us when we got in the cab—which for him meant shutting all the eyes on one side of his body in unison.

Thalia perked up with every mile we drove away from St Catherine's. She was looking more like herself today, in her old army jacket and favourite Green Day t-shirt. She hummed and tapped her feet in an off-beat against the car mat. As we turned down Old Farm Road, she rolled down the windows and belted out, 'I'm not getting any younger as long as you don't get any older!' She nudged me. 'Come on, Annabeth.'

'I don't know that song.'

'Seriously? We need to do something about your rock knowledge …'

When we arrived at camp, Chiron was clopping around the front porch of the Big House with a pair of pruning shears, trimming the bushes that framed the farmhouse. He straightened when he saw us and shoved the shears into the tool pocket of the gardening apron he was wearing over his PONIES CONVENTION '03 shirt.

'Annabeth, my dear! And Thalia—welcome back!' He held out his arm to shake our hands, then realised that his were crusted with soil. He wiped them on his apron. 'How is school?'

Thalia and I exchanged a look.

'Ahh.' Chiron winced. 'I see. I imagine the first week is a difficult adjustment. And mortal school is always a challenge for most demigods. Do not be downhearted, my dears.'

'It's fine,' Thalia muttered. 'I'm not downhearted.'

Chiron nodded. 'Annabeth, would you mind if I had a chat with Thalia? There are a few things we need to discuss in private. We can all catch up afterwards.'

I looked at Thalia, who shrugged. 'Okay,' I said. 'See you later.'

Chiron put his arm around Thalia's shoulder and steered her into the Big House. I hoped she'd tell
him about Luke's photographs. Chiron might be able to help her sort out her confusion. At the very least, he would warn her about just how devious Kronos could be.

Morning fog curled over the tops of the strawberry field. A dryad skipped across it, her leafy hair beginning to redden with fall colour, but no one else was in sight.

The emptiness was disconcerting. Fall at camp was always quieter than summer, but there were usually enough year-rounders that someone was bound to be out of doors playing volleyball, or flying pegasoi, or (particularly if you were a Demeter kid or Dionysus's twins) putting around in the strawberry fields. I knew more campers had headed out into the world to help the satyrs recruit new half-bloods this year, but knowing something and actually seeing its effects were two different things.

I crossed the lawn to the cabins. The lights were on in several of them—Ares, Apollo, and my own cabin six—but only one or two heads were visible through each window. The fire in the central hearth was blazing merrily, tended by a rosy-cheeked girl no older than eight. I'd seen her before, but she wasn’t a camper. A nymph, maybe, or a spirit. She appeared from time to time, but there was always a faint, ethereal quality to her, like she wasn't all fully formed. The only time I'd ever seen her looking completely solid was on my first day at camp.

The hearth-tender looked at me, gave a small, sweet smile, and vanished.

The door to cabin four opened and Clarisste stepped out. Her head was turned over her shoulder to shout at someone inside, ‘… until you pass Dad's rite of passage!’

She slammed the door behind her and jogged down the porch steps. A sword swung from her belt, clinking against the bronze breastplate she was wearing over her orange camp t-shirt.

'Hi Clarisse,' I said.

All the Ares kids had a mean streak in them, like their father, and as their head counsellor, Clarisse was the biggest and meanest of the lot. But she was also, in a weird way, my friend. We had helped her last year on her quest to retrieve the Golden Fleece. Since then, her regular threats to pulverise Percy and me (not that she'd ever succeeded) had become perfunctory rather than hateful.

Clarisse didn't look particularly surprised to see me. 'Oh, it's you,' she said. 'Should've known you'd pop up at some point, too.'

Too?

'Well, since you're here,' she lifted her sword slightly, 'wanna come get pulverised?'

I rolled my eyes. 'In your dreams, Clarisse. Give me five minutes.'

Clarisse laughed and bumped me with her shoulder, hard enough to leave a bruise. 'See you at the arena.'

Ten minutes later, I had deposited my weekend bag on my bunk (I said a quick hello to Malcolm Pace, the only Athena kid staying the year) and picked up a sword and breastplate from the armoury (Charles Beckendorf, who was hammering away at the forge next door, waved at me as I passed). Weapon in hand, I faced off with Clarisse on the floor of the sword-fighting arena.

The sword wasn't really either of our weapon of choice. For years, I'd trained with my dagger, the same one Luke had gifted me on our first meeting, while Clarisse favoured her spear (or her own bare fists). But all the best heroes were good all-rounders. We had a few good bouts before retiring to
the canoe lake to cool off.

'You're not half bad, Chase,' Clarisse said grudgingly as she poured handfuls of fresh water over her head.

'Not half bad?' I crossed my arms. 'I wiped the floor with you!'

'You wish you did.' Clarisse shook her dripping hair. A moment later, she admitted, 'There aren't many kids who're more of a challenge than you.'

It was possibly the closest Clarisse would ever come to a compliment. I grinned and dipped my legs in the cool lake. 'What did you mean earlier, when you said you expected me to pop up, too?'

'Oh. I ran into Prissy the other day.'

'Priss—you mean Percy?' My heart did a somersault. 'Percy was here?'

'Not here. I wasn't at camp.' Clarisse tossed her head proudly. 'My dad gave me the keys to his chariot.'

'Ares's war chariot?'

'It's a rite of passage when we turn fifteen—for the boys, anyway.' She scowled a little at the unfairness of this, then said with satisfaction, 'I'm the first girl to get a go in years.'

As Clarisse had turned fifteen nearly a year ago, I guessed it wasn't her birthday that had earned her this honour. She must have gained her dad's approval with the successful completion of her quest last summer.

'How did Percy get involved, then?' Somehow, I couldn't imagine that Clarisse would have swung by Manhattan on her first test drive of Ares's war chariot to take Percy on a joyride. Aside from the fact that she liked to pretend they were arch-nemeses, Percy and Ares actually were sworn enemies.

'He was butting in as usual,' Clarisse sniffed, though I noticed that her ears were slightly red. 'Ran into some—er—technical issues in his school's back yard. He just had to stick his nose in. Typical Prissy.'

'Uh-huh.' From her evasive tone (and knowing Percy), I guessed the technical issues had involved a monster or two. I would've bet a hundred drachmas that Percy had saved Clarisse's ass. Not that she'd ever admit it.

Before I could press her for details, the air over the lake shimmered, just as it had in my dorm room when Percy had IM-ed me. Several naiads skimming the lake surface scattered in alarm as a short, buff satyr with a curly goatee and a giant club appeared inches above them. He was supporting an unconscious kid in full battle armour—not just a breastplate like we were wearing, but also greaves strapped to his legs and a plumed helmet that covered half his face.

'Hedge?' Clarisse sprang to her feet. 'What's wrong? Who—'

The satyr, Hedge, shifted the burlap bag slung around his shoulders and lifted the head of the unconscious boy leaning against him. The boy's helmet tipped up, giving us a good look at his face.

Clarisse turned pale.

'That's Chris Rodriguez!' I said, stunned. He was—well, he'd been an undetermined camper a year
ago, until he'd left camp to join Luke's army. 'What happened to him?'

'Are you under attack?' Clarisse asked.

'Nah, I took out the monster dogs.' Hedge dropped Chris and struck a threatening pose with his club. He feigned a swing and a couple of karate kicks, as if demonstrating how he'd single-handedly fought off the monster horde.

'But where did you find him?' I asked. 'Did the monsters get him?' It didn't make sense. If Chris was working for Kronos, why would he have drawn a monster attack? Unless he'd been with the monsters …

'He was just wandering around in the middle of the desert!' Hedge said. 'I didn't notice him at first—there was this lady surrounded by orange dogs, so I jumped right in to help, of course.' He threw another pretend punch at an invisible monster dog. 'Hai-yah! They didn't stand a chance once I got going.'

'What other lady?'

At the same time, Clarisse asked, 'What are you doing in the middle of the desert?'

Hedge tugged at the collar of his lime-green polo shirt. 'Oh, um—it's the weekend, you know, I get a break from scouting. There may have been a date with a nephele, and another one may have gotten jealous and dropped me over the rez …'

None of this made any sense to me. 'What about the lady?' I repeated.

'Dunno, she disappeared when I was pulverising the dogs. Maybe she was one of those desert Mist things.'

'A mirage?'

'Yeah, that. She could've given the nephelae a run for their money.' He looked disappointed that she hadn't been real.

'But what about Chris?' Clarisse demanded. 'What's he doing in Arizona?'

'Beats me. I only noticed him after I got rid of the dogs. Hard to miss him then—walking around in circles and babbling like a whackjob.'

The reddish tint of Chris's light brown skin took on a more dire meaning. If they were in the middle of the desert in late summer, he had to be practically melting in his heavy Greek armour. 'Did he pass out from heatstroke or something?'

'Eh?' Hedge glanced at Chris as though just realising that he was unconscious. 'Oh. That might've been me.' He held up his hands defensively. 'He was totally whacked out! Kept shaking me and muttering about string. Had to knock him out to drag him back to civilisation. Anyway,' he crossed his arms and glared at us, 'what should I do about him?'

'Can't you bring him back to camp?' Even as I said it, I realised it might not be the best idea. Chris had run away from camp, after all. What good would bringing him back do? Would he even stay once he came to his senses?

Chris gave a soft moan. His eyelids fluttered, but didn't lift.
'Chris?' Clarisse said. Her voice was strangely tentative. 'Can you hear us?'

Chris made an indistinct rasping noise. Hedge dug into his burlap bag and came up with a bottle of amber liquid, which he tipped into Chris's open mouth.

'Are you crazy?' I demanded. 'He can't take that much nectar at once!'

'It's not nectar, it's one of my homemade remedies,' Hedge snapped. 'Bit of birch sap mixed with Gatorade. Does wonders—see?'

'Need … the … string,' Chris gasped. He sat up so quickly, Hedge had to jump back to avoid being smacked in the chest by his helmet.

'Chris!' Clarisse leaned towards the Iris-message. 'Chris, it's me—'

But Chris backed away on his hands and knees, his eyes wide and fearful. 'You're not real, you're not real,' he babbled.

Hedge put his hand on Chris's shoulder. 'Relax, kid, it's just—ouch!' He withdrew his hand quickly as Chris turned his head and tried to bite it.

'Mary!' Chris yelled. He grabbed the hem of Hedge's shirt and yanked him back and forth. 'You have to help me! I have to find the string. I'll never get out of here if I don't—I have to find the string!'

'What string is he talking about?' I asked.

'No—blasted—clue—' Hedge tried in vain to tug his shirt out of Chris's grip. He finally lifted his club and gave Chris a big clunk on the head.

'String,' Chris repeated dizzily, and collapsed to the ground.

'See what I mean?' Hedge said.

I glanced at Clarisse. All the colour had drained out of her face. I couldn't understand why she looked so worried. I mean, this wasn't good, but she looked as if she'd been made an ambassador for peace or something—like the world as she knew it had ended.

'We have to tell Chiron,' I said. 'He'll know what to do.'

'Fine. You do that,' Hedge growled. 'But get back to me pronto. I'm gonna look for a place to hide him, but I can't very well bring him to school, and—oh blast, I'm losing the rainbow.'

Sure enough, the image warped, throwing Hedge and Chris out of focus.

'Go to my mom's place,' Clarisse said, recovering from her shock. 'Bring him there and we'll get to you—'

The Iris-message fizzled out.

We ran for the Big House. Chiron and Thalia were sitting (well, standing, in his case) at the card table on the back porch. From the grin on Thalia's face and the fond, reminiscent expression on Chiron's, they had moved on from any serious topics they might have been discussing earlier.

Thalia spotted us first. Her amusement faded the moment she saw our faces.

Chiron set his coffee mug down on the card table. 'What is it, Annabeth?'
We explained about Hedge's Iris-message and Chris's predicament. Chiron's thick eyebrows grew increasingly furrowed as he listened, until they almost made a single line across his forehead.

'This is troubling news indeed. Chris Rodriguez, did you say? Yes, I remember him.'

'Which one was he?' Thalia asked.

'You wouldn't have met him,' I said. 'He left camp before you returned. We saw him last on Luke's ship, when we were heading for the Sea of Monsters.'

Chiron tugged on his scraggily brown beard. 'And you say he appeared quite mad?'

'Raving!' Clarisse said. 'He didn't seem to see any of us at all. Kept moaning about string and—' I had never heard Clarisse's voice shake so badly before, 'he mentioned Mary.'

The blood drained from Chiron's face. 'It cannot be,' he said, and he seemed now to be muttering to himself. 'A ghost, perhaps? But that would mean Lord Hades—unless …' He shook his head sharply and, without explaining any of this, said, 'It may not be feasible to bring him back to camp.'

'But we can't leave him to die!' Clarisse protested.

I stared at her. Not that I disagreed—enemy or not, it would be wrong to leave a fellow half-blood for dead—but last summer, Clarisse had been all for slaughtering the rebel half-bloods who had betrayed us. I didn't expect her to stick up for Chris all of a sudden.

'No, of course not, child,' Chiron said gently. 'But it does not sound like he would be ready to make such a long journey right now. Assuming we can ascertain that he has a desire to do so.'

'I told Hedge to take him to my mom's place in Phoenix.'

'Yes, that's not a bad idea.' Chiron rubbed his chin. 'Can your mother care for him, then?'

Clarisse frowned. 'I don't know. I don't think she's on assignment at the moment. Fine—I know. I'll go home. If I can borrow my dad's chariot again, I could get there in two days.'

Thalia raised her eyebrows. 'You're just going to run off to help a crazy person who, as far as we know, is working for Kronos?'

Clarisse rounded on her. 'You don't understand! Chris isn't—he—if he's seen Ma—' She crossed her arms and stamped her foot on the ground. 'I have to speak to him.'

I didn't know whether to be amused or horrified by the idea that was forming in my head. The thought of Clarisse caring about anyone the way Thalia and I cared about Luke was so foreign, I almost dismissed it right away. But I knew the look on Clarisse's face all too well. I'd worn it myself often enough—most recently when Thalia had shown me Luke's photos and I'd entertained the brief, tantalising hope that he might return to us.

'We need to find out what is behind all of this,' Chiron said. 'It may be our chance to learn the Titan lord's plans—or one of them, at least. I do not doubt that he has several up his chiton. The whole situation is disturbing. I think …' He shook his head. 'No, I should not speculate until we have more answers. Clarisse, if you are indeed willing—'

'I'm gonna go pack.' With another glare at Thalia and me, she stalked off towards the cabins, muttering, 'Phobos and Deimos better not show up this time.'
'I don't get it. What's going on? And who's Mary?' Thalia looked at me expectantly.

I shrugged. I'd never heard of anyone named Mary either. 'Maybe it was the lady Hedge saw with him. The one who disappeared.

'I don't think so. Mary was …' Chiron shook his head. 'I will leave it for Clarisse to decide if she is willing to share that story,' he said. 'In the meantime, it would be best not to discuss the matter until we learn more about what is happening. We shall see soon enough what Clarisse discovers in Arizona.'

He gave Thalia and me a stern look. We nodded quickly. Thalia mimed pulling a zipper across her mouth.

'Well, then, there are some matters I must attend to before our lessons this afternoon. The nymphs should be serving lunch right about now. Annabeth, you are welcome to join us later if you wish,' He nodded to Thalia and me and trotted indoors.

The nymphs were indeed serving up platters of bread, fruit, and cheese in the dining pavilion. After scraping our usual offerings into the bronze braziers (I burnt my mom extra portions to make up for the times I couldn't do it at school), I joined Thalia at the Zeus table. It wasn't like there were enough of us around for anyone to care about the seating rules.

'So what did you and Chiron talk about?' I asked Thalia. 'Did he tell you about Kr—the Titan lord?'

'Actually …' Thalia raised a goblet of apple juice to her lips and took a long sip. 'He told me about Luke. About when he was here.'

I didn't know what to say to this. In the silence, I took a small bite of cheese.

'I thought he'd be really angry at Luke, after—after—you know. But he wasn't. He seemed really worried about him, too.'

'Chiron cares about all of us.'

Thalia put down her goblet. It made a wet ring on the stone table. 'Yeah. I got that. He's okay, I guess. I was a bit mad at him before, for wanting to keep me here, like I should just train up for the prophecy like a good little girl, but it wasn't really like that at all. He just wants to help me catch up on stuff you guys got to learn when I was stuck as a tree. That's what the private training is for.'

'Are you going to stay here now, then? I mean, since you hate school and all.' I wondered what I would do if she did. After all the pleading I'd done to get my dad to send me to St Catherine's, what would he think if I dropped out after only a week? And where would I go if I did?

Thalia made another ring on the table, next to the first, and drew a line connecting them, like a pair of handcuffs. 'I could stay,' she admitted, 'but it'd just be like last summer. After a while, I needed to leave. I know this place is home for you, Annabeth, but it's different for me. I just don't feel like I've found where I belong.' She erased her drawings, leaving a smeared wet patch on the stone. 'Maybe it doesn't even matter. Maybe I won't be around long anyway.'

My cheese tasted like it had turned to ash in my mouth. 'Don't say that.'

'It's true, isn't it?'

'Maybe not. Maybe there's a way, a loophole or something—' But nothing came to mind. Prophecies were worse than oaths on the Styx; you could break the latter if you were willing to risk the
alternative of being cursed. But you couldn't thwart a prophecy. Greek mythology was full of stories about heroes who had fulfilled a prophecy simply by trying to avoid it. There was this one king, for instance, who'd left his son to die when an Oracle prophesied that the baby would grow up to kill his father and marry his mother. That son had later grown up with foster parents, and on hearing the same prophecy, left home to avoid it. During his travels, he'd ended up killing a stranger, saving a kingdom, and marrying its widowed queen. I'm sure I don't need to tell you who the stranger and the queen were.

The point was, if the prophecy foretold that Thalia's soul would be reaped by a cursed blade, her efforts to avoid said blade would probably just lead her to a different cursed blade—maybe even earlier than we'd otherwise expect.

I didn't know how Thalia dealt with it. Maybe the same way I did—pretend like it wasn't there hanging over our heads. At least Thalia was here now, very much alive, and if our time was limited … well, this was the story of my life, after all. Nothing really lasted—not situations, not homes, and not people. Nothing was eternal, unless you were a god. And with Kronos and his festering plots, maybe not even for them.

Maybe that was why Thalia couldn't figure out where she belonged. Camp had at least established some permanence in my life. For her, everything was temporary.

A wry smile twisted across Thalia's face. 'Don't worry, Annabeth,' she said. 'I won't go down without a fight. And if that's what it comes to, I'll take him down with me.'

Chapter End Notes

The song Thalia sings along to is Church on Sunday by Green Day. That line just seemed particularly appropriate for age-defying Thalia!

Clarisse's reference to her chariot adventure with Percy comes, of course, from the short story, The Stolen Chariot in The Demigod Files. RR's timeline for everything isn't the easiest to make sense of; some sources indicate that all of TDF takes place between BotL and TLO, but that can't possibly be true, given the ages given for the characters in some parts (Annabeth is listed as 13 in one of the interviews, and she's clearly 15 at the end of BotL). So I'm assuming that the different snippets of TDF were taken from different time periods, and placing The Stolen Chariot between SoM and TC. This makes the most sense, since Clarisse indicates that driving the war chariot is a ritual for Ares's sons (and presumably daughters) when they turn fifteen. I've always pegged Clarisse as a year or so older than Percy and Annabeth, since she's described as thirteen or fourteen in LT.
I Become The School Porn President

Chapter Summary

The mean girls play a dirty trick on Annabeth in class.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After our first, rocky week at St Catherine's, things started to look up. Sports extracurriculars were in full swing from the second week on, which meant we got to spend our afternoons in the sports C—a state-of-the-art athletic complex with ball courts, training gyms, and even an Olympic pool—or outdoors on the pitches and fields.

Thalia and I soon found ourselves at the centre of a talent bidding war. Once the junior captains realised we were proficient at just about every sport the school had to offer, they were all clamouring for us to join their teams.

'We need a good setter if we're gonna take on St Agnes this year,' said Patrician Longhorn, the volleyball captain.

'Are you sure you've never played?' Esther McGuire, the soccer captain, was astounded after a friendly match where Thalia scored ten goals and I saved every attempt on ours.

Only the crew team wasn't too enthusiastic about us, but that was the only sport in which Thalia and I didn't shine. Our strength and stamina might be comparable to their best athletes, but we were both shaky on water.

Marissa continued to badger Thalia (and me, once she saw my lap timings) to join the cross-country team. We outstripped the others easily—at all, a slow demigod is often a dead demigod. I eventually gave in to Marissa's pleas, since she was the only captain willing to excuse me from Saturday training sessions (I wasn't about to forego my visits to camp). Thalia held out, claiming that she preferred to run alone, and just for fun. I thought there was more to it than that. Marissa wasn't the only captain Thalia left hanging. She kept rotating among the different teams, as though she was afraid to commit to any in particular.

To my surprise, Izzy was the only junior captain who didn't hunt us down in her recruitment drive. She turned out to be as good an archer as I'd ever seen. If she'd been a demigod, I'd have sworn she was a child of Apollo.

'It's just practice,' Izzy said with a shrug, after an impressive session where she'd hit ten consecutive bulls-eyes. Strangely enough, her last two shots had missed the target completely, as though she'd been aiming at something else entirely. 'Not like Thalia. She's naturally talented—I can tell.'

Her hands-off approach turned out to be the wisest. After several weeks, Thalia finally announced that she would join the archery team, to the disappointment of Marissa and the other captains.

September blew into October with a flurry of red-gold leaves and cool, crisp temperatures. Between afternoon sports and regular weekend visits to camp, I was finally getting more comfortable with
boarding school. Melanie Richards and her friends still gave us the evil eye whenever we crossed paths, but as classes were organised by house, it was easy enough to stay out of their way.

At least, until the announcement that the junior school was to have combined computer science classes on Friday afternoons.

The Claymore girls were all in high dudgeon about this, as it cut into sports time. Thalia and I, however, had a different worry.

'Can we even do computers?' Thalia asked. 'I mean, phones attract monsters.'

'I don't know,' I said uneasily as we waited outside the door to the computer lab in the science C. There was a reason why the only computer at camp was in Chiron's heavily barricaded office. 'I only tried once, and—well, it wasn't pretty.'

That was putting it mildly. A monster had totally wrecked my dad's computer after I'd used it to send Percy an email.

'It can't be the computers themselves,' I reasoned. 'Or even the phones. I mean, we're actually near a lot of cell phones—almost everyone here has one—and no monsters have come after us yet, thank Zeus.'

'Yeah, but we aren't the ones using them. I don't see how we can get around it in an actual class.'

'I think it'll be okay as long as we're not using them to communicate. Maybe monsters tap into satellite signals or something.'

We had to halt our conversation then because the rest of the class turned up in the hall, all sixty eighth-graders crowding outside the door to the lab. It swung open moments later, held by a young, redhead teacher dressed in a silky emerald blouse and neat pencil skirt. In an attempt to appear older and stricter, she had pulled her fiery hair back into a stern bun. Wisps of it curled out from the sides like wild sparks escaping a flickering flame.

She smoothed down her skirt unnecessarily and said, 'Well, come in.' Her voice was lightly accented, reminding me a bit of my stepmother. Several Claymore girls smirked at each other as we filed past her into the lab, obviously pegging her as an inexperienced pushover.

'One to a computer, hurry up, now.' Our new teacher affected a crisp, commanding tone that clashed with her soft, lilting accent. She seemed to be trying to cover up her nervousness as she marched stiffly to the front of the room and stood beside the blackboard. She'd written two lines on it in large capital letters.

There was the usual first-day scramble for seats as everyone tried to eke out their territory for the rest of the semester. The computer lab was laid out with three long, vertical rows of tables. Thalia and I hesitated, caught between wanting to stay out of the teacher's immediate view and knowing that reading anything written on the blackboard would be murder on our dyslexic eyes if we were too far back. We ended up somewhere in the middle, between the attentive, eager-beaver Baxtors and the stoners from Richards who were just cruising through school on their parents' wealth. The Baxtors weren't as eager as usual to be up front today, though. Probably they thought a class that didn't count towards our GPAs was a waste of time.

'As you can see,' our teacher motioned towards the blackboard, where she'd written what looked like COUNT THE SEAS, and under that, KATE SHE IS, 'I am Kate Seunis, and this is Computer Science.' She pronounced her name with a hitch on the 'S', the way you might say 'Tsar'.
Esther McGuire put her hand up. 'Miz Seunis, do we really need to be here? I mean, we already know how to use the Internet. Who doesn't have a laptop, or a Facebook page?'

Ms Seunis crossed her arms and glared at us. 'First, not all of you are equally well-versed in technology. This class offers the less fortunate among you an opportunity to receive instruction on resources such as word processors and the world wide web.'

'You mean there are fossils who don't have Facebook?' Melanie Richards, sitting in the row next to ours, shot us a malicious grin.

'Second,' Ms Seunis continued, walking down the row between us and Melanie, 'you are not here just to learn how to use a computer. I intend to show you how computers can be used as a research tool—a design tool—an analysis tool—any kind of tool you may ever need. This class will cover many programmes that can assist you in diverse fields, whether you are aiming at concentrations in the sciences, or design, or even the humanities.' She stopped a few computers down from us, where several girls were hastily clicking to minimise the windows on their monitors. 'I'm afraid your familiarity with Facebook and Twitter won't assist you here.'

Satisfied that no one was illicitly checking their social media, she marched back to the head of the class and brought down the projector screen, bringing up a display of her own computer monitor.

'We will begin with a simple survey to gauge your level of familiarity with current technology in general, and any experience you have with a variety of software. If you look on your desktops, you will see a shortcut to it. You will spend the first fifteen minutes of the lesson filling it out. Your answers will determined what you get out of the semester, so don't rush through it.'

The room was quickly filled with the staccato taps of mouse clicks and rapid typing. I didn't have much experience with computers, but the WindowsXP system was pretty intuitive. I found the desktop link and opened the survey, which was just as Ms Seunis had indicated—a simple questionnaire about our computer knowledge and experience.

After a minute or so of answering the questions, Thalia whispered urgently to me, 'Give me a hand, will you?'

I peeked through the gap in the computers. Ms Seunis was walking down the opposite row. Wheeling my chair over to Thalia's workstation, I looked at her monitor. She was stuck on the second page, where we were supposed to rank our proficiency in a list of programmes.

'I don't know any of them—well, fine, Google, but what's Adobe, or ArchiCAD, or WordPress—is that what you call Microsoft Word now?'

Melanie leaned across the aisle. 'What's the matter?' she sneered. 'You a dinosaur as well as a dyke?'

'Piss off, Richards,' Thalia snapped.

'Shh, ignore her,' I said. 'Can't you just say you don't know any of them? Or do it randomly.'

'I tried, it won't work. I keep getting an error message.'

I got her past the automatic question-not-answered error and was about to help with the next page when I heard the tap-tap-tap of Ms Seunis's heels coming down our aisle. Quickly, I returned to my workstation—and gasped in horror.

Instead of the half-filled class questionnaire, my screen showed a large digital image of two naked girls in a very compromising position. I grabbed the mouse to get rid of the window before Ms
Seunis could see, but the cursor on the screen didn't move when I wiggled the mouse frantically.

Someone had unplugged it. I whirled around to look at Melanie, who was back at her workstation, the very picture of innocence. Except for the tell-tale smirk playing about her lips.

'What is the meaning of this?'

I gritted my teeth and turned around to face an irate Ms Seunis.

Melanie Richards evidently needed no instruction in how to use computers as a tool for humiliation.

+++ By the time we got back to the dorm C that evening, my status as a lesbian porn addict had spread like wildfire. No less than twenty taunting notes found their way to my desk during Study Hall, shot as spitballs or flown as paper aeroplanes behind the teachers' backs. I was ready to bang my head against a wall—or better yet, into Melanie's. Usually I preferred the intellectual approach to revenge, but I wasn't completely above exacting vengeance Ares-style.

'Thank the gods it's Friday,' I groaned as Thalia and I climbed the stairs to the eighth-grade dorms. 'I've had enough of this week.'

Thanks to Melanie's little stunt, Ms Seunis had put me in detention until dinner time, making me clean the computer lab and tally all her survey responses by hand. It had meant missing cross-country practice, which annoyed Marissa—especially when I refused to make up for it on the weekend. She wouldn't speak to me all through dinner.

Before we could get to our room, a door further up the hall shot open. One of the girls from the archery team emerged.

'Thalia!' she said cheerfully.

'What's up, Cheryl?'

A few other girls poked their heads out of the room, where they appeared to be having a party. Izzy pushed past them and stepped out into the hallway.

'We've all voted,' she said, looping her arm firmly through Thalia's. 'You're hanging with us tonight. Think of it as team bonding.'

'I—'

'Come on,' Cheryl said. 'You never go out with us on the weekends.'

'Well, um …' Thalia looked awkwardly at me.

'Oh, Annabeth can come, too,' Izzy said. 'We're not that exclusive. Besides, it's really Esther's DVD collection.' The soccer captain waved at us cheerfully.

'You sure you want the porn president joining you?' I said sarcastically, listing one of the many insults that had peppered the taunting notes in Study Hall.

Izzy rolled her eyes. 'We know Richards set you up—it was obvious.'

'The rest of the school doesn't seem to think so,' I muttered.
Cheryl shrugged. 'Not us—right, girls?'

There was a chorus of no's and a lot of head-shaking from inside the room.

'There's always going to be idiots,' Izzy said. 'Don't worry, it'll blow over. Come hang with us; it'll cheer you up.'

Izzy and Cheryl frogmarched Thalia and me into the room. There were about a dozen of them inside, sprawled on the twin beds or sitting on the floor, passing bags of chips and popcorn around. Esther appeared not only to own the DVD collection, but also the *Enchanted* bedspread she was currently sitting on as she rifled through her DVDs.

'Which one do we want, girls?'

Esther's roommate, Elise, looked up from the desk where she was setting up her laptop and a couple of speakers. 'Let Thalia pick, since she didn't get to see *The Labyrinth* with us last week.'

'Oh man, you totally missed out,' Cheryl groaned. 'Seriously, it was so good.'

Someone threw a handful of popcorn at her. 'It was creepy, you mean. I couldn't sleep a wink all weekend!'

'*The Labyrinth?* I said uneasily. Something about it struck a chord with me, which was strange since my knowledge of what was 'in' at the cinemas was always patchy.

'You know, that film remake?' Cheryl said. 'The one with Keira Knightly.'

'Don't see it if you don't like horror movies,' Elise warned. 'But that actor who played the goblin king was, like, so dreamy.' She pointed to a huge poster plastered on the wall over her bed. It featured a Native American actor with intense, dark eyes and a dimpled chin under his roguish smile. He beckoned to us with one finger like he was inviting us to enter the stone maze in the poster's backdrop.

'So what'll it be, Thalia?' Esther prodded. 'I can't promise I'll have it, but I've got quite a few.'

'Er—I don't really know any movies,' Thalia admitted.

Her teammates threw her horrified looks. 'Get out!' Cheryl gasped. 'Nobody doesn't know any movies.'

Izzy nudged me and whispered, 'Seriously, even if you don't know, you ought to at least pretend or something. It's a dead giveaway otherwise.'

I gave her a sharp look, suddenly wary.

'I, um—you got any Disney stuff?' Thalia said quickly, trying to cover up.

This sparked off a debate over animated versus live action movies, with a side discussion of everyone's favourite Disney princess. It ended when Esther finally pulled out a DVD with a fuzzy blue creature in a hula skirt on the cover.

'It's pretty old, but I always loved this,' she said, passing it over.

'Lilo and Stitch?' Elise said.

'Just put it on,' Izzy told her. 'Before it's too late to watch anything.'
Elise popped it into her DVD drive. We settled down to watch.

The last movie I'd seen was before I'd run away from home, and I was willing to bet it was even longer since Thalia had seen one. I certainly didn't expect the story of an indestructible monster alien built for mayhem to strike a chord with me. Especially not when Stitch went rampaging across a toy version of San Francisco. It reminded me too much of what might happen to our actual civilisation if Kronos had his way. But when Stitch opened his mouth and repeated Lilo's words: 'Ohana means family. Family means nobody gets left behind. Or forgotten,' my eyes were unmistakably moist.

I heard Thalia suppress a sniff. The next moment, her hand closed over mine.

When the credits came rolling across the screen, there was hardly a dry eye in the room.

We helped Esther and Elise clean up before lights out. As we headed back to our own rooms, it occurred to me that the way I was straddling the mortal world right now wasn't all that different from Stitch. And hanging out with Izzy and the archers tonight was the first time I'd felt perfectly normal in the mortal world.

'Annabeth?' Thalia said after we'd turned out the lights.

'Yeah?'

I could hear the smile in her voice as she said, 'Thanks for not leaving me behind.'

+++ 

That night, I dreamt I was sitting at a dressing table in a Grecian-style bridal gown. The bodice was a masterpiece of white lace, draped over my shoulders like a chiton, and the skirt flared out from under my chest into voluminous waves of snowy silk. When I looked into the mirror, the face that stared back at me was way too pretty to be mine. Rich, honey-gold hair was piled above my head in an elegant bun, from which two soft waves draped down around my ears. My eyes, nose, and mouth were the perfect, classic features of a goddess, smooth and well-proportioned.

It wasn't my face, but it was familiar. I'd definitely seen the girl in the mirror before. I pictured her younger and chewing anxiously on her nails.

Standing behind me, with deft fingers weaving delicate flowers into my hair, was an attendant, also dressed in bridal white. She was probably one of my—well, Nia's—bridesmaids. She was taller than the mirror, so I could only see the lower half of her body as she worked, and the long, red-orange plait that ran down her shoulders.

A bright light descended behind me. The next moment, someone else appeared in the mirror's reflection—a hunchbacked man with great, beefy arms and a broad, muscular chest. Under his powerful upper body, he had warped, twisted legs that gave him a hobbled stride as he came forward to place his hands on the back of my chair.

'Lord Hephaestus.' My attendant dropped a curtsey and bowed her head.

'Father.' I stood and turned to face him. 'This is a surprise.'

'Daughter,' Hephaestus said gruffly. 'Can't let you be married off without my blessing, can I?'

He clasped his hands together. When he opened them, they were like clamshells parting to reveal a golden necklace inlaid with jewels. It curved beautifully into two serpent heads at the clasp, which was shaped like the eagle on Zeus's crest. The eagle's bright yellow wings shimmered with a coating
of powdered moonstone. It reflected the blues of my eyes, the white of my veil, and the gold trim of my gown all at once. I could hardly tear my eyes away from my reflection in the stone. The woman that smiled back at me was even more beautiful than the one I saw in the mirror.

'It's beautiful!' I was beautiful.

'It will give the wearer eternal beauty,' Hephaestus said. 'It has been charmed with a sacred vow.'

My attendant let out a soft sigh of desire, as though she, too, were mesmerised by the necklace.

Hephaestus placed the necklace in my hands. 'You are giving up much to marry Cadmus, my dear.'

'I love him,' I said simply. 'I'm willing to live as a mortal to be with him.'

'In that case …' A shadow fell over Hephaestus's face. 'May this necklace seal your vows. As it did your mother's and mine.'

With another blinding flash of light, Hephaestus took his leave. I shut my eyes, and when I opened them, I was no longer standing before a dressing table. I was still holding the necklace, which seemed to emit an eerie, ethereal light. Dust particles swam in it, coagulating into the vague forms of people. They were dancing—or maybe they were duelling.

A flash of red in the corner of my eye drew my attention. I tilted my head just in time to catch a brilliant streak of fur—a dog, or a fox, darting away. Its tail swayed behind it in a way that resembled an unfurled fan.

'It's cursed,' someone croaked.

I looked down and almost screamed.

I'd definitely been plunged into a different dream—no, a nightmare. The hem of my white dress was soaked in blood. The scent of it filled my nostrils, choking and metallic. It spilled from two men in Greek armour—one sandy-haired, one dark—who lay on either side of me, both with weapons thrust through their chests. The puddles of their blood spread slowly across the ground to meet as one giant, tragic pool.

The dark-haired man was perfectly still beneath the spear in his heart; it was the sandy-haired one who had spoken. The hilt of a sword protruded from his side, where the blade was embedded in the gap of his armour. I fell to my knees beside him.

'Why, Polynices?' I heard myself say. 'Why did you do this?'

Polynices's hand rose feebly to clutch at the necklace in my hands.

'It is—a curse,' he repeated in his straining gasp. 'You must break it, sister. Break it, or we are all doomed—you and Antigone as well.' His final words came out in a whisper so soft I had to lean forward to hear.

Tears blurred my vision, but not enough to obscure the cloudiness that came over Polynices's eyes. His stare turned cold and vacant. His hand slipped from the necklace and fell lifeless to his side.

Again, the dream shifted …

The smell of blood still hung in the air, mingled with a strange, minty scent. The ground beneath my knees was hard and cold. In the dim light, I could make out Luke's scarred face. He stood beside a
hulking figure whose hunched posture couldn't disguise his massive bulk—so big that it pressed right up against the ceiling of a cave.

Both Luke and the giant had their eyes fixed on the empty air in front of them, which rippled like a gauzy curtain in the dark. A person appeared in it, their face cast so deep in shadow, I couldn't make out a single defining feature. When they spoke, their voice was distorted, as though coming to us through a static-filled speaker. However, the excitement in their tone was unmistakable.

'I have found not one, but two, sir!'

'Two half-bloods in one school?' Luke said sceptically. 'The odds—'

'I think my authority on the subject is somewhat greater than yours, demigod.' It was clear from the pointed sneer that whoever this person was—I suspected a monster in disguise—their 'sir' had not been addressed to Luke.

'Enough,' rumbled the giant in a rich baritone. 'This demigod has the favour of our lord Titan. And he is quite right in saying that half-bloods—especially the powerful ones we have tasked you with finding—do not often congregate. At least not outside that infernal camp of theirs.'

'I was surprised myself,' admitted the disgruntled monster. 'But I believe they are here, and they are powerful. I require a retrieval operation, sir.'

There was a pause, in which Luke and the giant looked at each other.

'This is no small request,' the giant said. 'Either you are very certain … or very foolhardy.'

'We don't have enough forces yet,' Luke said. 'If we go to all that trouble and it turns out they aren't the ones we're looking for …'

'How certain are you?' the giant rumbled.

'I—' The monster faltered slightly.

'Be sure, then,' the giant ordered. 'And when you are, Luke will send the reinforcements you require.'

There was a shimmer in the image, like the monster was nodding.

'Yes, sir. Shall I change my disguise, then, to get in closer? I can disguise myself most effectively as a—'

'Fool!' the giant roared. The entire cavern trembled as he straightened. 'Do you wish to blow your cover by messing around? The half-bloods are not as stupid as you assume. Maintain your disguise!' The giant crouched again, panting as though he had just performed an Olympic lift. 'Go!' he commanded, and the monster's wavering image faded to black.

'Sir,' Luke said, 'can I—assist you?'

The giant's head swivelled to glare at Luke. For a moment, I thought he was going to punch Luke. Then he bellowed with laughter.

'Assist me? Assist me! Oh, young demigod, there is only one thing that can relieve my burden, and it would kill you to undertake it. But no matter, Soon enough, my lord uncle will be renewed and he will release me from my bonds himself. And you, Luke Castellan, will gather the army that will amass our victory.'
Luke bowed his head in acquiescence.

'Go now and summon the mercenaries. I want them ready to provide back-up when our scout has the half-bloods. Send the new kid with them. He has yet to prove himself after the last … mishap.' The giant's nose wrinkled, as if failure were a bad smell.

'The—-the mercenaries, sir?'

'Yes, the mercenaries! Is it my day to be beleaguered by half-wits?'

'They are mortals,' Luke said, very carefully.

'You are part-mortal.'

'Yes, but—'

'Is it concern you have for them, boy? The giant's voice was soft and dangerous.

'No, it's not—it's just—they're expensive, aren't they?' Luke said quickly.

The giant snorted. 'Don't worry your pretty little head about it. Our financial backers have come through. And once the Titan lord reigns supreme, all who have supported our cause shall have their reward.' He shifted as though adjusting a heavy weight on his shoulders. 'Indeed, our most valuable weapon rises from Tartarus as we speak. But to find it, we will need a powerful half-blood. May I remind you that you have not delivered on that front.'

'Percy Jackson—'

'You know very well that it is not the son of Poseidon who will come to us.'

Luke gritted his teeth. 'I won't fail.'

The giant laughed again. 'I will hold you to that, Luke Castellan. Nonetheless, there is a valuable lesson I learnt from our lord Kronos. A single plan is never enough. One must always have contingencies, and contingencies for the contingencies. If our friend has indeed found one of these contingencies … well, it is good to have options.'

His booming laughter echoed through the caves.

I jerked awake.

My sheets were drenched in sweat. My nose still detected the faint whiff of blood. With a groan, I realised why. I reached into my dresser drawer for a tampon before climbing out of bed and heading to the toilet.

Thalia was sitting up in bed when I came out. She'd flicked on the lights. I squinted against their harsh glare.

'You okay?' she asked.

'Yeah. Just that time of the month, you know.' I peeled off my sheets and chucked them into the laundry basket.

Thalia made a sympathetic noise. 'You were tossing around quite a bit before you got up.'

I pulled new sheets from my closet and spread them over my bed, using the time it took to think what
to tell Thalia. When I'd finished smoothing them out, I said, 'Just a dream.'

'Wanna tell me about it?'

I turned the lights back out and crawled into bed, but didn't lie down. I crossed my legs and sat with my hands propped under my chin. What was I supposed to make of all my dreams? I had no clue what the first two meant—and indeed, the second scared me badly enough that I just wanted to put it out of my head. The last one at least made more sense, even though it was hardly good news.

Thalia stayed sitting upright in her own bed, waiting. Finally, I told her about Luke's conversation with the giant and the monster.

'Does that—happen often?' Thalia asked when I finished.

'Monsters tracking half-bloods at school? Yeah, they—'

'I meant the dreams. Of—of …'

'Oh. Well, dreams are part of half-blood life, right? Don't you have them?'

Thalia shook her head. In the dark, with only the faint glow of streetlights peeking through our window blinds, her motion was as indistinct as the monster in my dream.

'I never dream about Luke,' she said softly.

I didn't know what to say to this.

'I'm not sure if I want to,' Thalia continued. 'I'm not sure I want to see how much he's changed.' She reached out and touched something on her bedside table. Maybe it was Luke's old diary with the photos. 'Sometimes I think all of this is a dream. Like maybe I'll wake up and the two of you will be like you were.'

I barely remembered the kid I'd been seven years ago. It was weird to think that for Thalia, it probably only seemed like two months ago.

'You grew up so much, Annabeth.' Thalia's voice took on a fond, reminiscent quality. 'It's like just yesterday you were this little girl hanging off Luke.'

My jaw dropped. 'I was not!'

Thalia laughed. 'Oh, you were. But don't worry, it was cute.'

I made a face, even though Thalia probably couldn't see it in the dark.

'You know, I could tell Percy so many stories,' Thalia teased. 'Maybe I should. Make him a bit jealous. You never know, that might just get him to notice you.'

I opened my mouth to protest that I wasn't trying to get Percy to notice me, but what came out instead was, 'He knows. I mean, he knows what I feel about Luke. When—when we first met, he already noticed.'

'Oh.' Thalia sounded like I'd just stolen the wind out of her sails. 'When you first … then you do like—I mean, even then—'

I thought of the way Percy had looked last year, when I'd kissed his cheek after we won our chariot race; of his grinning face welcoming me to Brooklyn. My cheeks burned. I was glad I'd turned off
'I guess I missed a lot,' Thalia said. She seemed to be half talking to herself. 'Were the two of you actually—no, he wouldn't have, right? Not with the age difference. But I didn't know you still liked —'

Age difference?

'Stop,' I said, realising we'd been referring to two completely different boys. 'I don't. Not any more. Not after he tried to kill us.'

Thalia didn't answer. Whether this was because she didn't believe me, or she was turning over that painful truth—he tried to kill us—in her head, I couldn't tell.

My own words felt like a lie. Maybe because they were. I didn't think I had a crush on Luke any more, but it wasn't true that I no longer felt anything for him. Even after everything he'd done, part of me still couldn't let go of him, of the Luke who had so often been there with a comforting hug, or a thoughtful gift, or just to ask about my day.

Of the Luke who had rescued me after weeks of fending off monsters on my own, promising me a family.

'I wish I could ask him why,' Thalia said, so softly I almost missed it.

I knew how she felt.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know it was probably Windows Vista or Windows 7 by this time, but I always figured schools take a while to catch up. Current software is expensive, after all! Besides, I really hate all the Windows interfaces after XP, so there.

Melanie's trick with the illicit websites … yes, I admit I totally stole that from It's a Boy Girl Thing (which is rated PG-13, so I figure my chapter rating here is pretty safe, considering there's a lot more in there than just the dirty webpage trick).

Speaking of movies, The Labyrinth isn't a real one. Well, the 1986 film is, but there is no remake with Keira Knightly. But you get a blue cookie if you can guess who the Native American actor in Elise's poster is supposed to be!

And yes, this chapter was a handy excuse to watch Lilo and Stitch again and take notes. I defy anyone to listen to that line while thinking about Annabeth, Luke, and Thalia, and not start crying.
Thalia Meets Her Dad

Chapter Summary

Thalia receives a summons to Mount Olympus.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When we drove up to Half-Blood Hill on Saturday morning, Clarisse was standing at the crest, feeding Peleus, the guard dragon. Terse as always, she greeted us with a, 'Took you long enough to get here.'

I raised my eyebrows. She was the one who'd been in Phoenix the past few weeks without bothering to let us know when she'd be back.

'We gotta talk,' she said importantly.

'I'm supposed to meet Chiron,' Thalia said. 'Can it wait?'

Clarisse crossed her arms. If it had been anyone but Thalia (namely Percy), she would probably have told them it was none of their business anyway—accompanied by half a dozen death threats. As it was, she scowled and said, 'It's Annabeth I need to talk to anyway.'

'Go for your lessons,' I said to Thalia. 'I'll fill you in later.'

We parted ways at the Big House. Thalia went in to meet Chiron for her private training, while Clarisse led me to the climbing wall.

'I thought you said you wanted to talk?' I asked. The climbing wall was probably my least favourite of all the camp's training equipment. It had a nasty habit of spewing hot lava—the kind the harpies used to scrub our dishes—as an incentive to speed climbers up the wall. I think the harpies got a kick out of it, vindictive as they were about not being allowed to eat us.

'Don't want to be overheard.' Clarisse slung her spear over her shoulder and started to climb.

Sighing, I deposited my bag clear of any lava spills, and followed her.

Once we reached the top, safely out of reach of lava fingers and eavesdroppers, I asked, 'So what did you find out in Phoenix.'

Clarisse glowered at me. 'Chris isn't fine, thanks for asking.'

'That's what I meant,' I lied quickly. 'Is he still, um—'

'Crazy? Yeah.' Once again, Clarisse looked uncharacteristically morose. 'Nothing we did made any difference. Gave him as much nectar and ambrosia as we dared—no change. Hedge tried some nature shit that put him to sleep for a bit, but when he woke up he was raving again.'

'Did you find out what he meant, about the string, and Mary, and how he ended up in the desert?'
'Will you just let me tell the story?'

I held up my hands and gestured for her to go ahead.

'We couldn't get anything sensible out of him so Hedge and I went back to the rez to look for clues. We found this abandoned building. There was a weird trapdoor inside. Like, I dunno, it wasn't really a door, more like a big stone, and it didn't do anything when Hedge sat on it, but when I touched it, it just, like, lifted up and tossed him off.'

'What was under it?'

'I dunno.'

Beneath us, a tongue of lava flickered up several feet. Clarisse brought her feet up to rest on a higher climbhold.

'It was a hole,' she amended. 'Just this black hole in the middle of the building. I was gonna see what was in there, but Hedge wouldn't let me.'

I raised my eyebrows. It wasn't like Clarisse to back away from anything. And while I didn't know Hedge as well, he didn't seem like the type either.

'Did something in there, er, scare him?'

'No one was scared, wiseass,' Clarisse growled. 'He's a satyr. They get crazy weird about underground spaces.'

The lava hissed as it retreated down the wall. It almost sounded like it was laughing.

'But that must be how Chris got to the desert,' I said. I tried to picture it—Chris emerging from a dark hole in the ground, a tunnel maybe, that led from … where?

For some reason, the image of Elise's wall poster imprinted itself over my mental picture. The tall, strong actor beckoned to me, to a maze of twisting walls in the background.

*The Labyrinth.*

I knew the story of the Labyrinth well, of course—the real one, not whatever blockbuster my classmates had watched. Its creator, Daedalus, was one of my mother's most famous children due to his prowess as an architect and inventor. And the maze itself was a hallmark of ancient architecture. It was said to have a life of its own—an old demigod had described it to me once as 'living, breathing architecture.' No one really knew what had happened to it, but something as monumental as the Labyrinth could well have passed along in the memory of civilisation like the archetypes Chiron always spoke of. They shifted with the seat of the West, the way Mount Olympus was now above the Empire State Building and the Sea of Monsters in the Bermuda Triangle.

*We are losing too many of them to the maze …* Was that was Kronos had been referring to in my dream?

'Whatever it is, he went beserk when we tried to ask him about it,' Clarisse said darkly, drawing me back into our discussion. 'He started to—to cry.' She looked highly uncomfortable with this. 'Said he'd never get out 'cause he didn't have the string and I had to help him or the walls would kill him.'

I shivered in spite of the heat rising from the lava below. 'Have you told Chiron about all this?'
Clarisse gave me a look like, *do you think I'm an idiot?* 'Of course I did. He was the one who said I should talk to you—only you.'

The flutter in my stomach was a mixture of pride and apprehension. Chiron valued my independent judgement enough to ask Clarisse to consult me alone. But he also wanted us to keep it to ourselves … which meant he thought the situation was highly dangerous.

I didn't want to make a mistake assessing it.

'It sounds like there's a—an underground tunnel.' I decided not to bandy about the word *Labyrinth* until I was sure. 'And Chris was, I don't know, scouting it or something?'

Clarisse let out a bark of laughter. 'Whatever it is, there's something down there that messed him up good.' She fingered the tip of her spear like she wanted to shove it into the monster responsible for Chris's state.

I ran through what we knew so far: the mystery hole that opened into an abandoned building in the desert, Chris's incurable madness, his incessant babbling about string …

String.

An integral part of the myth of Theseus and the Labyrinth was Ariadne's Thread.

Chris had been calling for a girl called Mary. Which sounded a whole lot like Ariadne if you weren't speaking clearly.

I had a sudden, dizzying desire to be back on firm ground. We were most likely dealing with the mysterious reappearance of an ancient structure that hadn't been seen for two millennia. I preferred not to discuss the subject while dangling over a lava pit.

'You know something,' Clarisse said, staring at me intently.

'How much do you know about the Labyrinth?' I said slowly.

'That's the maze, right? With the bull man? The one Percy's supposed to have killed?'

'He *did* kill Minos's bull,' I corrected. That was another worrying thing. Percy had killed the Minotaur only a year ago. Could it have reformed already? 'I don't know if that's what Chris ran into, but a hole in the ground, possibly an underground tunnel, and a string that's supposed to guide you through it—' I sighed. The conclusion seemed inevitable. 'That all sounds like the Labyrinth to me.'

'But it's just a building, right? Didn't some ancient king build it in, like Crete? What's it doing in Phoenix?'

'Daedalus built it. And he's not a king, he just built it for King Minos.' I started to explain about the Western migration of ancient archetypes, but Clarisse's eyes glazed over. She lost interest even quicker than Percy—at least he actually tried to pay attention when I talked. Clarisse just waved her hand dismissively.

'Okay, whatever,' she said. 'So some monster maze reformed under Phoenix. Why *Phoenix*? There's nothing there but desert.'

I racked my brains for anything I knew about Phoenix, which wasn't much. 'I guess the other thing is, if it is the Labyrinth, why was Chris scouting it? He's working for the Titan army—' I saw Clarisse's mouth twist like she'd bit into a lemon, 'so it must be something they want.'
'Like the string he keeps going on about?'

I nodded. 'That's probably Ariadne's thread. Theseus used it to find his way in the Labyrinth. But I can't think why they'd want that, unless it's to lead them to something else. It doesn't have any other —'

'Ariadne?' Clarisse interrupted. 'But what about—' she took a deep, shuddering breath, 'Mary?'

'Well, I guess he might have been trying to say "Ariadne." It was her string, you see. She gave it to Theseus so he could get out."

'Oh.' Clarisse was so uncharacteristically thoughtful, I wondered if I'd missed a clue.

'Who do you think Mary is?' I asked.

Clarisse didn't answer. She swung herself down from her perch and began climbing down the wall. I checked the lava levels quickly before following.

'No one,' she said when we reached the bottom. 'You're probably right. He must've been talking about Ariadne's string.'

And that was the last I could get out of her on the subject of Mary.

OoOoO

Chiron agreed that Clarisse should return to Phoenix and scout out the Labyrinth.

We discussed the matter in the rec room, which had acquired a new ping-pong table since I'd last been there. Apparently Hermes had dropped it off this week. Judging from the weird burn marks it had along the sides, I suspected it was a reject from his delivery business.

'We must determine whether Chris was in the Labyrinth by accident or intent,' Chiron said. 'If it is the latter, I fear there is something about it that interests the Titan lord—which can mean nothing good.'

'Don' you know?' Clarisse asked.

Chiron smiled sadly. 'I do not know everything, my dear. And Kronos is the master of secrets and deceptions. If he is searching for something in the Labyrinth, it will be another piece in his multi-layered plans.'

'How do you know he doesn't just want the Labyrinth itself? Like, to throw his enemies in it like they did in the story?' Clarisse raised her chin at my surprised look. 'I know some things, okay.'

'Because the Labyrinth is first and foremost a maze, and the goal of the maze archetype has always been to seek the centre—and whatever it holds.'

'The bull man!' Clarisse guessed. She pounded her fist on the ping-pong table, making the balls jump. 'I'll pulverise it!' 'It can't be the Minotaur,' I said. 'Percy killed it.' Besides, why would Kronos seek out the Minotaur specifically when he already had an army of equally deadly monsters to serve him?

Indeed, our most valuable weapon rises from Tartarus as we speak.

Was the weapon the giant had spoken of hiding in the Labyrinth?
After some discussion, we agreed that Clarisse would undertake the scouting mission on her own. I was a little disappointed by this. Even though I couldn't simply run off to Arizona in the middle of the school year, this was the Labyrinth. It was my area of expertise—who else knew more about its architecture and history? Who had designed the hedge maze by the art and crafts cabin in tribute to it? Would I ever get another chance to investigate the holy grail of architecture?

But Clarisse was the logical choice for a scout. Phoenix was her hometown, which gave her the best chance of navigating it in search of clues.

'Use your knowledge of the city,' Chiron told her. 'If the Labyrinth has indeed situated itself there, you may be able to discern what serves as its new centre without even entering the maze.'

'I'm not scared to go in,' Clarisse claimed, though I noticed she was gripping her spear more tightly than necessary. 'I'll just pulverise anything I meet in there.'

'The stories tell of dangers more subtle than the archetypal monsters,' Chiron said. 'If you must enter, do so with caution. Go no further in than you can remember how to get out.' He made Clarisse promise to stay out of the Labyrinth if possible.

'And I'd like you both to keep this mission to yourselves for now,' Chiron added. 'It will be dangerous enough for Clarisse without risking our enemies learning that she is spying on them.'

'Can't I tell Thalia?'

Chiron considered this for a moment. 'We'll see.'

I remembered then the other thing the giant in my dream had said: *To find it, we will need a powerful half-blood.* The Titan army was on the lookout for Thalia. No other half-blood was more powerful than her, except maybe Percy. Perhaps it was better that she didn't get involved. No need to help Kronos find her.

A shiver ran down my spine. The mysterious monster reporting to Luke and the giant had claimed to have found two half-bloods in the same school. I hadn't picked up on it before, but … there were two of us at St Catherine's. What were the odds of another school with two demigods?

'Where is Thalia, anyway?'

'Mr D wanted a word with her.'

We found Thalia and Mr D outside, traipsing across the strawberry fields from the direction of the woods. Or rather, Thalia walked, while Mr D glided inches above the ground, causing the strawberries to enorge as he passed. The berries fell off the vines and collected in a woven basket that trotted along next to his floating feet.

Chiron took one look at the stony expression on Thalia's face and said quietly to me, 'I think Thalia may have enough to be troubled with right now.'

Thalia saw us on the back porch and ran to grab my arm.

'Can Annabeth come?' she asked Mr D.

Puzzled, I glanced between Chiron and Mr D. The latter looked supremely bored, and like he'd just gotten out of bed. Instead of his usual leopard-print track suit, he had on gold pyjamas with little purple dolphins swimming all over them. It looked totally out of place for a stroll in the woods, but then Mr D didn't exactly jog (or perform any form of exercise, for that matter) in his jogging suit
either.

Mr D said, 'Olympus isn't a place you just visit unannounced, girl.' He clapped his hands and the strawberry-filled baskets came flying through the creeper vines to land neatly at his feet.

'She won't be unannounced, she'll be with me!'

Mr D gave us a long-suffering look. 'Oh, Hades if I care. If Father doesn't like it, he can just zap her.'

'Zap me?'

Chiron cleared his throat.

'He probably won't.' Mr D sounded like he didn't care either way. 'There's so much paperwork involved these days when we zap mortals. Rhea knows why Hades is so touchy about accidental deaths these days.' He gave us another baleful look. 'Then again, it might be worth it to get rid of some of you brats.'

With a flick of his wrist, the strawberry baskets leapt to the card table on the porch. He disappeared into the Big House without another word.

Chiron sighed. 'Argus will give you a ride into Manhattan. He can do the strawberry deliveries while you're there.'

Fifteen minutes later, we were back in the strawberry van, trundling down Old Farm Road.

'Are we really going to Mount Olympus?' I asked Thalia. I'd only gotten to see the home of the gods once before, on a rare winter field trip. The chance to examine all that ancient architecture again was one I wouldn't pass up, especially since Mr D and Chiron deemed my chances of being 'zapped' very slim.

'Yeah.' Thalia was nowhere near as thrilled by the prospect. Argus had turned the radio to her favourite station, but she wasn't even humming along. 'My dad wants to speak to me.'

I wondered why Zeus couldn't simply materialise at camp. Or infiltrate her dreams or something. The other gods did that regularly. Maybe the king of Olympus had certain restrictions. Now that I thought about it, none of the Big Three gods ever showed up at camp. It could have been because they had no demigod children—until Percy and Thalia, anyway—but maybe that wasn't the reason. After all, the goddess Artemis had no children, but she had stopped by with her band of eternal maidens at least once in my memory.

'Have you ever met your dad before?' How had Thalia found out about her parentage? As far as I knew, she'd never been formally claimed. Yet when we'd met, she'd already known she was the daughter of Zeus. I'd never thought to ask her about it.

'Yeah,' said Thalia grimly.

'On Mount Olympus?'

'No, I've never been there.' Thalia plucked idly at a loose thread on her t-shirt. 'He used to come by a lot when I was a kid. Until … until he didn't. My mom—well, they fought a lot.'

It was weird to think about a mortal arguing with a god (though I guess my dad must have, when he'd tried to return me to Athena after she foisted me on him). I didn't know whether to be amazed that Thalia's mom had dared to fight with the king of the gods, or that Zeus had put up with it.
She must be a real force of nature. But then, so was Thalia.

'You never did tell me—when you went to find your mom in L.A., how did it go?'

Thalia yanked the stray thread from her t-shirt in a quick, violent motion. 'She died. When I was—you know. The tree.'

All of Argus's eyes except his normal two, which were fixed on the road, swivelled to Thalia in sympathy. My fingers drifted to the college ring on my camp necklace and toyed with it as I tried unsuccessfully to come up with something to say.

'It's fine,' Thalia said. 'It's not like I ever went back after I ran away. I just wanted to see if—well, there wasn't anything left.'

She reached forward and turned up the volume on the radio so that for the rest of the drive, the music was too loud for conversation.

The security guard at the Empire State Building gave us the special key card to Olympus as soon as Thalia said her name. The closer our elevator travelled to the magic 600th floor, the paler Thalia became. When the doors chimed open at the top, revealing the floating stone path that led from the elevator into the cloud-level city of the gods, she looked ready to puke over the side of it. I wondered if the mortals below would think it was bird poop.

'It'll be okay,' I told her. 'He's still your dad. He has to care about you.'

Thalia didn't answer. She lifted her chin resolutely as we crossed the floating path, keeping her eyes fixed on the majestic columns of the palace in the distance.

The streets of Olympus were just as busy as they'd been on my first visit. Immortals of all types and ages went about their daily business. Multi-fingered dactyls trotted by, pushing wooden carts filled with tools and raw metals. Satyrs lounged among the trees, playing their reed pipes and chasing the giggling dryads. Nephelae—cloud nymphs—drifted along like wispy ghosts. Hawkers who were probably minor gods lined the winding paths, flogging their wares.

The crowds thinned closer to the marble palace that was the official home of the twelve Olympians. (In actual fact, they were rarely all in residence there except during the Winter Solstice, when they had their annual council.) A pair of goddesses stood a little way from the steps that led into the main entrance, their honey-gold heads bent away from us as they argued.

'Wow,' Thalia said as we ascended the steps between the thick Doric columns that flanked the palace entrance. Inside, the throne room was at least five times the size of any mortal temple. The ceiling was so high, it could have been the sky itself. It was even painted an azure blue with streaks of gold crackling across it. Twelve thrones stood in a semicircle facing us, eleven of them empty. The occupied seat in the centre was the largest of all, made of blindingly white marble.

Zeus rose from his throne and came towards us. He must have been about six feet tall while seated, but he took mortal size when he approached. I guess that was a good sign.

Zeus nodded to Thalia, but frowned at me. 'I would speak to my daughter alone.'

Mindful of Mr D's threats about zapping, my legs bobbed in an awkward curtsey and I backed out of the throne room.

The two goddesses were still arguing near the palace steps when I came out. From this angle, I had a better view of one of them. She was familiar in the way runway models are—you get the sense
you've seen them before, but can't possibly put name to face. Her features were an attractive blend of
every girl I'd ever admired (and maybe even wished—very rarely, of course—I could look like).
Silena Beauregard's china-blue eyes resided in the sweet heart-shape of Izzy's face, complemented
by the lopsided single-cheek dimple that Percy had inherited from his mom. Soft waves of honey-
gold curls framed this enchanting combination. It was a rich, vibrant colour, as opposed to my own
airhead-blonde.

She was an artist's impression of the perfect woman. And I had most definitely met her before.

As soon as recognition set in, I crossed to the other side of the steps and ducted into the bushes, not
wanting Aphrodite to see me. My only encounter with the goddess of love had involved a charmed
pink scarf, a rehashing of the most embarrassing incident of my life, and some highly disturbing
speculation on how she could 'spice up' my love life. I wasn't keen to draw her attention again, any
more than I was to dredge up the Tunnel of Love debacle.

I could've sworn I'd met the other goddess before, too, even though her face remained turned away
from me. There was something about the way her fingers hovered near her mouth when she talked
…

As far as I could tell, their argument had something to do with stolen jewellery.

'… if I ever get my hands on that thieving—'

'Well, if you'd just keep a better eye on your things …' said Aphrodite.

'How in Zeus's name was I supposed to know it'd reform? I mean, Athena destroyed it ages ago!'

Their voices trailed away as they wanted off into the palace garden. I emerged from my hiding spot,
brushing leaves out of my hair, and sat down on the palace steps. For a brief moment, I wondered
what my mother had destroyed, but then my attention was diverted by the architectural smorgasbord
that lay before me. Here at the peak of Mount Olympus, I had a birds-eye view of all the ancient
monuments dotting the mountainside (not to mention the Manhattan cityscape, if I looked further
down). These were all the structures that had stood the test of time. They'd been immortalised in
civilisation by the beauty and longevity of their design, such that they were still copied and
represented in the modern buildings of the city underneath.

I found my notebook and started to sketch the sights. I drew at random, picking from the assortment
of designs available: the Doric columns of the Athena Parthenon; the guilloche mouldings on the
Erechtheion; the friezes adorning the temples.

After a while, I stopped to examine my sketches. I hadn't paid much attention to where I'd positioned
each individual sketch. They formed a convoluted sort of pattern on the page, with the gaps between
columns and spires twisting like a …

Like a maze.

I stared at the page.

The Labyrinth wasn't represented on Mount Olympus, maybe because it hadn't been constructed as a
paean to the gods. But it had appeared in my drawing anyway, hidden in the spaces between the
structures, carving its way into their heart.

'Hey.'

I looked up. Thalia stood at the top of the steps, her audience with her dad over. I snapped by
notebook shut and put it back in my bag.

'So what did he say?'

Thalia looked like she was wrestling with a tough decision. 'Stuff,' she said vaguely. 'It was kinda …' She shrugged. 'He asked how my training was going.'

As it seemed odd that Zeus would summon Thalia all the way here just for a fatherly chat about her life, I guessed there was something she wasn't telling me. I was about to pry further, but then I remembered what Chiron and I weren't telling Thalia about the Labyrinth.

I let it go. Knowledge could sometimes be a dangerous thing.

Only fifteen minutes had passed when we descended to ground level. Time in magical places always ran differently from the mortal world: just last summer, Percy and I had spent a few days in the Sea of Monsters, only to find a week had gone by in real life. More disturbingly, the year before, a couple of hours in a casino in Vegas had cost us five whole days. It was nice to experience the time discrepancy in reverse, though it meant we now had to wait for Argus to finish his deliveries and come back to fetch us.

Thalia didn't want to wait in the Empire State Building. 'I'm sick of skyscrapers,' she said. 'Let's go somewhere with trees.'

We made our way to Central Park, which was a brilliant splendour of fall glory. Trees were crowned red and gold, scattering leaves like largesse to the populace of children who stamped gleefully through the crisp piles. Joggers weaved through the paths, their track suits adding splashes of colour to the fall foliage. A few kids on scooters raced by, laughing, headed towards the park zoo. A little further up, a skateboarder was zooming across a junction, chased by a—

Shrill screams broke the tranquility of the late morning scene.

An escaped zoo hippopotamus was barrelling through the park.

The boy on the skateboard pivoted and swerved sharply to avoid a jet of spit from the rampaging hippo. His skateboard hit a pothole and flipped, sending him flying. He grabbed a low-hanging tree branch and clung to it as the hippo stumbled under him. The hippo's rump thudded onto the discarded skateboard and it went skidding across the path, looking like some bizarre cartoon caricature. The skating hippo collided with another tree and fell off, looking dazed. It shook its head in a most un-hippopotamously manner, rolled off the skateboard, and opened its mouth wide. The skateboard disappeared in a snap of its massive jaws.

'Hey! I saved all year for that!'

With an angry shout, Percy Jackson dropped from the tree and brandished his bronze sword at the hippo who'd eaten his skateboard.

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I just want to say a big thank you to those of you who have been commenting as we go along. It is truly rewarding when I get to hear your opinions on the chapters, especially the parts you liked or didn't. Or even just a 'hi, I'm reading' lets me know I'm not just
putting this out into an empty void. So here's a shout-out to Christinymous, thegoddessinzerogravity, populardarling, biocraft, Bond706, and RazeKaiser768. I really appreciate that you've taken the time to write a comment!
A Hippo Reads Our Future

Chapter Summary

Annabeth, Thalia, and Percy run into a strange monster.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Percy advanced on the hippo.

It pawed the ground with one stubby leg, eyeing Percy's trusty sword Riptide with its beady black eyes.

Thalia and I ran forward to help. The Mist cleared as we got closer. Instead of a hippo, I saw a stout creature with the same round, bulky body, but the head of a horse. Except where a normal horse's neck should have been, this monster had a pair of stubby tusks protruding half a foot outwards. The wrinkly skin covering its hippo body was the deep purplish-red of a bad bruise, covered with a glistening sheen of sweat.

Riptide swung through the air, slicing off one of the horse-hippo's tusks. The monster rolled back on its haunches and bit at the blade with its malevolent row of black teeth. With his sword clamped between the horse-hippo's jaws, Percy was jerked off his feet. He stumbled and fell flat on his face at the monster's front legs. The horse-hippo tossed Riptide aside (the sword sailed through the air and plunged into the trunk of a tree) and made a gargling noise, like it was working up a throat-full of phlegm.

With the fleet-footedness that had put her in high demand for the cross-country team, Thalia reached Percy first. She dove between him and the horse-hippo, activating Aegis. At the same time, Percy brandished his wristwatch, which expanded into a massive bronze shield. I had a brief glimpse of the designs etched onto its polished surface—my own likeness, among others, captured in a Grecian engraving of heroes in battle—before Thalia and Aegis collided with him and inadvertently knocked his shield out of his hand.

A splatter of blood-red horse spit splashed Thalia's shield and trickled down Medusa's ugly face. It dripped to the ground in thick globules, making random patterns at their feet: three lines forming a crude stick-table, a squiggly symbol that resembled an infinity sign, two curves intersecting in the shape of a mountain.

At the sight of Aegis, the horse-hippo went into a panic. It picked itself up on its stubby legs and trotted in a crazed circle, braying and spitting more blood-red phlegm all over the place.

'What are you doing here?' Percy demanded.

'Saving your ass,' Thalia retorted. She got to her feet and brushed loose gravel from her jeans.

'I had it under control,' Percy grumbled.

I picked up his shield, which shrank back into a watch. Riptide had already vanished from the tree. Percy's hand dipped into his pocket, where his magical sword must have reformed in its disguised
pen form. I handed him the shield-watch. He shook it at Thalia.

'I didn't need a shield.'

'Well, sorry for trying to help.'

Percy turned back to the horse-hippo, who had now spat a whole ring around itself of the same red blobs that had splattered Thalia's shield. (Medusa's face still bore bloody streaks.) They had fallen in curious patterns—a circle of symbols.

'Hey, Lard Tub!' Percy yelled. 'You owe me a skateboard!'

The horse-hippo responded by shaking itself like a dog. A wave of red sweat flew over, dousing us in a sticky, stinking shower.

'That's it,' Thalia spluttered. She shrugged off her monster-sweat-soaked jacket and elongated her spear. 'This thing needs to go back to Tartarus.'

Percy clicked his pen, which sprung back into Riptide. 'I'll distract it. You guys go for the kill.'

He waved Riptide at the horse-hippo like a matador taunting a bull. It bared its teeth and pawed at the ground again.

'That's right, Blubber Brain,' Percy challenged. 'Demigod snack right here.'

The horse-hippo waddled forward, out of its circle of spit.

Thalia and I split up, each taking one side of the circle. As I ran clockwise around the horse-hippo, the phlegmy ring it had produced rearranged itself into something meaningful. An 'E'. A small, cursive 'v'. One half of an infinity symbol. More letters like that.

Greek letters.

Something clicked in my head. A tale I'd read once, years ago, when I'd been obsessed with everything to do with prophecies.

But I didn't have time to think about it. Percy had met the horse-hippo's remaining tusk with his shield and sword, clamping it between them as he'd once done with Clarisse's electric spear, right before he'd snapped it. The monstrous tusk wasn't as easy to break. Percy held on for dear life as the beast tried to swing itself out of his clamp. His sneakers dug deep tracks into the dirt for purchase.

'Now!' he yelled.

Thalia and I let our weapons fly. My dagger and her spear soared through the air and stuck into each side of the horse-hippo's hide, embedding themselves into its round, fat flesh. At the same time, Percy released the monster's tusk and twisted Riptide so that he could jab it upwards into the horse-hippo's throat.

The monster gave a strangled, gurgling cry and exploded in a flash of grey. Percy's skateboard toppled out of its ashes and clattered to the ground inside the ring of red saliva. The bright red patterns emitted a brilliant glow. Now that I had recognised them as letters, I could read the ancient Greek writing:

*A circle of three bound in love and hate;*  
An unwitting choice will seal their fate:
One that threads grey through their hair.

I only got halfway around the circle before the writing, too, vanished like the monster that had created it. All that remained was its severed tusk, our bronze weapons, and the shower of sweat still clinging to our clothes.

Percy gathered up his skateboard and tucked it under his arm. Thalia retrieved her spear. I stared at the place where the circle of writing had been, trying to fix the lines I'd read in my memory.

'Er, Annabeth?'

'What?'

Percy held out my dagger. I took it, becoming aware as I did so of the crowd that had gathered in our vicinity, gawking and pointing at the three crazy kids with weapons. Jogging towards us from the direction of the zoo were two keepers in ranger uniforms.

I didn't know what the Mist had made of our little showdown with the horse-hippo, but it couldn't be good. With our luck, we'd be blamed for setting a zoo animal free and then murdering it. (Well, discounting the fact that it wasn't actually a zoo animal, this wasn't exactly untrue.)

Percy grabbed my hand. 'Run!'

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Percy led the way to an apartment on the Upper East Side. I'd seen it once before—well, spied on it from the fire escape. That had been an accident, but the memory brought a blush to my cheeks.

'Mom, I'm home!' Percy called. 'And I brought friends!' He looked over his shoulder at Thalia and me. 'Come on in. My mom doesn't bite, I promise.'

'We do have to meet Argus to get back to camp,' I said.

Percy's face fell. 'Right now?'

'I guess we could stay a few minutes.' I looked down at my filthy clothes. 'And maybe get changed.'

Sally Jackson's soft, kind face popped up behind Percy.

'Who—' she began, then she saw me and her smile widened. 'Oh, hello, Annabeth, it's good to see you!' Her eyes travelled up and down our bedraggled forms. If our filthy states disgusted her, she didn't let it show. 'And you must be Thalia,' she said, opening the door wider. 'Percy's told me so much about you. Please come in.'

We followed Percy and his mom into the tiny apartment. It was cramped but cosy, with walls painted a cheerful sunshine yellow and a living room full of mismatched armchairs that were adorned with squishy blue cushions. One of the chairs had an open laptop sitting on it; a coffee mug with WIRLS BES MOM painted on it in uneven letters balanced precariously on the armrest.

Sally gestured to the armchairs. 'Make yourself at home.'

'Um …' I picked at the damp edge of my t-shirt. 'We're kind of—'

I meant to say that I didn't want to dirty her cushions (I could imagine the fit Janet would throw if I tried to sit on anything in our home in my current state). But Sally misunderstood me.
'Oh, how thoughtless of me. You'll want to clean up, of course. Percy, can you show Annabeth to the bathroom? I'll get a towel, and I think I have some old clothes that'll fit you both—I'm afraid we only have the one bathroom, but go ahead and have a seat while you wait, Thalia. Really, don't worry about the mess. I promise Percy's done worse.'

'Mom!'

When I came out to exchange places with Thalia a few minutes later, dressed in Sally's old slacks and one of Percy's camp t-shirts, Percy had already changed into clean jeans and a blue shirt with a big, grinning fish splashed across the front. He had his shield open on the table and he was rubbing its surface with a cloth. It did indeed have my picture on it, as well as Percy and Tyson, his Cyclops half-brother. Our adventures from last year's quest were hammered into its face, making a beautiful Grecian mural. The intricate carving was the work of a master.

'Did Tyson make that?' I asked. 'It's beautiful!' And very flattering. I'd never been the subject of a mural before.

'Yeah. Handy, too, against that horse-hippo thing.'

'An Orobas,' I said.

Percy looked up from his shield. 'Oro-what?'

'Orobas,' I repeated. 'An Oracle demon.' I'd read about them when I was ten, right after I'd heard the Great Prophecy. Obsessed with figuring it out, I'd searched high and low for any information I could get on prophecies, oracles, or divination. My book had neglected to provide an illustration of the Orobas, which was why I hadn't made the connection until I read its salivary writings. 'It has prophetic spit.'

Percy raised an eyebrow. 'How does that work?'

I explained about the Greek writing and the lines I'd read in the ring of spit.

'Huh,' said Percy. He stopped cleaning his shield and frowned at the images. There was a light red smudge over one of the Laistrygonian giants Tyson had depicted me fighting. It had probably featured more Greek letters before he'd started rubbing the stain away. Now, it was completely indistinct.

'Well, it sounds like a good thing you were there to help,' Sally said. She set out three steaming mugs of hot chocolate and a plate of blue muffins. Her own mug had disappeared and her laptop was packed up. 'I'm sorry to be a bad host, but I have to run—I have a class to get to, and I was just about to go when you guys showed up. If I'd known earlier you were coming …'

'No, don't worry,' I said quickly. 'We'll be fine.'

'Stay as long as you like. There's plenty of food. Percy will get you whatever you want.'

Percy's eyes gleamed. 'Can we order pizza?'

'As long as you save me a piece.' Sally kissed Percy's cheek, gave me a quick hug, and headed out the door.

Percy and I looked at each other.

'Well,' I said.
'Yeah,' Percy mumbled. 'It's, uh, good to see you.'

In the awkward silence that followed, I became very aware of the fact that we were alone in his living room.

This was so stupid. Percy was my best friend. Less than an hour ago, we'd been fighting a monster together in our normal style. I'd wanted to see him again ever since he'd IM-ed me on my first day at St Catherine's. How could I suddenly be at a loss for words?

More for something to do than because I really wanted a drink, I grabbed a mug of hot chocolate. Sally had made it nice and thick, with plenty of cream and marshmallows on the top. Percy copied me and we both sat there swigging the sweet, warm liquid. A foamy white moustache appeared on his upper lip when he put his mug back down, making me smile. He grinned back, and I realised I probably had an identical one.

'You should have a muffin,' he offered.

'Are they as good as the cookies?' His mom had brought a whole basket to camp last summer.

'Better,' he promised.

'Don't mind if I do.' Thalia's voice made us both jump. She'd emerged from the bathroom in another pair of Sally's pants and a borrowed black blouse. I sat my mug down abruptly and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. Thalia shook her head at us. 'Sorry to crash the date.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' I snapped. To my mortification, my cheeks felt hotter than the chocolate.

'I IM-ed Chiron and told him where we are,' Thalia said, still looking annoyingly smug. She plucked a muffin from the plate. Through a large bite, she continued, 'He said we could stay until the evening if we liked. I thought you'd want to.'

'I don't—I mean, I do, uh—' I reached for my mug again. So did Percy. Our fingers brushed. It was like being near Thalia when she was channelling her electric powers.

Thalia smirked and took another bite of her muffin.

'Annabeth says the hippo thing was a prophecy demon,' Percy said quickly.

'Oracle demon,' I corrected. 'An Orobas.'

'Really?' Thalia sounded intrigued. She sank into Sally's vacated armchair.

I repeated the two lines of the prophecy for her.

Thalia shook her head. 'Can't make head or tail of that.'

'You're the Wise One,' Percy said to me. 'What do you think it means?'

'Well, it's kind of generic, isn't it? I mean, "a circle of three"—practically everything in the Greek world comes in threes: the Three Fates, the three Kindly Ones, the three judges of the Underworld—'

Percy grinned. 'The Three Stooges.'

'They aren't Greek, you idiot,' Thalia said. 'And there were three of us fighting the Orobas.'

"Bound in love and hate?" Percy glanced at me, then became suddenly interested in the muffin.
crumbs on his saucer. My cheeks burned again, though there was no reason why they should.

Thalia made an impatient noise. 'What about the next line—"an unwitting choice will seal their fate?" Or "threads grey through their hair?" Neither of those sound good.' She licked her lips nervously. My mind flickered over the Great Prophecy. One of its lines specified that Thalia would make a choice that could bring Olympus to its knees.

'My mom I always give her grey hairs when I scare her to death,' Percy said. Thalia gave him a dirty look. I don’t think she was keen to think about death in close proximity to choices.

'It's just as generic as the other line,' I said firmly. 'Like, people get grey hairs all the time. And, duh, the stuff we choose will have consequences. That's why wisdom is so important!

'Sure, Wise Girl,' Percy said. 'I'll remember to think long and hard whether to kill a monster next time it's trying to eat me.'

'I didn't say think about it for a long time! You just have to make a wise choice!'

'I'm just saying, you can think too much about stuff.'

'I don't recall you complaining when I was coming up with strategies to get the Golden Fleece. Or sneak into the Underworld.'

'None of which actually went according to plan.'

'That doesn't mean we shouldn't make a plan!'

'Geez, will you two just kiss and make up already?' Thalia said. I took a step back, my heart pounding. Somewhere during our argument, Percy and I had gotten to our feet. We were now standing face to face. Thalia helped herself to another muffin, grinning like she was watching an entertaining TV show.

When neither of us spoke, she said, 'Anyway, back to the point—prophecies are usually for quests, right? And none of us is actually on a quest, so maybe it doesn't apply to us.'

'Do me a favour,' Percy said, with an attempt at a laugh, 'don't accept any quests this month.'

I thought of Clarisse, who must have left on her scouting mission already. 'We might not have a choice.'

Percy and Thalia looked at me quizzically. I almost started to tell Percy and Thalia about Clarisse's mission, but then I remembered Chiron's admonition to keep it under wraps for now. Anyway, I couldn't see how the Orobas's prophecy would apply to Clarisse's task.

'I'm just saying, Kro—the Titan lord is out there, trying to bring down Olympus. If we have to stop him, we can't hang back to save our own skins.'

There was silence. Then Percy cleared his throat. 'Speaking of quests, what are you guys doing in Manhattan? Don't you, like, go to school in Brooklyn?'

Grateful for the change in subject, I explained about our weekend visits to camp and our excursion to Olympus. ('Better you than me,' Percy said to Thalia when he heard about her audience with Zeus.) The topic took us to school and what an all-girls' academy was like. Percy had been to boarding school before, but his schools had always had mixed enrolment. We had plenty of stories to trade nonetheless. He nodded in sympathy when I told him about Melanie, matching me story for story
with tales of the bullies from his own schools.

Once we actually got talking, the weird nervousness from before disappeared, and so did the time. When Argus honked for us downstairs, I was amazed at how quickly the afternoon had melted away. We’d caught each other up on two months’ worth of school stories and camp gossip (the way Beckendorf and Silena were currently dancing around each other was a hot topic), polished off all the muffins and ordered what Percy claimed was the best pizza in New York (he was probably right), and heard all about Percy learning to drive in his mom’s Mazda (I wondered if my dad would ever take the time to teach me).

‘You guys should, uh, come over more,’ Percy said. ‘Now that you’re in Brooklyn, I mean. Your school’s not too far from here, right?’

‘We go to camp on the weekends,’ Thalia reminded him. ‘Training to do and all that.’

An idea crept into my head. ‘Why don’t you come to camp for the weekends, too?’

Percy twisted his feet and stared down at them. ‘I—it’s kind of far. I mean, Mom would drive me if I asked, but she’s doing her writing class on the weekends, and if she had to take me all the way there and back—it’s two trips for her, and she’s got enough to do, you know?’

‘Oh. Maybe Argus could drop by for you after he picks us up, or before …’

Percy scratched his head. ‘I don’t wanna put him out either.’

‘Or maybe …’ My voice trailed off as I realised how desperate I must sound, trying so hard to get Percy to camp. Thalia was smirking again. My face reddened. ‘Never mind.’

Before we got into Argus’s van, I looked back up the fire escape to Percy’s apartment. There was a light on in the window. I thought maybe he was standing at it, watching us leave, but it was too high up to see clearly. In the twilight, the shadows over the building fell in an interlocking pattern. Maybe it was just a trick of the light, but they seemed to form familiar shapes. They weren’t from the lines of the Orobas’s prophecy, but the first oracle it had spat out, which I hadn’t consciously registered. Until now.

Three Greek letters—Pi, Alpha, Lambda—wound tightly around each other, wavering in the twilight.

Chapter End Notes

The Orobas isn’t technically a Greek demon, but I guess you guys are used to me co-opting creatures from various mythologies by now. Hey, I needed an oracular monster! I haven’t stayed completely true to the wikipedia definition, but ah well, artistic license. The three symbols Annabeth described are παλ. (No, I don’t know enough Greek to write out the actual prophecy in Greek, sorry.)

And Percy! I’m interpreting his line in TC—‘I hardly ever saw them’—as he did see them at some point, just very rarely. And as we’ve gone months since his last appearance (and it will be another month until the quest), I think it’s high time he showed up, yes? :)
Clarisse Makes A Long-Distance Call

Chapter Summary

Clarisse checks in from an unexpected location, and a school event is announced.

Chapter Notes

This chapter earns a higher rating because it expands on a Greek myth that … well, let's just say, that story isn't for the faint-hearted.

A letter arrived for me around the end of October, sent to the mail room at St Catherine's. It was addressed in my stepmother's neat, precise script, but it had to be from my dad. Janet had no reason to write to me.

The mail room was adjacent to what the girls called the 'double C'—Claymore Central, which was one of three large recreation rooms in the dorm C (one for each house). It was crowded and noisy that night, like someone had thrown an impromptu party.

The source of the excitement appeared to be a notice that had gone up on the main bulletin board. Plastered over the usual lost-and-found flyers, passive-aggressive complaint notes, and adverts for tutoring was a large poster featuring clip-art pictures of dancing girls within a cartoon border of leaves, turkeys, and pumpkins. Printed at the top were the words, 'JUNIOR THANKSGIVING FLING.'

'Isn't it great?' Elise bounded over to us. 'I've been looking forward to this since sixth grade!'

'A dance?' Thalia said dubiously.

'One that only eighth-graders get to attend.'

'You wouldn't be so excited if you had to be on the organising committee.' Izzy dropped glumly into a nearby armchair. 'Try being in meetings with Melanie Richards and her cronies.'

'Cheer up,' said Elise. 'At least it means someone sane is reigning them in.'

'We probably can't go,' I said. Most school socials were on the weekends, which meant Thalia and I had a convenient schedule clash.

'But you can't miss it!'

'They won't have to,' Izzy had an evil grin on her face. 'It's Friday afternoon, a week before Thanksgiving. No excuses.'

I shrugged and headed up to my room to read my letter, leaving Thalia to argue the point with Izzy and Elise.
As I'd guessed, the letter itself was in my dad's messy scrawl. He'd written a newsy epistle about his work at the university. Although he tended to be distant and distracted in person, my dad's writing was a lot more eloquent.

*I find myself missing you more now that it's fall. Having you at camp in the summer felt normal, but I guess I got accustomed to the idea that you'd be with us during the school year. I keep expecting you to be in my study in the evenings just like last year—you working on your homework, me on the paper I've finally submitted to the New England Journal of American History.*

I wasn't prepared for the wave of homesickness that crashed over me. It had never crossed my mind that I could be homesick for Richmond, when I hadn't thought of it as home for years.

Hanging out with my dad, though … I'd liked it more than I ever thought I would. He never peppered me with inane small talk, but when he started discussing his favourite topics—military history, mostly, though it was planes that really got him going—he had plenty of interesting things to say. He spoke to me about his research as though I was equal to any academic he'd ever discussed it with. I wasn't sure if this was because he thought me as intelligent as his colleagues or because he'd just forgotten who he was talking to. Either way, I liked that he never spoke down to me.

I pictured him scrawling out this letter at his desk, stopping occasionally to fiddle with his model planes, the way he did whenever he was thinking about how to craft a specific paragraph. I imagined him sticking the finished letter in the envelope and then getting distracted by something on his desk, absent-mindedly putting the letter aside. He would have completely forgotten to address and post it until Janet came by to tidy up and found it lying there. She must have taken care of mailing it.

*I actually presented that paper at the conference the week before you left for school. Some exciting news about that: soon I won't just have my model planes to play with, but real live Sopwith Camels. One of my reviewers put me in touch with Tim Morley at USF, who agrees with my take on the significance of the Camels in the Battle of Ypres. Better yet, we managed to secure a research grant that will allow us to purchase a fleet of Camels. We'll be able to investigate their manoeuvrability and prove our hypothesis. Of course, this would mean moving out to San Francisco to join him, but …'*

The letter fluttered from my fingers. The feeling of homesickness evaporated, replaced by a sick churning in the pit of my stomach.

San Francisco.

He couldn't seriously be considering … the most dangerous city possible for demigods … surely I'd told him about it before?

My hands were trembling as I picked up the letter. It took me some time to find the paragraph I'd stopped at; the letters were more jumbled than usual.

*Of course, this would mean moving out to San Francisco to join him, but giving up a tenure track position here to head up a new research team across the country isn't an easy decision.*

*Tim's given me until Thanksgiving to decide, so I'll keep thinking about it.*

The churning in my stomach settled slightly. Surely my dad wouldn't actually decide to move to a city that I couldn't live in.

Or would he?

I knew how much he loved his military aircraft research. Would he give up this opportunity if I told
him it meant I couldn't stay with him any more?

I read his final paragraph, which asked me to come home for Thanksgiving—the week after the Junior Fling. Surely that meant he did care more about me than his planes.

At least, that was what I tried to convince myself.

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A few weeks later, I had even more reason to fear a move to San Francisco. We finally heard back from Clarisse. In the month she'd been away, I'd scoured the Greek mythology section in the school library and dug up every reference in the cabin six encyclopaedias for details on the Labyrinth. There were at least five conflicting versions of Theseus's adventure in the maze, and most of them were more keen to describe his showdown with the Minotaur than the path he took to get there.

Only one account elaborated on the actual construction of the Labyrinth itself. It was first and foremost a prison for the Minotaur, but King Minos had appropriated it as an execution chamber for convicts—and later on, a gladiator arena for Athenian tributes. It wasn't simply a prison block; it was the prototype for future mazes: confusing, misleading, and impossible to navigate. The histories estimated that as many prisoners had died wandering it as had actually fallen to the Minotaur.

Nothing was recorded about how Daedalus had managed to accomplish this, but he was a genius way beyond his time. With the insane number of things he'd been credited with inventing in his lifetime, I bet he'd built in all sorts of secret contraptions in the walls.

Only twice had there been a Labyrinth jailbreak, and Daedalus had had a hand in both. First Theseus, with the thread Daedalus had given Ariadne, then Daedalus himself, flying out with his son Icarus.

(Yes, Daedalus had to break out of the very prison he'd built for his king. Minos must have been a real jerk.)

Clarisse listened to all this with a scowl. Only her face was visible in the Iris-message. After a month in Phoenix, she looked a lot worse for wear. 'Well, that may be what the stories say, but news flash: no one's flying out of there. It's underground. All of it.'

'But the original Labyrinth—'

'Archetypes evolve,' Chiron said gently. 'I've often wondered, for instance, if the London Underground was a manifestation of the maze. It certainly isn't navigable without a map. Perhaps the subway system in Phoenix …'

'It's not in Phoenix,' Clarisse said. 'Not all of it, anyway. Did any of that research tell you how big the blasted thing is?'

'Well, not exactly, but if it's a magical space like the Sea of Monsters—'

'It goes all the way up the West Coast. I guess it does, anyway. I dunno how, but I went in under Phoenix and popped up here.'

'You went in it? Clarisse, we discussed this.'

'I said I wouldn't go in unless I had to. And I had to. I wasn't finding shit outside. A week of searching and all I got was that same hole in the building on the rez, with that sign you drew me on the door.' She traced a triangle in the air—the Greek Delta.
'Was there anything else in the building?'

'Nothing. Mortal or magical. I searched it pretty thoroughly. Just that damned sign and that damned hole.'

Chiron sighed. 'So you went in.'

Clarisse nodded. 'I thought I was in the subway tunnels at first, like you said. But then the walls started to change, like first they were concrete, then brick, then real earth or something. It got crazy cold, too. I did what you said—just remembered how many turns I'd taken until I couldn't, but when I was heading back, I must've taken a wrong turn—might've gotten distracted by a dracaenae or two—because I thought I was coming out the same way I came down, but—well, you see.' She stepped back in the hologram, waving her hands around her. The focus of the image shifted to reveal a red steel bridge imprinted against an ominous black sky. Fog rolled down a massive mountain in waves of roiling grey.

Chiron and I stared at it in stunned silence.

'It's Frisco, all right,' Clarisse confirmed. 'And I dunno what's with the place, but it's crawling with monsters.'

'San Francisco has always attracted more than its fair share of monsters,’ Chiron said. 'The Mountain of Despair is always situated on the western edge of civilisation—'

'Well, they're swarming the docks in the bay. That's where I popped out. They were all heading to some cruise ship in the harbour.'

'The Princess Andromeda,' I said. 'Luke's ship. It has to be. Chris must have started out from here. I mean, there. But that means …'

'The Titans are in San Francisco,’ Chiron said. His eyes were fixed on the Golden Gate Bridge and behind it, the peak of Mount Tamalpais, disappearing into the fog. 'This isn't good. The place is dangerous enough as it is.'

'This place gives me the creeps,' Clarisse agreed. 'I'm gonna try and get back to Phoenix.'

'Do you have enough mortal cash for a bus?'

'I'll go back through the Labyrinth. It got me here quick enough. Plus I wanna get a better look.'

'I don't think that's wise,' Chiron said. 'Until we know more—'

'Yeah, well, Little Miss Genius there didn't manage to work out that it could do this, did she? We won't know more unless I—'

The image wavered. A pleasant female voice cut across Clarisse's: 'You have run out of credit. Please deposit one drachma to continue the call.'

We heard Clarisse curse in the background, and then the Iris-message fizzled out.

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When we got back to school at the end of that weekend, Thalia and I stumbled on what seemed to be the tail end of a fashion parade on our dorm floor. Girls ran from door to door in glittering dresses and various states of make-up.
It was obviously something to do with the Thanksgiving dance. In the past week, Fling Fever had spread through the school faster than an outbreak of chicken pox. It was like Silena Beauregard and her Aphrodite siblings had replaced our classmates. Everywhere we went, the dance was the sole topic of conversation. Girls discussed dresses and hairstyles in the halls between class. Even the Baxtor bookworms were caught up in it, joining in debates about the best dance beats and must-have snacks.

From the snatches of conversation we caught, the weekend boarders had cajoled the teachers into taking them on a shopping trip downtown.

'They weren't keen to chaperone us,' Cheryl admitted. 'I think they're sick of listening to us talk about the dance.'

'You think?' Marissa snorted. 'Colbert banning all dance-related talk in class wasn't a clue?'

'Yeah, well, he's a guy.'

'Remind me again why you're so keen to have boys at the dance?' Izzy said with her eyebrows raised. She'd done herself up with silver eyeshadow and thick mascara that made her eyes pop. It struck me again how very pale they were. Almost as if you could see right through her irises.

'I heard the seniors actually get to bring dates to their dances.'

'No, that's not true. They just get to have joint dances with Truman Academy.'

'That's even better!'

'Oh my god, some of those guys at Truman are totally dreamy. Remember when they had the junior nationals there—'

I didn't know what Truman Academy boys looked like, but my mental date to the dance had messy black hair and a roguish smile with a single dimple in his right cheek. I ducked my head and pretended to be examining my fingernails so no one could see me blush.

'Boys,' Izzy sniffed. 'Like they even know how to behave at a dance.'

Two of my cross-country teammates exchanged furtive smiles. I saw their pinkies brush and guessed that some of us wouldn't care that our dance was girls-only. Nor would they lack a date, even if they might hide it from Melanie's homophobic radar.

Cheryl was eager to get back to the shopping trip. 'Well, Seunis took us to Soho in the end.'

'Seunis?' Thalia's jaw dropped. 'That stick in the mud?'

'She's not so bad outside class. She actually volunteered to chaperone the dance as well.'

Maybe I needed to revise my opinion of Ms Seunis. She'd been keeping an annoyingly close eye on me since the porn fiasco, but I guess she must have a softer side.

'Anyway,' Cheryl said, 'how about you two? Did you get any shopping done when you went home?'

'Er—' Thalia and I exchanged a look.

'Not exactly,' she said. 'What's wrong with this?' She gestured at her black jeans and leather jacket.

'Oh, come on,' Marissa said. 'You're always wearing the same old thing. Don't you have anything
'Hey, don't diss the jacket,' Thalia warned, tugging on her lapels. 'It's vintage.'

'Yeah,' I teased, 'it's older than we are. Timeless.'

Thalia shot me a look that was half-exasperated, half-amused. Then an evil grin spread across her face. 'You know who you should totally make over?' she told Marissa. I realised half a second too late what she was up to. 'Annabeth.'

'No—Thalia—' My protests were drowned out by Marissa and Cheryl's excited squeals.

'Ooh, yes, your hair's gorgeous, Annabeth! And if you just had something cute to wear …'

I had a fleeting image of Nia and her wedding necklace. Then it gave way to a memory of the only makeover I'd ever had in my life—last summer, on Circe's island spa. But what stuck in my mind wasn't the vision of beauty her attendants had transformed me into—it was Percy's dumbstruck, admiring look when he saw me.

Maybe that was why I let the girls talk me into sitting at Izzy's dressing table while they straightened my unruly hair and powdered my cheeks. Patricia Longhorn, the only girl in eighth grade taller than me (she was a veritable Amazon, who could give Clarisse a run for her money, size-wise) lent me a silky, strapless green dress she'd outgrown.

By the time they'd finished, I wasn't quite as lovely as when Circe had worked her magic, but I thought I came close. Feeling self-conscious, I patted the elegant bun into which Cheryl had pulled my carefully straightened hair.

'I'm good, aren't I?' she said with relish. She pursed her lips at my reflection in the mirror. 'But you need one more thing.' She produced a pair of dangly earrings and held them up to my ears. 'Perfect.'

'But I don't have pierced ears.'

'That could be rectified.' Izzy's eyes gleamed. Her own earrings, normally colourless fillers during school time, were shaped like little golden deer.

'But—'

'Not scared, are you?' Thalia smirked at me.

'Are you gonna do it?' I shot back.

She shrugged. 'Yeah, why not? I want two in one ear, though.'

Izzy clapped her hands together. 'I'll get the needle!'

I turned to Thalia. 'Are you serious?'

'Why not?' She examined her ears in Izzy's mirror, as though picturing ear studs in them. 'I always thought it'd look cool.' She waggled her eyebrows at me, her expression remarkably like Percy's when he was egging me on for some challenge. 'Go on. I dare you.'

I lifted my chin. 'Fine.'

Izzy returned with a needle in one hand and a cup of ice with a few apple chunks in the other. She waved at the ice cubes. 'Put that on your ear,' she instructed us.
While we iced our ears, she dipped her needle expertly into an opaque bottle.

'Is that *alcohol*?' I asked incredulously. Not that sterilising the needle was a bad idea, but I couldn't imagine how she'd gotten her hands on contraband like that.

'Nah. It's—uh—medicinal. My guardian's a h—I mean, a doctor. She wanted me to always have something to clean up scrapes and stuff.'

I narrowed my eyes. I couldn't have sworn she'd meant to say something other than 'doctor'. No one else seemed to notice the slip.

'Your guardian?' I asked.

Something flashed in Izzy's eyes, a shifty expression so brief that I would have missed it if I hadn't already been on the lookout for anything strange.

'My parents died a long time ago,' she said lightly. She pulled the needle out of the sterilising solution. 'Okay, good to go. Who's going first?'

Ten minutes later, Thalia and I were both sporting brand new holes in our ears (multiple studs adorned hers). The curfew bell went, depriving me of the chance to dig further into Izzy's background. Izzy took up her mantle of dorm monitor and ushered us back to our rooms before the teacher on duty could catch any of us breaking curfew.

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In my dream that night, I was wearing Patricia's green dress and my hair was up in Cheryl's elegant bun. Emeralds dangled from my ears, next to two loose curls that fell from my bun. The light touch of a golden, jewel-encrusted necklace adorned my throat.

Percy held my hands and looked down at me. This was the first indication that I was dreaming. In real life, he wasn't much taller than me, if at all. But the dream gave him a few extra inches, just the right height for me to rest my head on his shoulder if I so chose.

'You look nice,' he murmured.

Soft chords of music struck up in the background. Percy's hands drifted to my waist and we began to twirl in a slow circle.

The pace of the music accelerated, and so did our feet. A motley collection of couples passed in and out of my view as we spun around the dance floor. Some of the couples were unexceptional (like Silena Beauregard and Charles Beckendorf, on whom the Stoll brothers from cabin eleven had a betting pool for when they'd finally admit to liking one another). Others were absurd (Grover went limping by with Clarisse, who seemed to have him in a stranglehold). Izzy waltzed by with Thalia and yelled at me, 'We don't need boys here!'

Melanie minced over on Luke's arm, sniggering. 'Who's your boyfriend, loser?' she hissed at me.

'How could you, Annabeth?' Luke fixed me with sorrowful eyes and shook his head.

I opened my mouth to ask what he was talking about, but suddenly Ms Seunis was looming over all of us, three times her usual size, her arms crossed and her most forbidding expression plastered across her face. 'You don't go here!' she announced, placing her hands on Percy's and Luke's shoulders. She dragged them away.
Izzy cut in and kept me turning in a circle on the dance floor.

'Izzy, stop!' I gasped. She was spinning me around so fast, it felt like I was in one of those playground saucers that revolved at dizzying speeds. Her arms rippled, becoming solid and muscly. Her legs morphed into thick thighs and large, swollen feet. Only her eyes stayed the same, their pale white shining out of a lined, bearded face, like an older, male version of herself.

'You are the most beautiful woman in the room,' my new dance partner whispered. 'I would have slain a hundred Sphinxes to claim your hand.'

He wasn't looking at me, but at the golden necklace I wore. My eyes drifted down to it. The jewels embedded in the soft gold shone like they were backlit by moonlight.

I knew this necklace.

The orchestra struck up a discordant tune. Violins wailed in a chorus that would have deterred the most persistent of Stymphalian birds. My dance partner pushed me away. He had turned into Percy, who gave me an accusatory glare.

'You lied,' he said in a voice so wounded, it seeped like poison into my heart. I knew instantly that I had committed an unforgivable crime, something so indecent that it angered the gods themselves. My necklace tightened around my neck like a noose.

'I can't even look at you,' Percy said, pushing me aside. Hot tears obscured my vision. As Percy turned away from me, he blurred into three people at once: himself, and Luke, angry blue eyes flashing in his scarred face, and the man with Izzy's eyes, drowning me in his fathomless irises.

All three shades grabbed at my arm, where my dagger was sheathed. I had no time to scream before they snatched it up and plunged it into their own eyes, one after the other. Blood poured out in a flood of gory tears.

They staggered from the room. I tried to follow, but to my horror, the necklace had become a rope, jerking me towards the ceiling. I kicked and clawed at my throat in a panic, but the noose held fast.

My vision swam again. Shadowy figures appeared and cut me down. Their features danced in and out of focus, in brief flashes of shapes and colours.

'Leave, child,' said a woman's lightly accented voice. A streak of reddish-orange whipped through the air as she tossed her head. 'This is no sight for you.' She had a thick ponytail—or was it two? Three? My vision was so blurry.

I had a single glimpse of a girl who resembled Izzy before she covered her face and ran, sobbing, from the room.

Hands caressed my neck, reaching to undo the noose. It came away as the golden necklace, lifted from my dying body. More footsteps sounded. Someone else had come—a lean, sandy-haired man.

'It is yours now,' the woman whispered. 'Your inheritance, from your mother. Take it, Polynices.'

My last sight was of Polynices's hands closing around the golden necklace. The two snake heads on the clasp hissed in triumph.

I woke with my hands still clutching my neck.

What was I supposed to make of my dream? Half of it seemed like the product of my brain on a
sugar high. The other half … I shivered. I still didn't know who the unknown people were—the man with Izzy's eyes, the mysterious Polynices, whom I'd last seen dying in a pool of his own blood.

And the necklace. Nia's necklace.

Why did I keep dreaming about it?

I had no answers.
Chapter Summary

Annabeth's first school dance doesn't turn out quite as planned.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dance day arrived. The organising committee had gone all out with the decorations—the school gym was practically unrecognisable under the streaming banners that festooned the bleachers. The usual ceiling lights had been dimmed so that the fairy lights that had been strung overhead looked like stars winking down at us.

Nearly every eighth-grader was here, relishing the opportunity to turn out in heels and miniskirts and not get yelled at by the teachers. Pop tracks blasted from the speakers while the enthusiastic DJ—one of the senior classwomen—encouraged us to hit the dance floor.

Only a few girls had actually done so; most of us were gathered in tight huddles along the walls and bleachers. Tables had been set up there, heavily laden with bowls of punch, trays of finger food, and cornucopia-style centrepieces.

'I don't see what the hype was about,' Thalia remarked, snagging her tenth hot dog roll from the large platter next to us. She'd let Izzy talk her into swapping her favourite jacket and jeans for a pair of black leggings and a baggy shirt that hung off one shoulder. It was artfully distressed, and had an explosive pattern of luminescent dots that resembled a supernova. With the new silver loops in her ears and the striking black eyeshadow she'd applied, she actually looked quite pretty.

I smoothed the skirt of Patricia's green dress and turned to look at the crowds of students roaming around arm in arm. The dangling hoops in my ears swayed back and forth when I moved my head. It was a funny sensation, but not altogether unpleasant. This earring business was growing on me.

'I guess it's something different. Plus, we get to skip Computer Science.'

'No escaping Seunis, though.' Thalia jerked her head towards our fiery-haired teacher, who was one of the three chaperones (along with Mrs Stimpson and the long-suffering Mr Colbert). Ms Seunis had actually let her hair down for the occasion (literally—it fell in waves around her shoulders) but she was still dressed in her usual smart blouse and pencil skirt. She wove among the knots of giggling girls, trying to break up the cliques and encourage us to mingle.

'Crap, she's coming this way,' I said.

'Let's go dance, then,' Thalia suggested. Izzy and some of the archery team were already on the dance floor. Thalia dragged me over to them. An upbeat song was playing as we joined their hip-shaking, arm-waving group and tried to copy their actions.

The rhythm of the song accelerated at the end. Someone cried, 'Twirl time!' Everyone grabbed their nearest friend. Laughing, Thalia grabbed both my hands and swung me around in an exuberant, if clumsy, circle.
I had a brief moment of panic as I remembered the terrifying spinning from my dream, but it passed. The track ended. Everyone was still laughing. Breathless and dizzy, we made our way over to the punch table. A group of Richards girls (at least, I thought they were Richards girls; it was hard to tell when no one was in house colours) were monopolising the punch. Ms Seunis shooed them away when she saw us approaching.

'Enjoying yourselves, girls?' she said, ladling out punch into little paper cups for us.

'Uh huh.'

Ms Seunis looked between Thalia and me. 'Try to mingle more,' she admonished. She gave me a little push in the direction of a bunch of girls trading cards near the food table. Thalia, she herded towards a pack in the bleachers who looked like they'd managed to find something stronger than punch. She was about to redirect Izzy, who was right behind us in the punch queue, to a different group as well, when Izzy tripped. In the most precise display of clumsiness ever, Izzy caught the edge of the punch ladle as she flung out her arms to catch herself. The ladle flipped out of the bowl, flinging punch all over Izzy … and Ms Seunis's clean, white blouse.

'Oh, sorry!' I thought I heard a hard edge to Izzy's voice, but another loud song had just started up, so I couldn't be sure.

Ms Seunis looked like she was exercising immense restraint to keep from lighting into Izzy on the spot. 'It's all right,' she said stiffly. 'Let us go clean up.'

She placed a hand on Izzy's shoulder and marched her towards the exit. I caught Izzy's eye as they passed, meaning to give her a sympathetic look. But the expression on Izzy's face froze my own. She didn't seem at all troubled; rather, she was nearly triumphant, like she'd solved a particularly thorny puzzle.

They were gone so quickly that I couldn't verify what I'd seen, but the back of my neck tingled in warning.

Thalia re-joined me and we took our punch to the benches by the side of the gym, near the doors to the equipment storeroom.

'Score one for Izzy,' Thalia said, grinning over her punch. She drained the cup. 'You know, I actually went to a dance once.'

'Really?'

'Yeah, Luke and I ended up crashing one in—oh, I think it was in Charlotte? I don't remember. But we snuck in to hide from this crazy warthog and we just had to blend in. Of course, that was a mixed dance, not like this, or Luke would've been in real trouble.' Thalia got a faraway look in her eyes, a bit wistful, but also a bit hard.

'We had a dance at camp once,' I said. It had been the summer after Luke's quest, when Chiron's Party Pony relatives had come to visit and organised a prom, to the delight of the Aphrodite cabin. I'd still been the youngest kid at camp, then. I remembered wandering aimlessly around the amphitheatre and chugging endless goblets of punch because nobody bothered to ask the nine-year-old dance. Until Luke found me and pulled me into a dance not unlike the spinning Thalia and I had just done.

Thinking about Luke made goosebumps stand out on my bare arms. Or maybe the temperature in the gym had actually dropped a few degrees. The atmosphere was different, somehow.

A commotion had broken out at the punch table, where Izzy's spill hadn't yet been cleaned up. A
couple of girls were arguing in increasingly loud voices. Melanie Richards was one of them. She shoved one of her friends' shoulders. The girl shoved her back.

That was strange. Melanie was always surrounded by a pack of sycophants. I'd never seen a single one of them stand up to her.

I looked around. Ms Seunis hadn't returned, and both Mrs Stimpson and Mr Colbert had vanished, too. The DJ stopped the music to go break things up, but to my surprise, once she got there, she simply joined in the fight. In fact, all the girls were now moving towards the punch table, squabbling at the top of their voices.

'Something's wrong,' Thalia whispered. 'Do you feel that?'

'Monsters?' It was hard to tell in the gym. Even the dance organisers hadn't been able to eliminate its perpetual dirty-socks smell.

'I'm not sure.' Thalia got up, placing one hand on her bracelet.

Melanie's voice rose above the din: 'It's mine! I saw it first!' She broke away from the angry crowd, moving towards the dance floor.

Esther McGuire tackled her and snatched something out of her hands. 'Over my dead body!'

Someone else yanked on Esther's hair and pulled her back into the melée. The entire eighth-grade population of St Catherine's seemed to be transformed into howling maenads, intent on tearing each other to pieces in their scrabble for the coveted golden object.

I climbed onto the bench to get a better look. The object of contention was tossed briefly into the air between grappling hands. It was a circle about the size of a dinner plate, glittering with gold and jewels. An ornate necklace with an eagle-shaped clasp that ended in a pair of snakes' heads.

I knew that necklace.

But what was it doing here, in the midst of a bunch of mortals?

However it had appeared, it was now instigating a full-out brawl among our mortal classmates.

'We gotta get it away from them,' I said.

'No kidding.' Thalia ran forward into the screaming, shoving fray and elbowed her way to the centre, where Melanie and four other girls were engaged in a five-way tug-of-war for the necklace. It was a miracle that it hadn't been ripped apart by now. Thalia got her hands on it and yanked it out of everyone's grip.

The girls fell on her instead, pulling at her hair and tearing at her clothes. Thalia activated Aegis, but the image of Medusa did nothing to deter our classmates. Aside from the fact that they probably didn't even know who Medusa was, they were scarily focused on the necklace and only the necklace. The shield blocked Melanie and four other girls; everyone else crowded Thalia from behind.

Although she could probably have taken them all easily, she'd hurt a lot of our classmates in the process. And she'd have to drop the necklace to fight them off.

'Thalia, stop!' I reached among the bickering girls and grabbed her arm. 'Leave it—we need a better plan!'
The moment the necklace left Thalia's hands, the girls lost interest in her. I pulled her out of the frenzy.

'Holy Zeus, it's like they've turned into harpies!' She rubbed her scratched, bruised arms. 'Where in Hades have Seunis and the teachers got to?'

'They won't be any use, not if that thing's magical,' I said. 'Someone planned this.' It was too coincidental that Ms Seunis had been lured out of the gym just before the craziness had started. Too coincidental that Izzy had gotten her out of the way.

I shook my head. We didn't have time to worry about who had set this up and why just yet. 'We need to separate them first, then get the necklace away.'

'What's the plan, then?'

My eyes travelled across the gym, searching for anything that might help us. They landed on the storeroom door. The storeroom where all the sports equipment was kept—game balls, archery bows, volleyball nets …

'That's it!' I ran for the door and flung it open. The sports equipment lay in neat piles inside the storeroom. I went straight for the volleyball section, where the nets were folded up on a shelf. 'Get something heavy to weigh them down,' I told Thalia.

She caught on right away. While Thalia gathered up a small collection of baseballs and softballs, I dragged out the nets and began to weave them together. I made little loops at their ends and we wrapped in the balls so that we ended up with a few large throw nets.

'We need a way to fling it over them,' I said.

'I have an idea.' Thalia went to the shelf of archery equipment. She handed me a sheath of arrows. 'Tie these to the top of the nets.'

We emerged from the equipment room armed with bows and our unorthodox trapping device. I shot my arrows first, sending the nets into the air. Thalia had the tougher job—she aimed her arrows at mine, so that as the nets arched over the fighting crowd, she pierced the shafts, detaching the net from the arrows.

The nets fell over our fighting classmates, splitting them into smaller, trapped groups. They shrieked and tugged at the netting confining them, but slowly, the spell broke. The fighting began to subside. The girls who were separated from the necklace stopped clawing at each other and stared blankly around them. Finally, only the group who still had the necklace inside their net remained fighting. Thalia reached between the netting and plucked it out of their hands. At first, they yelled at her to give it back, but then their expressions turned dazed and unfocused.

Thalia held the necklace at arm's length to examine it. The light it gave off was almost holographic, like the surface of an Iris-message. I glimpsed my own reflection in its ethereal sheen—not sweaty and dishevelled as I undoubtedly was, but a vision of beauty equal to Helen of Troy, or even Aphrodite herself.

I had a sudden, powerful urge to snatch the necklace away from Thalia and fix it around my own neck.

Thalia dropped the necklace. The spell broke as it clattered to the floor. I blinked and shook the vision of my prettified self out of my head. (The complement to that image—Percy staring at me with...
unhidden admiration and awe—was harder to dispel.)

'That in Zeus's name …' Thalia's voice was shaky. I wondered what she'd seen in the necklace.

'We can't leave it lying around,' I said. 'Let's take it to camp. Chiron might know what to do with it.'

The harsh glare of electric ceiling lights filled the gym. I scooped up the necklace and stuffed it quickly into the pocket of my dress.

'What is going on in here?' Ms Seunis had returned, clean and punch-free. She stood in the open door next to the light switch, her hands on her hips. Her mouth fell open as she took in the students trapped under the volleyball nets and Thalia and me standing in the middle of the dance floor with the revolving disco lights centred on us like guilty spotlights.

Mrs Stimpson and Mr Colbert appeared in the doorway behind her, gaping at the scene. I had no idea why they'd left, but guessed that it had been Mist-induced. This whole situation reeked of magical intervention.

Ms Seunis strode up to us. 'You have some explaining to do, girls.'

'We—'

Ms Seunis put her hands on our shoulders. 'To Principal Kellis,' she said curtly. Her long nails dug into my skin. 'Come.'

She marched us out of the gym and down the halls of the sports C, leaving Mrs Stimpson and Mr Colbert to sort out the trapped students. Some of them had started to cry.

We ran into Izzy as we left the building. She was racing across the field that separated the sports C from the main building. This was even more suspicious. When and why had she left the sports complex?

'What happened?' she gasped.

'Miss Chase and Miss Brunner played a distasteful prank,' Ms Seunis said icily. 'I am taking them to the principal's office. You should return to the gym, unless you were involved in their mischief as well.'

Izzy shook her head quickly. She looked stricken, like she'd failed a pop quiz. I could feel her eyes following us all the way to the main building.

There was no way to explain our true involvement in the dance fiasco without sounding like we were insane. No one would believe that the entire eighth grade had just started fighting out of the blue—especially without producing the necklace that had instigated it, and I wasn't about to do that. Aside from not wanting it to be confiscated, I didn't know if it would have the same effect on Ms Seunis and Principal Kellis. The last thing we needed was to break up a fight between them. That would probably end in our suspension, at the very least.

We listened in helpless silence as Ms Seunis described the scene she'd walked in on and accused us of disrupting the dance with an elaborate prank. With no real defence, we could only hang our heads and accept our punishment: rescinded home privileges, and detention all weekend.

'Chiron is going to kill us,' I groaned when we finally got out of the office. 'And how are we going to take the necklace to him if we can't go to camp?'
'We've got worse problems,' Thalia said darkly. 'Someone planted that.' She gestured to my bulging pocket. 'And that means someone knows we're here.'

I tugged fretfully at my camp necklace. 'It doesn't make sense. If it's a monster, why didn't they just attack us?'

'Maybe they needed a distraction.'

The back of my neck prickled again as I replayed the events of the afternoon—and in particular, Izzy's actions. She'd never struck me as the clumsy type, yet she'd managed to trip herself up at the punch table.

Thalia looked trouble when I mentioned this. I could tell she didn't want Izzy to be an enemy.

'If it's her,' she said uncertainly, 'why now? We've been hanging out with her all term. If she's really a monster, wouldn't it be easier to just attack us during sports practice or something?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'But I think we'd better be on our guard.'

Chapter End Notes

Anyone guessed Izzy's secret yet? As for the necklace, I’m pretty sure everyone knows by now what it is (as if the title of this story wasn’t a massive clue), but I’m kind of hoping nobody knows yet where I’m going with it. Feel free to throw your guesses into the ring, though!
I Get Invited To Join A Special Clique

Chapter Summary

The mysterious enemy makes a move … and Annabeth learns Izzy's secret.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chiron wasn't happy when we told him we wouldn't be at camp that weekend. At least, I think he wasn't. It was hard to tell, as we'd caught him in the middle of a camp emergency. The climbing wall had malfunctioned, trapping several campers at the top while the lava levels kept rising. I barely had time to explain what had happened at the dance before he was pulled away to deal with the situation.

'Hang on to that necklace,' Chiron instructed me. 'You're right—it sounds like something I should have a look at.' He sighed. 'Come to camp at Thanksgiving break. Try to stay out of trouble in the meantime.'

Our first detention on Saturday was in the gym, where we had to clean the entire place top to bottom. Given the mess it had been left in the night before, this was no easy task. It took us the better part of a day to repair the nets, sweep up the trash, and scrub the floor. We even had to clean all the food platters and punch bowls. It was worse than KP at camp, even if we didn't have to scrub anything with lava. By the time we trudged back to the dorm C, the sun was low in the sky and all we wanted to do was collapse into bed.

However, we returned to a shock in the dorm. Our room had been completely tossed. The bedsheets and blankets were strewn on the ground. Our mattresses lay askew, as though someone had pulled our beds apart. Books and papers were scattered everywhere, our drawers were open with the contents upended onto the floor, and our closets showed clear signs of being ransacked.

It was just as well it was the weekend. Otherwise, we'd have failed dorm inspection in an instant. (And we certainly didn't need any more black marks on our record.)

Thalia swore and sifted through her stuff. 'Who'd do this?'

I examined our door. The lock was intact. Whoever had broken in hadn't done it by force. Either they had Hermes-worthy lock-picking skills, or …

My stomach turned over uneasily. 'Someone who had a key.'

Thalia looked at me in alarm. 'Izzy?'

'She's dorm monitor,' I said grimly. 'She has all the spare keys.'

'What was she looking for?' Thalia found her green diary and slammed it down on the table with a sigh of relief. 'Nothing's missing.'

'What do you think?' I tipped the edge of the troublesome necklace out of my pocket. It had been pure luck that I'd forgotten to put it away after showing it to Chiron during our IM. I thought about the three times the necklace had appeared in my dreams—as Nia's wedding present, looming over
the dying Polynices and his brother, and as a noose around my neck.

That last memory seemed to suck the air out of the room. I strode over to our open window and took a deep breath.

'It doesn't make any sense,' Thalia said. 'I mean, not that someone wants to make trouble with that thing—it's definitely bad news—but Izzy. She's been so nice to us all term. If she were a monster—'

'I don't think she's a monster. But she's not what she seems, either. Listen—' I told her about my dreams, including the weird man with Izzy's eyes (leaving out the bits about Percy, of course). The more I spoke about the necklace, the heavier it felt sitting in my pocket. We'd be able to talk to Chiron about it when we went to camp for Thanksgiving break next week, but waiting even a day to figure things out seemed untenably long. I wanted answers. And if Izzy had been searching for the necklace, she must have them.

'I think we should find out just what Izzy knows.'

But Izzy wasn't in her room, nor did she turn up at dinner.

'Family emergency,' Elise said. 'She got called away this morning.'

Izzy didn't return the next day either. I yawned my way through breakfast, having gotten little sleep all night. I'd been half-expecting a monster to burst through the window at any moment. Ms Seunis was supervising our detention today, so after breakfast, Thalia and I went down to the computer lab.

'You're cleaning the lab today,' she told us. 'But first,' she steered us inside, 'turn out your pockets.'

'Excuse me?' Thalia said.

'Do you think I'm going to risk a couple of pranksters planting tricks in my lab? Turn out your pockets!'

Thalia and I exchanged nervous looks. Besides the necklace—which I was most certainly not revealing—we also carried our demigod weapons. But Chiron had said to stay out of trouble. If we refused, we'd probably end up with another week's worth of detentions.

Ms Seunis crossed her arms and tapped her foot impatiently. I sighed and placed my Yankees hat and bronze dagger on the teacher's table. I felt a little prickle of alarm as the knife left my hand. It was almost as if my dagger was agreeing with me that this was a bad idea.

Ms Seunis glared at the knife. 'You're trouble, Miss Chase,' she said.

Thalia took out her mace canister. Ms Seunis caught her arm as she was laying it on the table. 'Take that off, too.' She indicated Thalia's bracelet. 'Jewellery is not to be worn during detention.'

Thalia slid Aegis off her wrist with a mutinous glare. 'Should I get rid of the earrings, too?' she said sarcastically.

Ms Seunis swept our disguised weapons into a drawer. 'Don't get smart with me, girl.' She handed Thalia a stack of wet wipes. 'You can start by polishing the computer screens.'

Thalia tossed her head and snatched up the wipes.

'What about me?' I asked.

'You.' Ms Seunis crossed her arms and looked me up and down. The necklace, still hidden deep in
my pocket, seemed to grow heavier with each second we stared at each other. Thalia made her way
down the aisle, swiping the wet wipes across each monitor. Still Ms Seunis continued to glare at me
like she was trying to ferret out my secrets. I struggled to keep my face blank and innocent.

A funny smile played about Ms Seunis's lips. 'You're trouble, Annabeth Chase,' she repeated. She
took a few steps back to the lab door and locked it shut. 'Now, why don't you give me that necklace
in your pocket? It won't do you any good after I kill you.'

Styx and Hades! I dove for the drawer with our weapons, but Seunis was mind-bendingly fast. She
was a bright, orange-red flash, a streak of fire darting between me and the drawer.

Sharp teeth pierced my arm. Seunis had become a fox with silky fur the same colour as her bright
hair. Four magnificent tails fanned out from her rear end, making me wonder if I was seeing double
—or quadruple—from the pain.

Then a large, hard object slammed into us. The fox’s jaws released me. I stumbled away, clutching at
the wound.

Thalia caught me. She’d thrown one of the computers at the Seunis-fox. Momentarily stunned, the
fox lay sprawled on the table. But her four tails stayed rigid, spreading across the aisle and blocking
our way to the exit.

'I can't believe she got us to drop our weapons!' Thalia fumed.

'It must have been Charmspeak—you know, magical persuasion,' I said. 'She was the monster all
along. It wasn't Izzy!'

'Very good, Annabeth Chase.' Seunis was back up again. Her muzzled face morphed back into
human form, though she now had pointy ears sticking out of her flowing hair. The rest of her body
remained fox-like, with its silken red fur and four bushy tails. She got to her hind legs and towered
over us, her head nearly scraping the ceiling. 'That pestilential girl—she's as much of a nuisance now
as she was as a mortal. Completely ruined my plans at the Thanksgiving dance. I would've gotten my
fourth tail by now—maybe even a couple more—if she hadn't lured me away. And then you two
messed up the rest of it and stole the Necklace of Harmonia.'

'You planted the necklace!' My mind was whirling, trying to make sense of it all. Harmonia … Nia
… a little red ball of fur … 'You're a—' The clues from my disconnected dreams were finally coming
together: the fox-like creature Calypso had given Nia; the flame-haired attendant preparing Nia for
her wedding; the streak of orange-red dashing through the room where Polynices lay dying; the
woman who'd lifted the necklace from my strangled body. 'A fox spirit.'

'I prefer "Kitsune". It's Japanese, you know. I always did like my time in Japan. They show proper
respect for foxes there. Why, it was their mythology that gave me the idea to collect nine lives—one
for every soul I lead to their death!' Seunis—or Kitsune—advanced on us, her tails waving
menacingly. Four tails—three of which must be lives she had stolen from some unfortunate souls.
'And the necklace was the perfect tool. That fool Harmonia never realised just how badly it was
cursed, until it was too late. But it worked out nicely for me. Once I figured out how it worked, it
was just a matter of passing it on. Her daughters fell under its spell so neatly! Generation after
generation …'

'You cursed the necklace,' Thalia accused. She threw a chair at Kitsune, who batted it away with one
of her tails. 'You made it show people—things.'

The way she said things made me wonder again what the necklace had shown her. My face burned
as I remembered my own visions in it. Had Kitsune been privy to all of that, too?

'You're not getting it back,' I told Kitsune. 'We're not going to let you dupe anyone else into dying for you.'

Kitsune laughed. 'I'd like to see you try. Silly girl—you're already under the curse.' She backed us into the corner of the room. Two of her tails shot out to grab Thalia. They closed around her ankles and dangled her upside down. Thalia swung furiously, trying to tear herself free. Her forehead screwed up in concentration. I knew she was attempting to call down lightning.

'It won't work, daughter of Zeus,' Kitsune said with smug satisfaction. 'This building is grounded. Oh, my master will be most pleased when I deliver you to him.'

'Your master,' I gasped, as her third tail wrapped around my waist and held me down. The monster from my dream. It must have been her.

Kitsune's face elongated into the fox's long jaw. 'As for you, Annabeth Chase,' she said, 'your life will be my next tail.'

I caught a glimpse of sharp, glistening teeth moving towards my throat.

Then the windows shattered.

A volley of silver arrows sailed into the room, landing inches from my feet. One pierced Kitsune just as she was about to sink her teeth into me. The tail around me vanished, leaving Kitsune with only three.

'No!' Kitsune screamed. She dropped Thalia and darted around the room at lightning speed, dodging the arrows.

A band of girls swung in through the broken windows, all carrying silver bows. Izzy was at the front, her own bow loaded and aimed at Kitsune.

'You!' Kitsune snarled.

'Me,' Izzy said calmly, although her pale eyes pierced Kitsune like gimlets. 'After what you did to my family, did you think I wouldn't hunt you down once you reformed?'

More girls kept landing in the room. There had to be twenty of them, at least. They all looked to be my age or younger. Kitsune backed away, her face livid.

'It'll take more than your puny arrows to kill me, Hunter.'

Izzy loosed her arrow. Kitsune shrunk into the form I'd first seen her—the baby fox Calypso had presented to Nia—and darted out the window. Half of the girls jumped out after her, like hunters on the chase.

'Three lives you may still have,' Izzy called after Kitsune, 'but we'll hunt you down until we get them all!'

One of Izzy's friends helped me to my feet. 'You're hurt,' she said. 'Here.' She rummaged in her backpack and produced a canteen, out of which she dripped nectar over the fox bite on my arm. The wound closed immediately.

'Thanks,' I said. 'Who are—?'
'You're a Hunter,' Thalia said. She got to her feet. She was staring uncertainly at Izzy, like she wasn't quite sure what to make of her.

'A Hunter?' A vague memory surfaced in my head, of a group of girls in silver tunics just like the ones standing before me now. 'The Hunters of Artemis?'

'Guilty,' Izzy said. She slung her bow across her shoulder and sheathed her arrows. 'I think you've met Zoë before.' She indicated a tall, willowy girl with long, dark hair. Braided into the crown of her head was a silver circlet. 'Our leader.'

Zoë inclined her head. She did look extremely familiar—which was to be expected, since I'd encountered the Hunters twice in my life. The first time, I'd been travelling with Thalia and Luke. Thalia had gotten into a fierce argument with them. The second time had been at camp. Luke had been the one to quarrel with them then. It had ended with Camp Half-Blood being firmly trounced in capture the flag and cabin eight 'accidentally' burning down the next day. The entire group had left in high dudgeon, and that was the last I'd seen or heard of Artemis's band of immortal girls.

I felt certain, though, that there was at least one other time I'd seen Zoë.

'We meet again, Thalia Grace,' Zoë said. My eyebrows shot up. It was the first time I'd ever heard someone call Thalia by her full name—a name I didn't even know. How did Zoë know it?

'Don't call me that,' Thalia muttered.

'If you're a Hunter,' I asked Izzy, 'what are you doing at St Catherine's?'

'Recruiting, of course,' Izzy said, sounding more like the cheerful guide she'd been on the first day of school. 'We're always on the lookout for new talent. Show her, Phoebe.'

The girl who'd treated my arm pulled out a pair of brochures from her backpack and handed them to Thalia and me. It had three-fold panels, like a college brochure, with pictures of girls our age doing a bunch of training activities, like archery, hunting, and camping.

'A WISE CHOICE FOR YOUR FUTURE!' I read off the front panel. 'You're asking us to join you?'

Phoebe smiled. 'It is a great path for maidens. We hunt monsters and protect the wild. And the best thing is, no boys allowed!'

Several of the Hunters cheered at this.

I turned the brochure over in my hands. 'So … you were scouting us? But you were here before us. How did you know we'd be coming?'

'I didn't,' Izzy said. 'It's an all-girl's school—good potential for recruits. Why do you think I captain the archery team?' She winked at Thalia. 'You're perfect.'

Thalia frowned. 'This is a mortal school.'

'Lady Artemis does not discriminate,' Zoë said. Her accent sounded like something straight out of the old plays they made us read in Lit. 'Mortals are welcome to join the Hunt, although it is rare. We accept all young maidens such as thee.'

'They took me,' Izzy added. 'I was mortal.'

'Seriously?'
Izzy nodded. 'I was a princess of Thebes—my real name is Ismene.' She pronounced it *Is-muh-knee.*

'Thebes—that's the city that was terrorised by a Sphinx!' "Yes. Few mortals could actually see it for what it was, though. My father, who solved its riddle and delivered the city from it, was one of them. I, too, could see through the Mist, although my brothers and sisters could not.' Izzy got a faraway look in her eyes. I thought of the man in my dream, who had the same, silvery, bottomless irises. Izzy's dad … Oedipus.

'The Hunters came to me after that necklace,' Izzy pointed at my pocket, 'destroyed my family.'

I took out the Necklace of Harmonia. 'Kitsune said it was cursed.'

'It is. My mother hung herself because of it. My brothers killed each other. My sister …' Izzy sighed. I shivered, remembering the pools of blood and the chokehold of the noose. 'I took the necklace to the temple of Athena at Delphi to break the curse, but by that time, I'd lost my entire family.'

'If you broke the curse,' Thalia said, 'it should be harmless now, right?'

'The necklace was destroyed,' Izzy said darkly. 'It shouldn't even be here. The fact that it has returned …'

'Many things have returned to this world that should not have,' Zoë said. She fixed Thalia with a long, inscrutable look that made me wonder if she knew about the Fleece and how it had revived Thalia—and if she did, what she thought about it.

Thalia lifted her chin and stared defiantly back. 'So we have to destroy it again.'

Zoë plucked the necklace from my hands. 'I will take care of it,' she said.

'Won't the curse affect you?'

'The curse preys on the weakness of the flesh,' she said loftily. 'I do not succumb to such distractions. I care not for what the Necklace of Harmonia has to show.'

Zoë's cool haughtiness made me want to argue with her. There was something else tugging at me as well, a nagging sense that I should hold on to the necklace. Maybe it was just the curse trying to reel me in. After all, I *had* fallen prey to the necklace's enchantment, if only temporarily. Just recalling the beguiling images I had seen in its reflection made my cheeks feel hot again.

The Hunters who had hared off on the foxhunt dropped in through the broken windows. 'She got away,' said one. 'We shot her once, but—well, she just lost another tail.'

Zoë sighed. 'Foxes are difficult prey. And this one will not die until all her tails are gone. But we will track her down. She is not the Teumessian—she can be caught.'

'You'll join us in the Hunt, won't you?' Izzy said eagerly.

Zoë slipped the necklace into her pocket and held out her hand to Thalia. 'You wished to join before, but made the wrong choice then. Now you have another chance to become our eternal sister.'

Thalia narrowed her eyes. 'What makes you so sure I'm going to say yes now?'

'Do not be stubborn, Thalia. Annabeth and thyself are both welcome.' The Hunters were all grinning at us like we'd already agreed to Zoë and Izzy's offer. I could see why Thalia was hesitating; Zoë's presumptuousness was annoying. But there was something about her serene confidence that made
me examine the brochure again. The maidens in the pictures all looked so content. Like a family.

'I am sorry thy friend forsook thee,' Zoë said solemnly. 'But you have no reason not to join us now —'

'No one's fors—forsook—saken—agh! No one's betrayed me!' Thalia snapped.

Zoë's eyes flashed. 'There is no need to be rude. Just because you were wrong about L—'

'Don't you dare say his name.' Thalia ripped her brochure right down the middle and flung it at Zoë. 'You can keep your stupid brochures. My answer's still no.'

'Fine,' Zoë said stiffly. 'But you will regret thy decision, Thalia. I told thee so before.'

The knob of the lab door rattled.

'We must go,' Zoë said. 'If you will not join us—'

'Annabeth?' Izzy said.

'I—' I looked between Thalia and Zoë, and back down at the brochure. 'Can I think about it?'

Thalia snorted. Zoë glared at her.

'Keep that,' Zoë told me. 'If you change thy mind, we will find thee.'

I had the feeling that although she was talking to me, it was really Thalia she was addressing.

There was a loud banging on the lab door. We heard Principal Kellis shouting for us to open up.

The Hunters slipped back out the window, as lightfooted as cats. Izzy gave us a last, disappointed look, and joined her sisters-in-arms.

Chapter End Notes

Izzy/Ismene's backstory comes from Sophocles's plays Oedipus Rex and Antigone. When I first started plotting this fic, Izzy was going to be a mortal English princess (Elizabeth Stuart) with demigods in her ancestry (Henry VIII would have made such a good son of Zeus—he had all the wives-coming-to-a-bad-end down pat). Then I watched a production of Antigone … and yeah, I know Antigone's supposed to be the main character, but I must just have a thing for supporting characters.

Kitsune is actually the Japanese work for fox, though fox folklore is common to both Japanese and Chinese mythologies (and apparently Korean).
I Catch The Wolf Express

Chapter Summary

Annabeth goes home for Thanksgiving, but doesn't stay for long.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For the second time in two days, we were back in the principal's office. This time, we didn't even bother trying to come up with an explanation. The security footage showed us smashing the windows and computers in the lab with large orange softball bats—a Mist-distorted version of the actual events that we had no good defence for. We sat meekly in the stiff-backed chairs in front of Principal Kellis's desk while she yelled about our wanton destruction of school property for half an hour. Finally, she sent us back to our rooms to pack while she called our parents—or 'guardian', in Thalia's case.

So much for not getting into trouble. I wondered how my dad would react when he got the call saying I'd been expelled. He probably wasn't going to be happy about having to drive all the way up to see my principal.

I don't know how Principal Kellis managed to get hold of Chiron, since he didn't have a phone. Maybe she emailed him when she couldn't find his number. But somehow she must have gotten through because Thalia and I were summoned back to the principal's office when both he and my dad arrived the next day.

Principal Kellis brought Chiron and Thalia into her office first, leaving my dad and me to wait outside in awkward silence.

'So, uh, this was due to, er, monsters again?' my dad asked.

'Yeah.' I explained about Kitsune. 'Are you mad at me?'

My dad ran a tired hand over his face. I squirmed in my seat. He must have gotten up crazy early to make it here at this time.

'No,' he said finally. 'It's not the best for your academic record, but maybe it will all work out anyway.'

I blinked. He was taking my expulsion a lot more calmly than I'd expected. 'What do you mean?'

'Well, we're moving,' he said. 'To San Francisco.'

My stomach turned over worse than it had when Seunis had transformed into Kitsune.

'I'd wondered how we would manage, with you still being at school here—pulling you out in the middle of the year wouldn't have been ideal—but now it's a lot simpler. You can come with us.'

He looked at me oddly. It took a while before I realised my mouth was opening and closing with no words coming out.
'Dad, I can't go to San Francisco!'

'Why not?' He looked genuinely surprised, which annoyed me. How could he not know that taking me to the most monster-infested city on the continent was just flirting with disaster?

'It's—half-bloods can't live in San Francisco! It's like monster central!'

My father raised his eyebrows. 'Did you not just tell me about an encounter with a monster in this very school?'

'But—'

'Annabeth,' he said quietly, 'I have to go for my job. The research post will be for at least five years. I'm taking my family with me—and you are part of my family. I'd like you to come.'

Tears sprung to my eyes. I balled my hands into fists. 'I can't, Dad!'

The office door opened and Chiron wheeled out, with Thalia following close behind. They looked between us uncertainly.

'What happened?' Thalia mouthed at me.

'Mr Chase, Annabeth,' Principal Kellis called.

'Ah, it's Professor, actually,' my dad said.

Chiron caught my shoulder as I passed him. 'It'll be okay,' he whispered. 'I manipulated the Mist.'

Thanks to Chiron's machinations, the security footage had re-arranged itself to look like a stray baseball had come flying through the window, breaking it and taking out several computers in the process. After that, expulsion was off the table. Principal Kellis must still have been suspicious, though, because she suspended us for a week.

'Well,' Chiron said when we had all left the office, 'I think it's better that way. You can stay at camp until your suspension is over.'

My dad cleared his throat. 'I was, ah, hoping that Annabeth would come home for Thanksgiving.'

I rubbed at the beads on my camp necklace. There was a painful lump in my throat. What did 'home' even mean if my dad was moving across the country? To San Francisco?

Chiron nodded. 'I apologise. I didn't mean to presume. Come, Thalia, perhaps we should give Annabeth and her father some privacy.'

Thalia gave me a sympathetic look as they withdrew to the school atrium.

'I'm not expelled,' I said.

My dad nodded. 'That leaves us at a bit of an impasse.' He sighed. 'I hear you about San Francisco. But … maybe you wouldn't have to live in the city itself. We could find you a school elsewhere in the state. Berkeley, maybe. Just—nearer to us. Do you really want to stay at St Catherine's that badly?'

I hesitated. It wasn't that I had any special love for the school. The best I could say about it was that it had been bearable.
I glanced at Thalia and Chiron. Their heads were bent in quiet conference. Thalia was probably filling him in on what had really happened with Kitsune.

Unless she'd changed her mind about living at camp, Thalia would be returning to school after our suspension. And I'd promised we'd stick together.

My dad followed my gaze. He seemed to deflate. 'I'm still your father, Annabeth. Even if I haven't always—well …'

I stared at him, nonplussed by the turn in the conversation. 'Dad, I know you are. I just … I don't know what I want.'

No, that wasn't quite right.

I wanted to stay near to my friends—to Thalia, and to Percy, too.

I wanted to protect camp from whatever plot Kronos was hatching, with his growing army and his secret weapons and his mysterious plans with the Labyrinth.

I wanted to survive in the real world without worrying about monsters hunting me down.

And yes—there was a part of me that also wanted to live with my dad.

I did know what I wanted. It was just that most of those things were mutually exclusive. My eyes prickled with tears. I hated being torn between two choices.

'Maybe we don't have to decide this right now,' my dad said. 'Will you come spend Thanksgiving at home? In Richmond, I mean. We can talk more about it.'

'I—'

'You can go to camp first, if you must.'

'Okay,' I said. Maybe if we had more time to talk, I could convince him to see things my way.

He touched my ear. 'You're growing up so fast, Annabeth.' And then, to my great surprise, he pulled me into a hug.

'Don't move to San Francisco,' I said. 'Please, Dad.'

He smiled sadly at me. 'We'll talk about it at Thanksgiving.'

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A week later, I got on a plane for Virginia. My stomach was twisted up in knots the whole way. Not that I was nervous about flying (that was Percy's problem); I just couldn't help remembering the last time I'd taken this flight home. I'd been ten years old and my dad had sent me a beautiful letter telling me how much he missed me and how sorry he was for making me feel unwelcome at home. He'd enclosed his college ring, a plane ticket, and a plea for me to be part of his family again. I'd taken a chance and returned to Richmond for the first time in three years.

And it had all been a lie. My dad had been no more prepared than before to deal with a demigod daughter and her school issues. It had fallen to Janet to take me to school and handle the angry calls from the teachers when I failed my tests (I struggled too hard just to read the questions), or when the monsters inevitably showed up and disrupted the class (the Mist was helpful as always when it came to lumping blame on my head). We'd bickered for two months until I finally gave up and called
Chiron to come and get me.

Even though I'd actually spent a full year living with my dad now, I couldn't shake the sense of foreboding creeping through me. It whispered in my ear, telling me that coming home for Thanksgiving would be just like before.

My dad picked me up from the airport with my entire stepfamily in tow. We went straight to a restaurant for dinner, which was a pleasant surprise. Most unfortunately, they'd picked a sushi place, and I had to persuade them to go elsewhere. I happened to know that Monster Sushi was in fact a business run in partnership with a hydra.

'So if you cut off a head it grows back?' Matthew stared at me in wide-eyed fascination as we drove away in search of another place.

'Actually, two heads grow back.'

Bobby and Matthew wanted to hear all the gory details about what it looked like when you decapitated a hydra, how long the new heads took to grow back, and how you actually killed one, so I regaled them with the story of the hydra Percy and I had fought up the St James River last summer.

'And that was here?' Bobby looked ready to go searching for hydras in the back yard. Matthew had found an old plush dragon that looked like it had been sitting abandoned in the seat pocket for ages. He yanked at its head like he was trying to detach it. Dust billowed around us, making me sneeze.

'That's enough,' Janet snapped. 'No more talk of hydras, Annabeth.' She reached over the back of her seat and plucked the dragon out of Matthew's hands. 'This is filthy, Matthew. Where did you get it?'

We pulled up at a Chinese place, which was luckily monster-free. My stepbrothers wouldn't let the subject of my adventures go, though. I ended up relating more of them over pork chops and chow mein. Bobby and Matthew were so captivated, they forgot to fight over who got the last pork chop. This seemed to please Janet, at least until I started appropriating the tableware as props.

'Annabeth!' She snatched away the gravy boat that was serving as the Orobas that had eaten Percy's skateboard, and set it down on the lazy Susan with a loud clink. 'Not in public, please!'

My dad laughed. 'I think we get the idea, anyway.'

Janet diverted the twins' attention with the dessert menu. My dad turned to me. 'I got you a present,' he said without preamble.

'You did?' My eyes widened. 'But—why—' I couldn't think of any occasion that merited a gift.

He shrugged and pulled a little box out of his pocket. Curious, I opened it. Sitting on a velvet cushion inside were a pair of silver earrings shaped like owls.

'I noticed,' he gestured vaguely towards my ears, 'when I saw you at school.'

'You … noticed.' I tugged on my earlobe, embarrassed but pleased.

'First sign of the apocalypse,' Janet said drily. 'Frederick taking notice of something.'

My dad shook his head at her. 'Janet suggested earrings as a gift,' he admitted. 'But I thought the owls … you know, for your mother …'

Janet's lips drew into a thin line, but she didn't comment on this.
'Thanks, Dad,' I said softly. I put them on immediately, eager to show him how much I liked them.

It was one of the most normal evenings I could remember spending with my dad and the whole family in tow. The apprehension I had felt on the plane dissolved. A pleasant feeling of warmth and fullness drifted over me as we drove home, my stepbrothers dozing next to me in the back seat. Maybe this was what it was supposed to be like to come home to a real family, one that actually took you out to dinner to celebrate your homecoming. It was like being in a safe, cosy bubble.

The bubble burst as soon as I stepped into our house. I opened the door for my dad and Janet, who were each carrying a sleeping twin, and stopped dead on the threshold.

The house no longer had the messy, lived-in look that I remembered. When I'd left in September, the halls had been cluttered with Bobby and Matthew's toys, the paintings on the wall a bit lopsided, the furniture affectionately stained with juice and paint from our childhood mishaps. Now, it resembled a furniture warehouse: boxes were stacked against the walls, full of books and toys and the various ornaments that had once adorned the cabinets and shelves. All the paintings had been stripped from the walls, leaving them painfully bare.

I walked through the halls in a daze. Everything about the place screamed temporary. The kitchen was just as bare. Where frying pans and utensils had once lined the counters and walls, there were only a couple of plastic bowls—the disposable kind people usually use at parties—and half-eaten cereal boxes. I pulled open the fridge door. It was no longer bursting with fresh produce and the chilled herbs Janet liked to use in her cooking. A carton of milk lay on its side, taking up an entire shelf. A few lonely apples rolled around in the fruit compartment. It was clear that we'd had dinner out tonight not because of my homecoming, but because all of Janet's cooking supplies had been packed away, possibly already shipped to a new location.

It couldn't have been more obvious that my dad had already committed to the move to San Francisco.

I felt sick to my stomach. For all his talk about discussing it, he hadn't intended to consider my opinion at all. Against my will, he was going to pull me out of school and move me to a city I couldn't live in.

'Did you want a snack, Annabeth?'

I slammed the fridge door shut and whirled around to face Janet. My hands were trembling as I gestured to the boxes around us.

'What's going on?' I said, even though I knew the answer.

Janet pursed her lips. 'I would have thought that was obvious.'

'You're moving,' I accused.

'Didn't your father tell you?'

'He said we would talk about it!'

Janet rolled her eyes towards the ceiling in a why me? expression. When she spoke, her voice was carefully controlled, like she was trying her hardest not to yell. 'Your father has a new position at USF. He's going to write a book on World War I. It's a fantastic opportunity, Annabeth. Surely you're happy for him?'

'I can't move to San Francisco!' And I didn't want to have this conversation with Janet.
Janet caught my arm as I tried to push past her in search of my dad. 'This book is important to your father, and the move will bring me closer to my family. We can't always rearrange our lives around your needs, Annabeth. Families make sacrifices for one another.'

'You're not my family,' I hissed. Her words stung like barbed thorns. When had she—when had any of them ever sacrificed anything for me? 'Stop pretending like you are. You never wanted me.'

Janet reeled back like I'd slapped her. With hard, narrowed eyes, she said, 'You're acting like a spoilt brat, Annabeth. If you would stop to consider all our feelings, sometimes—'

'Why?' I shouted. 'You've never considered mine!'

'Annabeth!' My father's voice came over the second-floor balustrade. He was probably upstairs, putting the twins to bed. A hard, cold nugget solidified in the pit of my stomach. He'd never put me to bed. He'd always left it to Janet, who hated me, and now he'd made this decision to move when just last week he'd promised that we'd talk about it …

My hands clenched into fists. What a total kelp-head I'd been.

'Please don't raise your voice at me, Annabeth,' Janet said coolly. She crossed her arms and stared at me like I was the twins' age.

'What's going on?' My father came down into the main hall.

'Annabeth is being difficult about the move.'

'Shut up!'

'Annabeth!' My father put his hands on my shoulders. 'I know you have strong feelings about the move, but please don't be rude to your stepmother.'

I wrenched myself out of his hands. 'You said we'd talk about it!'

My father ran his hand across his face. 'The project was accelerated. I had to give them an answer—they need me there by the end of the week.'

'So you just decided. Without caring how it'd affect me.'

'We thought we'd ease you into it. You could stay at boarding school until winter break, while we get settled there—or you could even finish out the year if you really want to. And you're starting high school next year. It would be perfect timing for a switch. Janet's already looked into it—San Francisco has so many good schools, ones with great architecture programmes, too. It would set you up well for college. Wouldn't you like that?'

There was a cajoling note in his voice, like I was a recalcitrant five-year-old he was trying to bribe into behaving myself. It only made me angrier. Was that all this was? His gifts, his words—let's appease Annabeth because she doesn't understand. Annabeth's making a fuss. She's overreacting.

I might as well be seven years old again, begging them to believe me, to take me out of the room with the spiders. Only this time it wasn't Janet leaving me to the spiders. My father was ganging up on me, too.

'I can't live in San Francisco,' I said. 'If you're moving there, I'm going back to camp.'

My father sighed heavily. 'I hope you'll change your mind.'
I stormed up the stairs to my room and slammed the door shut. My father called my name once, but Janet said something I couldn't make out, and he stopped.

My room was as painfully bare as the rest of the house. Only the furniture wasn't packed away in boxes. The desk, closet, and shelves that had been there since my childhood looked alien without the knick-knacks that had once covered them. Someone—probably Janet, from the handwriting—had labelled all the boxes: clothes, books, toys, magic items. The last was the largest box of all, long and upright. Janet had put a big question mark after the label. Thinking about her going through my stuff and packing it all away made me feel like I'd swallowed something cold and slimy.

I didn't bother to look in the boxes. Nothing in them could be that important. Everything I needed, I already carried on me.

Because when it came down to it, I'd never had a permanent place for my things.

I threw my bag onto my bed and flopped down next to it. Why had I agreed to come back here?

For some time, I just lay on my back, staring at the ceiling. It was funny how having my early life pared down to a stack of boxes and empty furniture could feel so isolating. Why did it bother me so much? It wasn't like I thought of this place as home.

Or did I?

When I'd run away at the age of seven, I hadn't intended to return, but then I had. Not just once, but twice, I'd come back and tried to make things work. Maybe some part of me did think of this as a home to return to. Maybe I still hoped it wasn't just another temporary lodging.

Not any more. My room, once familiar, now ached with a chasm of impermanence. So did my heart.

Well, if I no longer had a home here, there was no point staying.

I inched my window open. A light drizzle had started. I shinnied down the drainpipe and landed with a splash in a puddle at the bottom. Hoisting my backpack higher on my shoulders, I squeezed through the same hole in the back hedge that I'd escaped through seven years ago.

It was pouring heavily by the time I reached the nearest of Thalia and Luke's old hideouts. I was soaked through and shivering madly when I crawled into the shelter of the hidden shack in Maymont. There were some old blankets heaped on a bunch of crates. I stripped off my wet clothes and wrapped myself in them. Inside one crate was a stash of supplies. Not all of it looked seven years old. Thalia must have used this place in the summer before she'd appeared at my window. One of the items she'd left behind was a flashlight. The beam was still working, if dimly. Gratefully, I switched it on.

My bag and its contents were soaked through. Great.

I refused to let the tears come. Instead, I focused on cataloguing the items I had with me. My Yankees hat and a spare camp shirt—now dripping wet, of course. I hung them on a beam with the rest of my clothes to dry. My sketch pad and the notebook with my research on the Labyrinth. I laid them on the ground, careful not to let any of the sodden pages tear. My bronze dagger, which added another light source to my flickering flashlight. I let my fingers rest on the hilt for a moment. Despite the freezing rain, it still felt warm to the touch.

The dagger made me think of the first time I'd run away. I'd been on my own for a few weeks, hiding from monsters and fighting them off with a hammer. And then Luke had found me, had given me this very dagger and a promise to be my family.
That hadn't lasted, either.

No. I would not cry.

I carried on cataloguing. A few golden drachmas. A paperweight tucked deep in a torn seam of the bag. I'd forgotten how it had even gotten in there. It was a tiny silver model of the Parthenon. Percy had made it for my thirteenth birthday, the year we became friends. It wasn't much use to me now, but just looking at it made me feel better. It was almost like he was here, grinning goofily at me.

A prism came out next. Thank the gods. I would need help to get back to Long Island. Of course, I could attempt the journey myself, like I'd done last summer, but that had taken me four days and six monster encounters. Plus, hiking up the coast in late fall was a very different story from doing it in summer. If I had to journey through the freezing rain all the way, I'd die of hypothermia first.

With the prism, I could IM someone—Chiron was the obvious choice; he could cover the distance between Long Island and Virginia in no time. But I was also loathe to disturb him at this hour, and to pull him away from his camp duties for my personal emergency.

My hand crinkled a sheet inside my bag. A dry sheet. Curious, I pulled it out and shone the flashlight over it. Unlike the other papers in my bag, the brochure the Hunters had left me wasn't wet. I stared at the heading until the words blurred in my head: *CHOICE—FUTURE—BETTER*. Then, not really sure what I was thinking, I flipped it over. On the back, under a grinning group photo where the girls had their arms slung around each other's shoulders, was printed: *TALK TO US TODAY! I-M ISMENE @ HUNTERS OF ARTEMIS*.

I shone the weak beam of the flashlight into the prism and tossed a drachma into the rainbow that streamed out the other end.

'O Goddess of the Rainbow, accept my offering!' The drachma shimmered and vanished. 'Er, Ismene, Hunters of Artemis.'

I heard Izzy's cheerful voice before her face materialised in the rainbow: 'Hi there! You've reached the Hunters of Artemis. I'm Ismene, but you can call me Iz—Annabeth?'

'Hi Izzy.'

'Oh my moons, it's good to see you! Is everything okay?'

'Um, yeah. Well, no, not exactly. I'm—kind of stuck.' I explained my predicament.

Izzy's face darkened. 'The Necklace of Harmonia,' she muttered.

'What?'

'It's cursed a lot of families over the years.'

'You think it cursed my family? But my dad and I—we've been fighting forever. I only came across the necklace a week ago.'

Izzy shrugged. 'Well, maybe I'm wrong. But either way, the Hunters are always happy to help a maiden in need! Problem is, we're in Chicago at the moment, so it might be a while before … no, let me see, I've got it! I could send a messenger to you. I just need to check with Zoë or Lady Artemis if it's okay.'

'Thanks, I appreciate it.'
'What's a little help between sisters?' Izzy grinned. 'So you've thought more about joining us?'

'I—' Something about the way she said sisters made my throat close up. The truth was, with everything going on with my dad, I hadn't really thought more about whether I should become a Hunter. I hadn't even had a chance to read the brochure thoroughly yet.

But at this moment, immortality with a band of sisters sounded pretty darned good. I'd have a place with a family, forever.

My gaze drifted back to the brochure, pinned down under my Parthenon paperweight. The silver model glared at me reproachfully, reminding me that this offer came with a price, too.

'I don't know,' I said. 'I need more time to think. Is that—is that okay?'

'Sure! Don't take too long, though. We do have an age limit. No teens over sixteen.'

'Um, I think I can definitely let you know before that.'

'Great! Okay, just stay on the line while I go and check with Zoë about getting you some help—'

She danced out of the rainbow. I waited, perusing the brochure in the meantime. To my dismay, the flashlight's batteries died before Izzy could get back to me. The hideout was plunged into semi-darkness.

I curled my arms around my knees and drew them close to my chest. My dagger was now my only source of light and it was nowhere near strong enough to shine into the prism. I could only hope Izzy would still send me help, whatever it was.

I thought of what she'd said about the necklace's curse. Was it really responsible for my dad's decision? I'd read about cursed magical items before. Usually, it was continued possession of them that wreaked havoc on people's lives. I'd only held on to the Necklace of Harmonia for two days. Was that enough to curse me? And what exactly did the curse entail?

It was in the middle of this brooding that I heard the howl.

I tensed immediately, gripping my dagger tightly. Thoughts of werewolves, cynocephali, and hellhounds rushed through my head. This shelter was well-hidden, but I wouldn't bet my life on a monster being unable to sniff me out. I reached for my Yankees hat and planted it firmly on my head. Then I peeked out of the entrance of my hideout. My chances were better if I could spot the monster. Before it found me.

I saw it through the rain, a vast silvery body bounding towards my shelter. My heart thudded loudly. A monster wolf was heading straight for me, like it knew exactly where I was.

Then I laughed out loud in relief. I knew this wolf!

'Remy!' I pulled off my invisibility hat as the wolf skidded to a stop in front of my shelter. I couldn't believe it was him—the same wolf Thalia and I had ridden at the start of summer. Had he been a pet of the Hunters all along? Had Thalia known?

Remy gave a soft bark of acknowledgement.

'Can you take me to camp?'

He licked my face. I took that as a yes. I quickly packed up my things and changed back into my
damp clothes. Remy's fur was toasty enough to keep me warm. I climbed onto his massive back, wound my fingers in his fur, and we took off towards the north.

Chapter End Notes

There was originally a long, angsty scene involving a call to Percy and awkward early percabeth comfort over IM, which also featured Sally giving Annabeth some much-needed mothering … but it had to be scrapped because it completely didn’t work with the timeline. I still have it in my notes, though, so if anyone wants to see it and laugh at poor, awkward Percy, just ask. :)

Annabeth finally gets a teacher she clicks with.

I spent an uneventful week at camp before it was time to return to school. Chiron said nothing about my abrupt return, but informed me quietly that he had contacted my father to let him know I'd arrived safely.

I didn't reply. I wasn't ready to talk about it just yet. Chiron didn't push the issue. He was more worried about Clarisse and how we hadn't heard from her for almost a month now.

Thalia was miffed that Remy had been a pet of the Hunters all along.

'I thought he was a sign from the gods! I didn't realise he was affiliated with them. I wouldn't have taken his help if I'd known.'

'What do you have against them anyway?'

'They're just so—they think they know everything. It's annoying.' She sighed. 'It's not that I don't think what they do is cool. But when they found us, you know, before, I'd have had to leave you and L—' She bit her lip. 'They're just so smug, acting like I chose wrong. I didn't, okay?'

I held up my hands. 'I didn't say you did.'

She raised her eyebrows. 'You're not seriously thinking of joining them, are you?'

'Would it be so bad?'

Thalia gave my brochure a dark look. 'Read the fine print, Annabeth. Are you sure you're ready to give up everything for them?'

I thought of my dad, moving across the country. Maybe I'd never see him again. Why shouldn't I find myself a new family? 'It's not like I have a lot to give up.'

She gave me a look that said she didn't believe this at all. 'All you need is one thing you can't give up on yet.'

She didn't elaborate, and she didn't bring up the Hunters again after that.

I wished Thalia wasn't so set against Zoë's offer. If she'd been open to it, I probably would have embraced the possibility with open arms.

Part of the draw was that being a Hunter was forever. The idea was like a salve on the hollow ache that had followed me up from Richmond. I couldn't shake the pervasive sense of temporariness that had come over me in my stripped childhood bedroom. *Nothing in your life is meant to last*, it said. Even at camp, the only home I'd known for the past seven years, everything I owned could fit into one duffel bag.
Was there any greater mark of temporariness than living out of a bag?

I'd have to leave camp eventually. There were no campers over the age of eighteen. Luke had been the oldest, and it was rare that he'd stayed as long as he had. All the other counsellors had either gone off to college and learnt to live in the outside world … or died in it.

Once, I'd told Percy that the real world was where you learned if you were good enough. I'd insisted on following him on his first quest because I wanted to prove that I could make it outside camp. I guess even then, I'd known I would need to leave some day.

Would it be so bad to leave now and become a Hunter? Who else was offering me a home, a family—one that might finally be permanent?

The little ghost girl tending the central hearth was back again, sitting so close to it that she almost seemed to be in the fire itself. She smiled sweetly at me, and I got the strange feeling that she sensed my dilemma. She turned her head slightly so that her chin was pointing towards the cabin on the opposite side of the green, one down from mine.

My insides did a slow turn over as I stared at the empty Poseidon cabin.

Thalia was right. I might not have a lot to tether me to my current life, but sometimes just one thing—one person—could be enough to make you hesitate.

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When we got back to school, it was like Ms Seunis and Izzy had never existed. The only evidence of our battle was the cordoned-off computer lab, which hadn't yet been repaired. Computer science classes were moved to a spare classroom where a few ancient computers had once languished in dusty corners. Now they were set up in the centre of the room, but there were nowhere near enough of them for the whole class.

Standing at the front of the room was a new teacher. She had an unexceptional sort of face, grey-haired and middle-aged, with bland features framed by crow's eyes and frown wrinkles.

'Who's that?' Thalia whispered.

'I guess she's replacing Kit–Seunis,' I said.

Cheryl gave us a strange look. 'Mrs Carlson's been teaching us Computer Science since October, remember?'

'Ahh.' Thalia nodded in understanding. 'The Mist,' she whispered to me. 'Chiron's been teaching me more about how it works.'

Of course. I knew the Mist made stuff appear normal to mortals, but this was the first time I'd experienced the way it warped actual memories. Although now that I thought about it, Percy had once told me about the Kindly One who'd posed as his pre-algebra teacher. After he'd disposed of her, his entire school had believed their teacher had been a different woman all along.

'It didn't manage to fix the computer lab, though,' I said under my breath.

'It's harder when there's real damage.'

'Enough chatter back there,' Mrs Carlson called. Her tone was firm, but not unfriendly. 'I know this isn't an ideal set-up, but since we can't be in our usual lab, we'll have to make do. You'll have to take
turns with the computers we've got.' She looked around the class. 'Who has completed the holiday homework?'

I looked blankly at Thalia. One big problem with the Mist creating false memories for the mortals—we didn't have any of those memories.

Thalia shrugged and leaned over to Cheryl. 'What was the homework again?'

'Prep for Photoshop. We had to draw a design to convert into digital art,' Cheryl said. She held out her half-drawn line-art (it was a sketch of some cartoon character I recognised but couldn't name). 'I'm not quite done either.'

Mrs Carlson directed a few girls who had completed sketches to start with the programme. 'I'll show you how to reproduce these digitally,' she told them. To the rest of us, she said, 'Keep working on your designs. You'll each get a turn soon.'

I pulled out my sketch pad and tore out a page for Thalia. As she hurriedly scribbled something on it, I flipped through my earlier sketches. I could easily pretend I'd done them for the homework assignment. It would actually be interesting to see how they would turn out digitally. Only once had I used software to design structures—in the time-bending Lotus Casino. I suspected a fair bit of magic had been involved in making that programme work.

While I waited my turn, I flipped to an empty page and doodled absently, thinking of the imaginary city I'd built in Las Vegas.

It wasn't long before Mrs Carlson called Thalia, Cheryl, and me up for our turns at the computer. She got us started with the programme one by one. I was the last to go. Mrs Carlson opened a blank file for me, then looked at my sketch pad.

'That's very abstract,' she commented.

I hadn't really been paying attention to what I'd been sketching. I thought I might have done some of my favourite structures—the Parthenon was one I tended to return to over and over again—but I found that my hand had drawn a complex diagram that twisted and turned all over the page. 'It's a maze, I think.'

Mrs Carlson raised her eyebrows. 'You think. Didn't you plan it?'

'It was just a random drawing.' I started to flip back to one of my earlier pieces, thinking maybe my designs for the art and crafts cabin that I'd done last year might suit the class exercise better. Mrs Carlson stayed my hand. She squinted at my random sketch.

'Most people draw a maze in two dimensions. You've given these rising walls—it's a proper labyrinth.'

My head jerked up at the word.

'And the lines—not many people can pull this off in a sketch, but they have a very Hellenic feel to them. Almost like you've drawn inspiration from—' She broke off, smiling wryly. 'Sorry. It's just that I used to be an architect. In fact, I was one for much longer than I was a teacher.'

My jaw fell open. 'I want to be an architect!'

'Do you?' Mrs Carlson beamed at me. 'I wish you'd said something before! There's all sorts of tools you'd appreciate, and we could have modified this project … Well, that's neither here nor there now.
There’s not much time left today, so we’ll just get you started with the basics, but if you come see me during Study Hall later, I’d love to talk more about it.’

As Mrs Carlson predicted, there really wasn’t time during the class to do much more than create a basic outline of one of my buildings (I chose a sketch of the temple I’d always wanted to build at camp). I thought wistfully of the destroyed computer lab. How much further could I have gotten if the whole class didn’t have to share the handful of slow computers in this classroom? For the first time, I actually found a class interesting.

Thalia was sceptical when I told her what Mrs Carlson had said. ‘She wants you to go to her office alone?’ She twirled her bracelet around her wrist. ‘I don’t like the sound of it. What if she’s a monster?’

‘Two in a row? That seems a bit unlikely.’

‘Take your knife anyway.’

‘I always do.’

Mrs Carlson turned out to be perfectly normal, though. She even kept a cookie jar on her desk, which she said was for students who came by (they were a bit hard and tasteless, but I decided not to mention this). Instead of the usual framed photographs most adults had in their offices, she had pictures of famous monuments: the Golden Gate Bridge (it was gorgeous, but I had to look away quickly, painfully reminded of my dad’s move to San Francisco), the St Louis arch (which brought up another scary memory of Percy jumping off it into the Mississippi River … long story), Hoover Dam, the Eiffel Tower, the Guggenheim … There was a series of buildings I couldn’t tear my eyes from. These were so perfectly blended into the surrounding natural scenery, they seemed to grow out of the earth itself.

‘Ah, the Frank Lloyd Wrights,’ Mrs Carlson said, noticing my fascination with them. ‘A stunning example of the organic style. He was a strong advocate of architecture imitating nature. Beautiful, isn’t it?’ She motioned for me to take a seat. ‘I can see you do have an avid interest in buildings.’

‘I want to design them,’ I admitted. ‘I want to make something—’ Permanent. I swallowed. ‘Something really great.’

Mrs Carlson studied the Frank Lloyd Wright pictures for a moment longer. ‘Have you done any design classes before?’

I shook my head. ‘I’ve only sketched stuff. And, um, I did get to draw up plans for—’ I couldn’t very well mention I’d redesigned a cabin at camp that had gotten torched by a drakon last summer. ‘I go to summer camp,’ I amended. ‘I did a bit of stuff there.’

‘An architecture camp?’ Mrs Carlson looked impressed.

‘Er, no. Just—just a camp.’

‘You might consider trying one of the university summer schools,’ Mrs Carlson mused. ‘Of course, they’re mostly for high school students, but you’ll be a freshman soon enough.’ She shook her head. ‘We can talk about that later. What I really wanted to show you is this.’ She turned the screen of her desktop computer to face me. On it was a 3D layout of a blueprint for a tall tower. A window on the left of the screen showed a list of commands for different layers of the image. I watched, fascinated, as Mrs Carlson brought up different views of the blueprint. It was like the magic building game I’d played in the Lotus Casino. Maybe it wasn’t as advanced, but it was better, because this was real.
'Would you like to learn how to use the software?' Mrs Carlson asked. 'We could make it your project for class.'

I nodded fervently, too thrilled to speak.

'Good. Now to get you started with a project …' She turned back to her row of architectural photographs. 'I know you like the Frank Lloyd Wrights, but they might be a bit complex to start with.' Her gaze landed on an old picture of a building complex centred around a pair of towers. 'I wonder …'

'Are those the twin towers?' I'd never had a chance to see them in person. The year after I'd arrived at camp, they'd been destroyed in a terrorist attack—or possibly Ares duking it out with a minor god. Chiron wasn't entirely certain.

Mrs Carlson nodded. 'Now known as Ground Zero. It's been levelled out, and I believe rebuilding is starting soon.'

'Could I design something for it?'

'Could you?' There was a steely glint in her eyes. It was the same way Chiron looked when he had a special challenge up his sleeve for capture the flag. 'What do you think?'

My mind was already racing through ideas. It would be a monument that commemorated the tragedy that had happened, but also included a nod to the gods so that they would appreciate it, too. The style would have to be a blend of ancient and modern. Marble wouldn't fit, but maybe I could use steel for the supports, and work in some stone for the decorative façades …

Mrs Carlson laughed. 'I can see you're already on the task. That's settled, then.' She offered me another cookie, which I politely declined. 'I won't keep you now, but bring your ideas to class next week. Hopefully the lab will be up and running again. I'll be able to get you started designing it in AutoCAD. Meanwhile …' She opened a drawer and rifled through the papers inside. 'Here.'

I took the brochure she handed me. The first page had a picture of a few kids posing with little 3D building models. The text was in fine print, which made it hard to decipher, but I managed to make out Cornell Summer College at the top.

'It's a summer programme,' Mrs Carlson explained. 'For architecture. Something to think about for next year, when you're in high school. It may be a bit far—Cornell's in Ithaca—but it's a good programme. Though I may be a bit biased, since I went to grad school there.'

'Oh.' I didn't know what to say. I couldn't really go to a summer school, not with camp. Not with Kronos out there, plotting a war with the army Luke was collecting for him.

But a summer spent completely immersed in architectural design …

'Have you thought about which high school you'll be applying for?'

'I—not really.' I thought fleetingly of my father's words—San Francisco has so many good schools, ones with great architecture programmes, too.

'Well, think about it. If you're really serious about architecture, it's never too early to start thinking about how to build your career.'

That evening, I laid the Cornell brochure next to the one the Hunters had given me and stared at them for a long time. If I joined the Hunters, would I be able to study architecture, the way Izzy had
attended school here? Would I get all these opportunities that I couldn't have if I went back to being a year-rounder at camp?

It was the first time I'd ever wondered if living at camp might be an obstacle to achieving my dreams.

In the middle of my contemplation, Thalia came in. She looked at the Hunters' brochure, started to say something, then seemed to think the better of it. She just shook her head and went into the bathroom.
We Take A Road Trip To Maine

Chapter Summary

Sally Jackson chauffeurs Annabeth, Percy, and Thalia to find Grover.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

My dad wrote to me at the start of December to tell me that he and my stepfamily had settled into their new home. The letter didn't get to me until mid-December, though, probably because he sent it to camp and not St Catherine's. The sting of our Thanksgiving fiasco had dulled by this time, although thinking about it still filled me with a layer of numbness, like the thin frost that covered our dorm windows.

In the letter, my dad persisted in inviting me to San Francisco for Christmas break. He promised they'd have a room in the house for me no matter what. Not for the first time, I wondered why he kept writing, kept insisting I belonged with him. It didn't gel with his refusal to choose me over his new family, or even over his job and his planes. Was it a lingering sense of responsibility? Did his conscience keep him from being able to abandon his daughter entirely to camp?

Maybe we would both be better off if I became a Hunter. I'd be taken care of—off his hands for good. He wouldn't have to feel guilty at all.

Enclosed with the letter was a scrap of notebook paper with my dad's new address, and a photograph of the four of them in the back garden of the house. In the background was the tall shadow of a mountain, reaching towards a dark, cloudy sky. *Mount Tamalpais*, my dad had scrawled on the reverse side. It was the same mountain backdrop that had been in Clarisse's last Iris-message.

I looked at their new address. It was south of the Golden Gate Bridge, but they were still in the shadow of Mount Tam, dangerously near to the bay where Clarisse had seen the *Princess Andromeda* docked. The city had to be crawling with monsters.

And my dad still didn't think twice about inviting me there.

The door to my cabin opened. My half-brother Malcolm stuck his head in. 'Chiron's doing archery class,' he said. 'You coming?'

I stuffed the letter and photograph back into their envelope and stuck it between the pages of my sketch pad. 'Coming,' I said.

My sketch pad felt heavy with indecision as I put it away. Lying among its pages now were the Hunter's brochure (which I'd read enough times by now to have memorised every word), Mrs Carlson's Cornell brochure (it bookmarked my sketches for my Ground Zero monument project, which was going so well, school had gone from being a chore to actually enjoyable in the past month), and now my dad's letter.

Chiron was distracted throughout the archery lesson. He didn't even bother to chide the Stoll brothers when they planted explosive arrows in the training sheaths and blew up half the range. I found out
later that evening that he was worrying about Clarisse. She still hadn't checked in with us, and Chiron feared the worst. He wanted to send a search party to look for her, but Mr D forbade it.

‘I am not authorising any more pointless excursions in search of this mystery maze,’ he said sourly. ‘What’s the point of sending my satyrs out on red alert to collect more brats if you lose them faster than they can bring them in?’

Chiron drew me aside. ‘Maybe at Christmas break, you could head to Phoenix instead of coming to camp?’

I thought of telling him about the Hunters—they might even have some tips for searching for missing people—but something made me hold back. Chiron certainly knew of their existence. If he’d never offered their programme to any of us, he must have a reason.

None of this made my dilemma any better. I wondered if the Hunters offered a two-week trial package. Maybe I’d be able to better ascertain if joining them was the right choice for my future if I could just try it out first. I added it to the list of things I should check out during Christmas break.

But it turned out that the Fates had other plans for me that week.

The second to last day of term, I was taking a shower after cross-country practice when Percy's face appeared on the bathroom wall.

I didn't notice the Iris-message until I heard his yelp. When I looked up, he had his hands firmly planted over his eyes and he was babbling something like, 'Shit—sorry—thought—sorry!'

I screamed and pulled the shower curtain around me. Percy disappeared; he must have cut off the message.

'What! Annabeth, what?’ Thalia yelled from our room. I heard a swishing sound, like she'd activated her spear and shield.

'It's fine!' I squeaked. 'I just—never mind, no monsters.'

Thalia punched me in the arm when I came out a few minutes later. 'Just give me a heart attack, why don't you?'

'Sorry,' I muttered, rubbing my towel over my ears. I'd finished washing up in such a hurry, they still had soap suds in them.

'What happened? Spiders again?'

'Got a call,' I mumbled, not keen to get into the details. I fumbled in my desk drawer for my prism and a drachma. Percy knew how risky it was to IM me at school, so he must have had a good reason to call. And embarrassing timing aside, I had to admit I didn't mind the chance to catch up with him. It had been more than a month since I’d seen him in Central Park.

'A call?' Thalia said. 'You don't mean a—an Iris-message? But who—?’

I made the offering to Iris and called out Percy's name and address. Understanding dawned on Thalia's face, followed closely by amusement.

'Ohhh, he—oh my gods—' She dissolved into laughter.

'Shit up,' I told her. 'No, not you,' I added quickly, as Percy's chagrined face appeared in the
'I'm really sorry,' he said. 'I didn't think—'

'It's fine. Your timing could be better, but, um, yeah, never mind.'

By now, Thalia was laughing so hard she was doubled over and rolling about on her bed, pounding at the pillows in her mirth.

'Is that—?' Percy craned his head, but Thalia was just out of his line of sight.

'Ignore her,' I said sternly. 'What's going on? Um, not that something has to be wrong. As long as no mortals are around, I don't mind—I mean, we haven't talked since—' I turned to glare at Thalia as she let out another wild peal of laughter. 'Shut up, will you?'

'Grover sent me a distress call,' Percy said. This got both Thalia's and my attention. She stopped laughing at once and sat up straight on her bed.

'A distress call? Like—like last summer?' Grover had got into Cyclops-sized trouble and called on Percy for help by setting up an empathy link with him. As far as I knew, Grover was still in Maine scouting for half-bloods. I didn't think he'd run into another satyr-eating Cyclops there, but you never knew.

'Yeah, through the empathy link. Oh, no, I don't think he's in trouble exactly,' Percy said quickly, seeing the look on my face. 'At least, I hope not. He wasn't very clear. But he said he needed help urgently. And I knew you'd want to help, too.'

'Of course,' I said. 'How are we getting to him?'

Percy's face broke into a grin. 'My mom said she'd drive me up tomorrow. I'll get her to swing by your school for you, okay?'

I gave Percy the address for St Catherine's and we disconnected the message.

Thalia got to her feet, all laughter forgotten as she strode across the room and started pulling clothes out of the closet. 'Better get packing.'

'You're coming, too?'

She snorted. 'Well, duh. It's Grover.' She said it like he was a little brother she had to go pull out of trouble.

I started to pack as well. Not knowing how long it would take to sort out whatever Grover had gotten himself into, I made sure to stuff as many warm layers into my bag as possible. I remembered my overnight escape to camp last month. It was even colder now, and Maine was further north. With our luck, we'd end up camping in the snow at some point.

I'd just finished packing in my sweaters when I slapped my forehead, realising the flaw in our plan. 'We'll need to get out of school early.'

Thalia looked pleased with herself. 'Leave that to me.'

+++ The next morning, we stood by the main entrance to the school, each bearing a signed permission slip to leave for winter break a day early. Thalia's private lessons with Chiron were evidently paying
off. She had manipulated the Mist so that Principal Kellis herself had come to tell us at breakfast that we were being summoned home immediately for a 'family emergency'.

The snow started to fall as Sally Jackson's little purple Mazda pulled up in the driveway and we hopped into the back seat.

'Annabeth, Thalia!' Sally's smile was as warm as ever, but there seemed to be a nervous edge to it. I didn't blame her; she was a mortal driving her demigod son and his friends into what could be a deadly battle. It was already remarkably brave of her to act as our chauffeur.

Percy twisted around in the front seat to look at us. 'Hey,' he said.

'So what's up with Grover?' Thalia asked as we pulled out of the school lane and onto the motorway.

'I don't know. He only gave me the address of the school and said he'd meet me there. I haven't heard anything since his distress call yesterday.'

'I thought you guys had an empathy link?' I asked. 'Can't you, I don't know, feel him?'

'It's not like it's a telephone or something,' Percy said. 'I don't even know how to switch it on or off. He's the one who knows how to work it.'

We lapsed into silence, wondering what could have made Grover send out a distress call and then go silent. My imagination didn't help. It kept conjuring pictures of different monsters—Laistrygonians and hellhounds and other terrifying creatures that might hide out in a school up north. I thought of Kitsune. Had the Hunters managed to track her down, or had she escaped? Would she be waiting for us up there?

Sally let out a shaky laugh and turned up her windscreen wipers against the intensifying snow. 'It's really coming down hard,' she said. 'I hope it doesn't turn into a real blizzard. We've got a long drive ahead.' Her voice was tight and her words came out quickly, not unlike Percy when he was nervous about something. 'I hope it doesn't end up like that time we had to drive to Gabe's aunt's funeral. You remember that, honey? Maybe not, you were only six …'

'Twelve hours in a car with that jerk,' Percy muttered. 'Hard to forget.'

He met my eyes and I winced in sympathy. Percy's ex-stepfather made Janet seem warm and cuddly.

'Percy loved the countryside, though,' Sally told us. The reminiscing seemed to help her to relax. 'Ms Ugliano lived near a lake—though it was frozen that winter. I had such a time keeping him off it. He kept telling me the fishies were trapped underneath and he had to set them free.'

'Mom …' Percy groaned. 'Annabeth and Thalia don't need to hear about all that.'

Thalia grinned wickedly. 'No, tell us more, Ms Jackson.'

'Call me Sally, dear.'

Percy sank lower in his seat as his mom regaled us with the adventures of Percy Jackson, six-year-old knight in fish-scale armour. He shrugged his coat up as if he were trying to hide inside it, until all I could see of him were the tips of his ears. They grew redder and redder as Sally segued into more childhood stories, like the time she'd bought him a goldfish and he'd insisted on taking baths with it. Or the time he'd pretended he was a dolphin and slid naked on his belly through the house because 'dolphins don't wear clothes, Mommy!'
'Mom, stop!' he moaned, casting a mortified glance towards the back seat.

I smiled sweetly back at him. This was apt revenge for the embarrassing timing of his Iris-message yesterday. (Okay, fine, so that hadn't really been his fault.)

At first, Thalia listened to Sally's ramblings down memory lane with amusement, but her attention began to wane around the third bathtub tale. She was fidgeting in earnest, spinning her mace canister in her hands and twisting the spray cap back and forth. I was afraid she might accidentally set it off and punch a hole through the roof of Sally's car with her spear, so I asked her, 'What's the longest road trip you've ever taken?'

'My mom drove us up to Sonoma once,' Thalia said. She shoved the mace canister back into her pocket and went very still, like she was retreating into the memory.

'What about you, Annabeth?' Percy asked, picking up on the change in subject with relief. 'Besides our quests, I mean.'

We were winding around Boston on the I-95 just then, reminding me of the longest road trip I'd ever taken with my dad—up here to visit family. He had a brother and sister in Boston, but I hadn't seen them since the Thanksgiving I was six. My mind circled back to the visit, to watching the adults through the upstairs banisters, and hiding out with my cousin Magnus in the library while the argument raged on outside. He was the only one I'd told about my plans to run away. I think I'd hoped at the time that I'd be able to live with him and Aunt Natalie (my seven-year-old brain hadn't quite comprehended the distance between Richmond and Boston). But then I'd met Thalia and Luke and put all thought of going back to my real family out of my head.

I wondered where Magnus and Aunt Natalie were now. As far as I knew, my dad hadn't kept in touch with his family after that massive fight. He never even spoke of them to me. I didn't even think he sent them letters, unlike the way he continued to write to me.

My fingers, which had unconsciously started toying with the beads on my camp necklace, froze around my dad's college ring. In a couple of years, would my dad stop writing to me, too? Would my name drop from his lips, never to cross them again?

I realised I hadn't answered Percy. Not that it mattered. In the long silence, Sally had, to Percy's dismay, started up again with a spirited story about three-year-old Percy deciding to go snorkelling for 'deep sea treasure' in the bathtub.

The blizzard continued to swirl around us as we crossed the border into New Hampshire, and finally, into Maine. Sally's store of stories seemed to be never-ending. It was comforting to hear her going on like any normal, proud mom. Even the stories that involved Percy dealing with dangerous stuff (like strangling a pair of snakes in the crib at playschool—Thalia was quite impressed by that one) were told in the same affectionate tone. I wondered if my dad had ever looked back on my childhood quite so fondly. Had he ever seen my toddler escapades as anything besides a nuisance?

I had a strong urge to call him and ask. Which was stupid. I already knew he and Janet had been perpetually annoyed by the monster attacks that plagued me as a kid.

All thoughts of my family were pushed aside when we finally pulled up at the military boarding school Grover was attending. It looked like something straight out of a fairy tale, with stone walls and turrets that stood out sharply against the snowy backdrop. Even its location, on an ocean cliff at the edge of a deep forest, was perfect storybook material.

Thalia grimaced as she stared out of the car window. 'Oh yeah. This'll be fun.'
I twisted up my hair and tucked it carefully under my ski cap, mentally preparing myself for battle.

'Thanks, Mom,' Percy said. He leaned over as if to kiss her cheek, then seemed to remember we were still in the back seat and pulled away.

'Are you sure you don't want me to wait?' Sally asked. She looked uncertainly at the school.

'No, thanks, Mom,' Percy said firmly. 'I don't know how long it will take. We'll be okay.'

Sally was still hesitating. I could tell even before she said it that she was really worried about him. Not that I blamed her. Percy had a real knack for attracting monsters, and with Thalia and me here, our scent would be at least twice as strong.

But we'd also have thrice the fighting power. And Grover needed us.

'It's okay, Ms Jackson,' I said. 'We'll keep him out of trouble.'

She must really have been anxious, because she forgot to remind me to call her 'Sally'. She turned her head to look at Thalia and me. 'All right, dears. Do you have everything you need?'

Thalia held up her bag. 'Yes, Ms Jackson. Thanks for the ride.'

Sally squinted at our bags as though trying to check the contents by visual X-ray. 'Extra sweaters?' she asked, with a frown at the swirling snow outside. She turned back to Percy. 'You have my cell phone number?'

'Mom …' Percy complained. The back of his neck was glowing as she interrogated him about his supplies. It was kind of sweet how concerned Sally was, checking on every last little detail. I couldn't help contrasting it with my dad's apathetic response when I ran away.

Percy was so lucky.

He didn't act like it just then, though. With a last, 'Mom, seriously,' he opened the car door.

We got out of the car. Sally gave us a wave and pulled out of the drive. The purple Mazda disappeared into the blizzard.

Thalia looked wistfully after it. 'Your mom is so cool, Percy.'

Percy looked like he was sorry he hadn't kissed Sally goodbye after all. 'She's pretty okay,' he said. He wrapped his arms around himself, pulling his coat a little tighter. I did the same; the biting wind seemed to cut through every layer I had on.

We headed up the path towards the school. Up close, it looked more like a medieval castle than ever, with the shadow of its entrance looming over us. All it needed were a couple of gargoyles sitting on the eaves. WESTOVER HALL, said the carved letters over the large double doors. I didn't like the look of it. This seemed like a place that could hold any amount of bloodthirsty creatures.

'What about you?' Percy said. I was confused, until I realised he was talking to Thalia. 'You ever get in touch with your mom?'

The air was suddenly charged with a freezing intensity that had nothing to do with the snowstorm. 'If that was any of your business—'

I sighed and stepped between them before the fight could even begin brewing. Percy hadn't meant any harm with his question, but I guess Thalia wasn't as over her mom's death as she'd pretended to
be. 'We'd better get inside. Grover will be waiting.'

Thalia cast a distasteful look at Percy, then said, 'You're right.' She put a hand on the handle of the oak door and repeated the question that had been in our minds all the way up: 'I wonder what he found here that made him send the distress call.'

'Nothing good,' Percy said grimly, and we pushed open the doors.

Chapter End Notes

All recognisable dialogue in the last scenes in this chapter was taken from *Percy Jackson and the Titan’s Curse*. 
We Infiltrate A School Dance

Chapter Summary

Once again, Annabeth finds herself at a dance with a monster chaperone.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I smelt the magic in the air the moment we stepped into the vast, echoey hall. My dad would have appreciated its decorations—a display of military colours and weapons that wouldn't have been out of place in the Civil War Museum (although from the insignia, the school's history was decidedly pro-Union Army). That wasn't the unsettling thing. It was the dank, earthen smell in the air, like a mix of underground spaces and sour workout clothing.

I would have bet my invisibility cap that there was a monster here.

I was just wondering where we should start looking for Grover when the heavy front doors slammed shut, making us jump. Percy mumbled something under his breath. Thalia pointed down the hall, where a faint strain of music was coming from behind a closed door. A slit of light was barely visible through the gaps; the dark hall was doing its best to swallow it.

'Come on,' Thalia muttered. She put her bag down behind a pillar and moved towards the music. We followed.

Barely ten steps down the hall, a pair of adults stepped out of a shadowy side corridor and blocked our way.

'Well?' The woman who bore down on us was dressed in a smart military uniform with red trim. She wasn't very tall, but her ramrod-straight posture made it seem like she was glaring down at us from a greater height. The man next to her was much taller, and standing even straighter. He wore the same black-and-red uniform and his grey hair in a crew cut.

'What are you doing here?' the woman snapped.

Percy held up his hands. 'Ma'am, we're just—'

The man leaned forward, pushing his face closer to Percy's. He had the strangest eyes: one brown and one blue. They gleamed in the darkness, like an owl's. The way he stared at us also put me in mind of a bird of prey, with its hard glare fixed on a tasty rodent. 'Ha! Visitors are not allowed at the dance!' he said. 'You shall be ejected!'

Dance?

'Here we go again,' Thalia muttered. She snapped her fingers hard. I'd seen her do this last night, when she'd sent a ripple through the Mist that would twist it into presenting things the way she wanted. The layer of Mist was so thick here—I guess that was the weird magic I sensed—that I could actually feel the rustle of her manipulation through the air.

I watched the teachers carefully as Thalia crafted us new identities as Westover Hall students. The
woman's eyes glazed over immediately; the man's narrowed. His nostrils flared. I couldn't tell for sure if he'd been fooled, but then he asked, uncertainly, 'Ms Gottschalk, do you know these students?'

Percy and Thalia let out nearly identical muffled snorts. I couldn't believe they had the mental space in our dire situation to find the name amusing.

Wait, of course I could. This was Percy. He made a joke out of everything. And he and Thalia could be strikingly similar sometimes.

'I … yes, I believe I do, sir,' Ms Gottschalk said dreamily. Her expression became less vacant, more like a strict teacher about to reprimand her students for truancy. She asked us why we'd left the gymnasium. That must be where they were holding their dance.

The man turned his steely glare from Ms Gottschalk to us. When his mismatched eyes fell on me, it was like the biting wind from outside had swept through the stone walls. I got the sensation that whatever Ms Gottschalk had said, this guy wasn't fooled. It didn't necessarily mean that he was a monster—there were mortals who could see through the Mist as well—but his expression reminded me of Ms Seunis's death glare, the one that promised weeks of detention. Or actual death.

Then, to my relief, hasty footsteps came down the hall. Grover appeared, running up in that odd, limping way he had when he wore the fake feet that hid his goat's hooves. 'You made it!' he cried. 'You—oh, Mrs Gottschalk. Dr Thorn!' He greeted the teachers with a nervous, bleating stammer.

Icicles seemed to shoot straight from the man's eyes at Grover. 'What is it, Mr Underwood? What do you mean they made it?' He cast us another nasty look. 'These students live here."

'Yes, sir,' Grover stammered, taking a step back. 'Of course, Dr Thorn.' He rubbed his hands together. I could just about see the gears in his mind turning. 'I just meant I'm so glad they made … the punch for the dance!' His face lit up triumphantly. 'The punch is great. And they made it!"

I tried to look pleased at the compliment. It wasn't easy, with Dr Thorn still glaring fit to kill. I couldn't hold his gaze for long; the two different eye colours were unnerving. Did people actually have eyes like that?

Mrs Gottschalk stepped in. 'Yes,' she agreed, 'the punch is excellent.' She patted Percy on the back as if to congratulate him for it, then bade us all return to the dance.

Grover grabbed our arms and pulled us off towards the gymnasium, from which strains of pop music was issuing.

'That was close!' he said, as soon as we were out of earshot of Mrs Gottschalk and Dr Thorn. 'Thank the gods you got here!' He pulled us into a little alcove just before the gym doors and hugged us in greeting before revealing why he'd called for us.

Grover had found two half-bloods.

As Grover explained his difficulties getting close to the pair, I thought uneasily of the dream I'd had some time back. Luke had been talking to a monster scout, who had mentioned locating two powerful half-bloods in one school. I'd assumed it had been Kitsune and she'd meant Thalia and me; after all, what were the chances that there'd be more than one school in the country with two demigods? We weren't all that common. And yet Grover was sure he'd found another pair. Did that mean Luke's monster scout had been here, instead?
Although Dr Thorn was no longer present, I could've sworn I felt his icy gaze on us. I didn't need Grover's confirmation that he was indeed the monster we were up against.

Grover led us into the gymnasium, which was decorated not unlike St Catherine's had been at the Junior Fling, only with a different colour scheme. The ceiling was festooned with black and red balloons, half of which had already fallen to the floor. A horde of middle school boys were using them for football practice. Watching them wrestle and slam balloons in each other's faces, I started to get why Izzy had so much disdain for mixed-gender dances.

Well, aside from the fact that she had a Hunter's aversion to boys.

'There they are.' Grover pointed out our quarry. They were obviously related, with the same olive skin and dark hair. It was surprising to find two demigods of different age in the same family, but it wasn't unheard of. Some gods—usually the male ones—occasionally favoured a mortal enough to dally with her over a longer period. Hermes had two different-aged sons at camp. Maybe he had fathered these two.

I watched the demigod siblings, trying to see if I could spot any clues to their parentage. The girl had her hands on her hips as she berated her younger brother, although she kept moving them to gesticulate as she spoke. The boy had something in his hands—playing cards, maybe—which he kept shuffling. From time to time, he'd wave one in his sister's face like he was protesting a point. Maybe they were Apollo's kids. The cabin seven kids were usually quite chatty.

'Bianca and Nico di Angelo,' Grover said. As if she'd heard him, Bianca di Angelo's head snapped up and she gave a wary glance around the gym.

Did they sense the danger they were in? Dr Thorn had just entered the gym through a side door near the bleachers.

'Have you told them?' I asked Grover.

He shook his head, explaining that it would only have increased their scent if they'd known who they were. Be sure, then, Luke's giant ally had ordered. The scout must have been Dr Thorn after all. He must have been biding his time all semester, waiting until he was certain about their status. The moment we approached the di Angelos, we'd paint a huge target on them.

We only had one chance to get them out, or we'd lose them for sure.

Thalia must have come to the same conclusion. She took charge of the situation immediately. 'Don't look at the kids—we have to wait for a chance to get them.'

She ushered us towards the dance floor and told us to act natural. 'Do some dancing, but keep an eye on those kids.'

'Dancing?' The kids on the dance floor were doing some weird flailing around with their arms that might be classified as dancing. I recognised the upbeat tune that was playing. It was from the latest Jesse McCartney album. Half the girls on our dorm floor were crazy about it.

Thalia, of course, wasn't one of them. She wrinkled her nose as she grabbed Grover, ignoring his protests that he didn't dance. Before she dragged him onto the dance floor, she jerked her chin towards Percy and gave me a tiny wink.

I gave her a slightly exasperated look in return. All the same, I couldn't pretend that, given the choice, I would much rather dance with Percy than Grover.
'What?' Percy stared at me in puzzlement.

I wiped the silly smile off my face. 'Nothing.' I wasn't about to tell him what had just been going through my head. 'It's just cool to have Thalia back.'

Percy scuffed at the floor with the toes of his shoes. I fingered my bead necklace, wondering if I should just grab him like Thalia had grabbed Grover. Somehow it felt different when it was me and Percy.

'So …' he said. The tips of his ears reddened, like they had in the car. I thought he might be about to ask me formally for a dance. Then he did something even better.

He asked me if I'd been designing anything good.

He knew me so well. This was way better than spinning around awkwardly on the dance floor. My giddy smile returned as I started to tell him about Mrs Carlson and the Ground Zero project, and all the ideas I'd come up with so far. It was easy to visualise the components I'd constructed on AutoCAD as I described them to Percy. He nodded encouragingly at all the right moments. I knew he didn't really understand architecture that well, but at least he never seemed to mind listening to me go on about it. Thalia always rolled her eyes and looked for something less sleep-inducing to do when I brought up the subject.

'So you're staying there the rest of the year, huh?' Percy asked after I finished extolling the virtues of AutoCAD and how awesome computer science class had become under Mrs Carlson.

There was a pause, in which my dad's letter, tucked inside my sketch pad with the two brochures, flitted through my head. The Jesse McCartney track ended and a slow Kelly Clarkson song came on. 'Well, maybe,' I said, fiddling with my necklace again. My eyes drifted to the kids on the dance floor, who had stopped bopping around. They started to pair off, holding each other with stiff, straight arms.

Percy didn't know yet about my dad's move, or the Hunter's offer. Should I tell him? Both options would take me far from him. How would he respond?

I suddenly hoped he'd give me a good reason to stay in New York.

I took a deep breath. 'If I don't—' I began.

'Hey!' Thalia interrupted. She had Grover in what looked more like a wrestling grip than a dance hold, and was steering him forcefully over to us. 'Dance, you guys! You look stupid just standing there.'

She threw a pointed look at the rest of the kids in the gym. We weren't the only ones standing around talking, but the others were in clearly delineated groups: girls in one pack, boys in another. Percy and I were the only chatting pair who weren't of the same gender. Besides the di Angelos, of course. I'd almost forgotten to check on them. They were still in the bleachers, but they had ceased arguing. Bianca had her arms crossed. She was staring blankly at the dance floor while Nico flipped through the cards in his hands. Dr Thorn, thankfully, had sidled away from them, moving towards the punch table.

I looked Percy, who was watching a giggling pack of girls go by with streamers in their hair. My stomach twisted like I'd just drank curdled milk.

'Well?' I demanded. Wasn't he even going to make an attempt to dance with me?
'Um.' He looked like he was steeling himself to face a pack of hellhounds. 'Who should I ask?'

Was he serious? I mean, I was standing right there. If I'd still had the Necklace of Harmonia, I might have tossed it to the pretty girls he'd been staring at and let them rip each other apart.

So much for giving me a reason to stay in New York.

My punch to his arm hit him a little harder than I'd intended. 'Me, Seaweed Brain.'

He went red and mumbled, 'Oh, right.'

I wished dancing had never been invented. Thinking that the Hunters had the right idea about boys after all, I clenched my fist around Percy's hand. His eyes widened like he thought I was going to break his fingers. He rested his other hand awkwardly on my hip. As we revolved slowly among the other couples, I could tell that I'd grown an inch or two taller than him.

Percy kept throwing panicked glances to Grover over his shoulder. It was pathetic. None of the other guys on the dance floor were acting this skittish. Was dancing with me really that bad?

'I'm not going to bite,' I snapped at him. Startled, he stumbled and brought his foot down hard on my toes. He gave me a pained look. It occurred to me then that maybe he just didn't know how to dance. 'Honestly, Percy. Don't you guys have dances at your school?'

He went even redder, by which I gathered I was right. I sighed. Maybe I would have done better dancing with Grover after all. Percy's hands were cold and clammy. Every couple of steps, he stomped on my toes. Irritated, I steered him to a spot out of the way of the other slow-dancing couples, and set us up in a slow, revolving circle.

Percy breathed a little sigh of relief once we found a rhythm. He seemed to decide that our previous conversation was a safer topic than talking about dancing. 'What were you saying earlier? Are you having trouble at school or something?'

I sighed again. 'It's not that.' I decided to start with my dad. I told Percy about the move, and how my dad wanted me to join him in San Francisco, of all places. Percy winced in sympathy, but didn't tell me I was right not to go there.

'So you'll go back to living at camp or what?'

I was about to tell him about the Hunters when my eyes passed over the empty bleachers. Something about it seemed wrong …

Oh crap.

'They're gone,' I gasped.

'What?' Percy turned his head to look. His face paled when he noticed Bianca and Nico's absence as well.

I scanned the gym, hoping they had just gone to get themselves punch or something, but neither sibling was anywhere to be seen. Neither was Dr Thorn.

The side door next to the bleachers, the one Dr Thorn had entered from, lay open.

Stupid, stupid, stupid! This was the flaw in Thalia's plan. Asking three ADHD demigods to multi-task was just looking for trouble. Our brains just weren't cut out for that kind of concentration.
I dropped Percy's hand. 'We have to get Thalia and Grover!'

Unfortunately, they'd danced all the way across the gym. Cursing under my breath, I pushed past a swarm of giggling girls and made a beeline for them. Why hadn't Grover, at least, kept watch on the di Angelos?

The answer to that became clear when I reached them. Grover had been tackled by a large, curly-haired brunette with make-up so heavy, she could have joined a clown posse. It looked like she'd tried to cut in on Grover and Thalia.

'I don't—' Grover squeaked.

'Butt out,' Thalia snarled at the girl.

'But Grover!' The girl's lip trembled. 'I thought you liked me!' If the situation hadn't been so dire, I would have laughed. As it was, Thalia's annoyed expression turned into one of glee. Grover's face resembled a beetroot as he stumbled away from his admirer, holding his hands up. The brunette seemed to take this as an invitation. She grabbed both his hands, pulling him back towards the centre of the dance floor.

Grover threw a glance at Thalia, like, help me! She didn't notice; she was doubled over laughing.

I ran up and tugged Grover away from his curly-haired admirer.

'Hey!' she cried. I ignored her and grabbed Thalia, too, giving her shoulder a shake to stop her laughter.

'They're missing!' I said. 'The di Angelos—they're gone!'

Thalia and Grover turned serious at once.

'Where's Percy?' Grover asked.

I turned around. Hadn't he been following me?

To my dismay, his messy black head was nowhere to be seen.

We'd lost the di Angelos and Percy.

Chapter End Notes

Several lines of dialogue from this chapter come from Percy Jackson and the Titan's Curse.
Chapter Summary

Annabeth goes one-on-one with Dr Thorn.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

What do we do?' Grover sounded close to hyperventilating.

'Should we split up and search?' I suggested.

Thalia shed her earlier amusement. The mantle of leadership settled back over her shoulders. 'No,' she said firmly. 'We don't need to lose anyone else. Stick together.'

We weaved through the crowded gym, scanning the clusters of students carefully in case Percy or the di Angelos might be concealed in their midst. No such luck. Dr Thorn stayed conspicuously absent, too. He wasn't among any of the teachers who roamed the gym, reprimanding students who got too rowdy with the fallen balloons, or sticking rulers between dancing couples who got too close.

Near the bleachers where we'd last seen the di Angelos, I spotted a discarded green cap lying among a scatter of colourful cards. I picked up one of the cards. It had a line-art drawing of a creature with a scorpion's tail and lion's body, but with a human's face leering evilly at me. Manticore, said the heading over the picture, with the number 3000+ in the top right corner. At the bottom of the card was a list of stats. It was probably some sort of trading card, like Pokémon only with mythological creatures.

I turned it over. The back of the card was embossed with a large, purple-and-gold M.

It wasn't important what the cards were, though. More worrying was what they proved: that the di Angelo siblings had been taken from the gymnasium, forcefully enough that they'd dropped their belongings.

Thalia pointed to the open side door next to the bleachers. 'What's in there?'

'The locker room, I think,' Grover said.

'Dr Thorn entered the gym from there,' I said. 'Let's check it out.'

We ran into the locker room. The smell of day-old gym shorts and dried sweat punched me in the nose. Grover groaned. 'I can't pick up monster smells through all this.'

'Shh,' said Thalia. She motioned towards a locked cubicle from which soft, slurping noises were emanating. We approached cautiously, drawing our weapons.

Spear at the ready, Thalia kicked in the door.

A pair of teenagers sprang apart when we burst in on their secret make-out session.
'DUDE!' the boyfriend complained.

The girlfriend, spotting Thalia's spear, screamed.

The next moment, Mrs Gottschalk marched into the locker room.

Grover gasped and clutched at my arm. 'Percy! I just—he's calling me!'

We didn't waste time. Mrs Gottschalk's arms shot out to grab us, but we pushed the two students towards her and she caught the scruffs of their necks instead. Ignoring her angry yells, we sprinted across the gymnasium, out its main entrance—ducking another pair of teachers—and back down the shadowy hall.

'They're outside,' Grover panted. 'I felt—on the empathy link—'

A fierce draught was whistling through the entrance hall. Someone had left one of the double doors open. A series of spikes were embedded in the stone wall; one had impaled a decorative shield display. Shreds of cloth littered the ground beneath the spikes, the same colour as the coat Percy had been wearing.

I gulped. He must still be alive, since Grover could sense him, but those spikes looked deadly. If Percy had been hit …

What sort of monster shot spikes like that?

Outside, faint footprints tracked a path through the snow. It was a good thing we'd come running out when we had. At the rate the blizzard was going, the tracks would have been covered up in minutes. We followed as quickly as we could, pulling our coats tight around us. My heart thumped wildly as I imagined Percy's coat in tatters. Never mind the monster—if we didn't find him soon, he might just freeze out here.

The tracks led through the woods, along a path that was lined with rustic lamps that barely lit our way with their dim light. It was hard to tell through the swirling snow, but I thought the trees might be becoming less dense. There was a strange, chop-chop-chop noise coming from overhead that I couldn't make sense of. Finally, I spotted a clearing ahead, where four dark figures stood out against the snow. Three of them were huddled together at the edge of a cliff, like they were shrinking away from the fourth.

'There!' Grover said.

As if in confirmation, a high-pitched voice carried across to us on the wind: 'They're not dolls! They're figurines!'

I squinted against the snow, trying to spot the bronze glow of Percy's sword. He wasn't carrying it, which meant he'd either been disarmed, or was too injured to wield it. As we got closer, I saw something swish behind the tall form of Dr Thorn, like a long, spiky extension from his back.

Thalia raised her spear, still moving fast towards Percy, Thorn, and the di Angelos. I caught the back of her coat before she could run straight in.

'We need to strategise!' I hissed. 'I don't know what Thorn is, but he's dangerous and he already got Percy!'

'Well, think fast,' Thalia said, 'because it looks like he's already going in for the kill.'
We would have to go for close combat. Thalia was the only one of us with a ranged weapon. Plus, with all this wind and snow, landing a decent shot would be tough even if she didn't have to worry about accidentally hitting Percy or the di Angelos.

'Traditional melee,' I decided. 'But with a distraction.' I found my Yankees hat and planted it firmly over my ski cap. 'Wait until I get his attention, then move in.'

Invisible, I charged straight for Percy and the di Angelos. I reached them just in time, knocking all three to the ground as Thorn's tail swished through the air. With a noise like a cracked whip, the same spikes I'd seen in the entrance hall sailed over our heads and disappeared into the storm. One of them caught the brim of my cap and knocked it off.

Thorn gaped at my sudden appearance. It was enough of an opening for Thalia and Grover. I saw Medusa's fearsome face first as Thalia ran in with Aegis. Too bad it didn't actually have the Gorgon's petrifying power. Thorn froze when he saw it, but recovered quickly enough to dodge Thalia's spear-charge. He sprang to the side, his body expanding as he did to become a lion-like creature with deadly claws and a long, scorpion's tail—the same creature that had been on the trading card in the gym.

'A manticore!' I gasped.

Bianca di Angelo crawled out from under me. 'Who are you people? And what is that?'

Her brother answered her: 'A manticore—he's got three thousand attack power and plus five to saving throws!'

I disentangled myself from Percy and Nico. Grover was playing a frantic tune on his reed pipes, causing weeds to spring from under the snow and grab hold of Thorn's legs. For a moment, I thought Grover's woodland magic would work. But then Thorn's claws tore through the weeds and he sprang out of their grip. His tail twisted towards us.

'Get down!' I reacted instantly, placing a hand on each of the di Angelos' heads. The manticore spikes flew at us.

The next second, something large and bronze sprang up between us and Thorn. I had a brief glimpse of myself and Percy battling a hydra before the image bulged out and distorted. Thorn's spikes embedded themselves in the shield with several loud thunks.

Grover flew through the air next, swatted by the manticore like a tennis ball. He smashed into the snow next to us.

Thorn bellowed in triumph. 'Yield!'

The momentum of Thalia's initial charge had taken her to the other side of the clearing. She turned around and ran forward with a murderous look on her face. 'Never!' she shouted at Thorn, coming in for the kill.

A bright beam of light blinded us all. It appeared out of the sky, like someone had just turned a spotlight onto the stage of our battle. Her vision impaired, Thalia's stab missed. Thorn's tail flew out and knocked both spear and shield out of her hands.

'No!' The cry came from both Percy and me at the same time. Percy was up and running before Aegis even landed in the snow. He reached Thalia just in time, knocking the spike Thorn had sent straight at her chest out of the way. It made another severe dent in his shield. I didn't think the weapon would withstand another assault.
Behind Percy and Thalia, the spotlight lowered. It was coming from a sleek black helicopter, armed to its rotor blades with rocket blasters and double-barrel guns. I blinked, trying to see this monster for its true self, but the Mist refused to shift. The helicopter remained a helicopter. I could even make out little human faces behind its front panel. Its chopper blades cut through the air, throwing up a tiny whirlwind of snow. That was the strange noise I'd heard before—which meant the helicopter was real. But who was manning it? And how had they found us?

The sound of a hunting horn broke through the helicopter blade's chopping, Thorn's gloating laugh, and the howl of the blizzard. It rang with a strong, clear note, filling my ears with its hopeful song.

For a moment, Thorn seemed unable to move. Even the helicopter appeared to be frozen in place.

An arrow zipped through the air and landed in Thorn's shoulder, breaking the spell. It glowed like silvery moonlight—the arrow, that is, not Thorn.

'Curse you!' Thorn twisted in pain and staggered away from us. He flung a volley of spikes in the direction of the arrow, but more arrows filled the air, each one nailing a spike dead centre. The precision of the shots made me catch my breath in awe.

The Hunters poured out of the woods. Instead of silver tunics, they now had ski parkas and thick jeans. Zoë Nightshade was at the head of the group, her expression haughty and her eyes fixed upon the manticore.

'Permission to kill, my lady?'

My eyes darted to the girl next to her, who was younger, maybe Bianca's age, with a simple auburn ponytail. She had a strange, unsettling beauty. Her eyes, glowing like the moon, bore the weight of ancient knowledge, yet they were set in a face as clean and innocent as a child's.

My jaw dropped. I had only seen her in person a few times, but there was no mistaking Artemis herself, goddess of the Hunt.

'This is not fair!' Thorn shouted. 'Direct interference! It is against the Ancient Laws!'

Artemis regarded him sternly. 'Not so,' she said. She had a lilting voice, lightly accented like Zoë's, but with a steely edge that gave each word a reverent weight. 'The hunting of all wild beasts is within my sphere. And you, foul creature, are a wild beast. Zoë, permission granted.'

Zoë's bow pointed straight at Thorn. His eyes darted to where Percy and Thalia lay in the snow, looking stunned by what had just happened. His mismatched irises were wild and feral, like a crazed, cornered beast. Somehow, I sensed even before he spoke what he intended to do.

I'd already seen how fast he could move and how accurately he could fling his spikes.

A streak of red ran down Percy's arm, dotting the snow with his blood. The sight of it made something snap inside me.

I had no plan, no thought—I just leapt.

The world flashed by in slow motion. Zoë loosed her arrow, which the manticore dodged, crying for Percy and Thalia's blood. I intercepted him mid-spring, catching his mane and lodging my knife into his back. Thorn had a thicker hide than I'd expected. He thrashed and bucked under the celestial bronze, but did not disintegrate. We went barrelling past Percy and Thalia.

I heard Zoë cry, 'Fire!' Her command was followed by the swift whistle of another volley of arrows.
They zipped through the air, landing harrowingly close to my face as I clung to Thorn's mane, doing my best to hold him steady so that the Hunters could land their shots.

'This is not the end, Huntress!' Thorn wailed as two arrows hit home. 'You shall pay!'

I had no time to react. Thorn jumped aside. My stomach jolted as we hurtled through the air. He'd leapt right off the side of the cliff—with me on his back.

As I fell, still clutching fistfuls of his mane, I heard Percy screaming my name.

There was a jerk, followed by a swaying sensation, like we'd landed on a trampoline. We were in a giant net, hanging from the military helicopter. There were two of them swerving through the stormy sky. The one carrying us flew away from the cliff while the other stayed to batter Percy and the others with its machine guns.

I rolled off Thorn's back into the net, which was swaying so much, it made me dizzy. It was made of some strange mesh that glowed orange against the stormy sky. Above us, the helicopter window wound down and a dark head leaned out. Its owner was moving his hands in a circular manner.

A shimmering green symbol appeared at the top of the net: a circle that surrounded what looked like a splayed, three-legged stool. At its centre was a spinning pinwheel. I thought I'd seen it before, but I couldn't think where.

A muffled curse drifted down from the guy above, like he was having trouble with whatever he was doing.

Thorn twisted around slowly. He had retracted his claws, probably not wanting to rip the net and risk falling to the ground. Still, he managed to gain enough purchase against the mesh to turn towards me. I struggled as far back from him as I could, but there was nowhere to run.

The manticore's tail curled around me. A thorn pierced my shoulder. My body stiffened, paralysed by whatever poison it had injected.

Everything faded.

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A wave of heat washed over me. Someone was cursing fiercely. I didn't seem to be in the net any more, but it was hard to tell as the manticore's poison was still in effect. It was like when the Myrmeke had bitten me at the end of summer, except it wasn't just my leg. I couldn't move or feel any part of my body.

'Ve should have just flown across,' someone muttered. 'We're even further now than we started out!'

Thorn's voice cut across the muttering. 'We'd be there if Torrington hadn't messed up his spell.'

The person who'd been cursing retorted, 'It's not me—it's the Labyrinth! It's resisting me—I can't—'

There was a high-pitched burst of sound, like the whine of a microphone that had just come on.

'Report, Thorn,' came a cold voice. It crackled like static on a long-distance transmitter radio.

'Yes, General. We have the package,' Thorn said. Maybe it was because I was barely conscious, close to a dream state, but I recognised his voice properly now. He was the monster I had heard in my dream, talking to Luke and his giant ally. Thorn was no longer confident or angry, as he'd been
during our battle on the cliff, but subservient. He seemed to expect a reprimand from his superiors. 'A
half-blood.'

There was a long pause. Then the General on the other end shouted, 'It's useless! This is not the half-
blood you were meant to deliver! Kill it!' There was a loud BANG, like someone had slammed
something into a rock wall. 'And now we have Artemis on our tail as well. You fool!'

'No, wait!' My heart leapt. That was Luke's voice, coming over the static. 'Don't kill her—I mean,
there's a way we can play this. I have an idea.'

The connection crackled so badly, I couldn't hear what Luke said next. When it stabilised, the
General seemed to have calmed down. 'You think like a strategist, boy,' he said. 'This … yes, this
might work.' He addressed Thorn once more. 'Where have you brought her?'

'Er—' Thorn floundered.

'Costa Rica, I think,' Torrington said timidly. 'Sir, I don't know what went wrong. I thought the
magic would work. I mean, with the Great Stirrings, and our monster army straight regenerating into
it, I thought—'

'Maybe because it's not part of the Great Stirrings,' Thorn said acidly. 'Maybe it's been in existence
all this while.'

'That's impossible!'

'No,' Luke said, 'it's not. Anyway, that's not the point.'

'Enough discussion,' said the General. There was no arguing with his tone. 'Find a solution. Bring
the girl here.'


My finger twitched. The paralysis was wearing off.

'Get the helicopter down to the Panama Canal with the—' He stopped, like he was swallowing hard.
'With the package. The ship can be there in six hours.'

Feeling was returning slowly to my skin. Hands were lifting me, strapping me into a seat. My eyes
opened at last. Immediately, I wished they hadn't, because I found myself staring straight into Thorn's
cruel, unnatural eyes.

'Awake, are we?' he said nastily. 'You'll soon wish you were dead, meddlesome girl. You'll pay for
making a fool of me.'

He jabbed me in the shoulder again. My vision swam as the painful prick delivered another dose of
poison into my veins and I blacked out again.

Chapter End Notes

Dialogue from the fight with Dr Thorn comes from *Percy Jackson and the Titan's Curse*. 
Torrington is, of course, Alabaster Torrington from the short story *Son of Magic* in *The Demigod Diaries*. He was obviously important enough in the Titan army to earn himself exile after the war, so I figured he must have been more than a simple foot soldier. I based the magic symbol Torrington makes in the air off one of Hecate's symbols. And yes, Annabeth did see it before in this fic. Anyone still remember it?

Fun fact: the largest labyrinth in the world is *La Senda*, in Costa Rica. I figured, since I'm playing with the labyrinth … why not? It makes a handy alternative for why the *Princess Andromeda* was hanging around at the Panama Canal, anyway!
When I woke up, my first thought was that I must still be dreaming.

I was alone in the dark. There was no sign of my captors. At first, I thought I was inside a cavern. It took me a moment to realise that I was just surrounded by a fog so thick, it seemed like a solid wall.

Where had I encountered fog like this before?

I was lying on a slanted path near the top of a hill. Fog rolled around it, thickening like inky soup at the foot of the slope. There was something unsettling about the way it churned, like a bottomless cesspool waiting to devour anyone who fell in. It reminded me of the horrible chasm in the Underworld that sucked you straight into Tartarus—the gaol to which the worst monsters were condemned.

Above, there was a point where the fog thinned, giving a tiny glimpse of a starry sky. I got to my feet, still weak and unsteady from the manticore's poison, and headed upwards, away from the terrifying pit below.

The ache in my body and my shortness of breath confirmed that this wasn't just a dream. After several laborious minutes of climbing, I came to a clearing littered with black marble. Large columns lay toppled across cracked stone and broken walls. Smaller pieces of debris were strewn all over the ground.

I knew then why all of this seemed like a dream. I had dreamt of this place before, months ago. It had been twilight and the central agora had been set up for a council of twelve. I'd thought the ancient ruins existed only in dreams and memories, but here it was, a real place after all.

Or a reformed place.

Why was I here? Where were Thorn and his lackeys?

The silence was so intense, it seemed to prickle on my skin. It was as if the earth had opened up and swallowed everyone who should have been here. Spooked, I called out. Even facing Thorn was preferable to being alone in this godforsaken place.

Someone moaned.

The sound was coming from further up the hill. I crawled over a broken marble wall blocking my way and carried on climbing until I reached the crest. Here, the fog took on a swirling, rushing quality. It funnelled down from the night sky, centring on a shuddering figure at its apex. A man was on his knees, his head and shoulders hunched until he was nearly bent double. His hands were at the level of his ears, pushing up against a heavy weight. He let out a groan that was raw with pain.
Slowly, he raised his head.

I inhaled sharply as my eyes met Luke's pleading gaze.

'Annabeth!' His voice was ragged and hoarse. Sweat rolled off his forehead, which was the colour of whey. He'd lost an alarming amount of weight since the last time I'd seen him. His skin seemed to sag off his thin frame. He appeared to be tinted grey, from his once-sandy hair to his shivering skin. 'Help me,' he begged. 'Please!' I ran to him at once. The closer I got, the more the air seemed to bear down upon me, like the sky itself was closing in.

The sky.

I stared at Luke, at his haggard face, his torn clothes—worn through as though from constant rubbing against the load on his back. His back arched as he struggled just to hold his position.

It seemed impossible that he could be carrying the sky on his back—logic, for one, dictated that I shouldn't be able to stand in front of him while it compressed him into an ever-lowering crouch. But I could think of no other explanation.

How had this happened?

'They left me here,' Luke answered, and I realised I'd wondered aloud. My hand was trembling. It had reached out to him of its own accord. It wavered in the air, inches from his face.

I withdrew it and touched my own cheek, finding it wet. I hadn't even noticed the tears falling from my eyes.

'Please,' Luke gasped. He strained, grinding his teeth as he tried in vain to straighten his back. His hands fell to the rocky ground. The ceiling of fog closed the gap, sitting right on his neck, pushing his head down. 'It's killing me.'

'Luke,' I whispered. My heart tugged at me to help, but there were so many questions swirling in my head, just like the fog surrounding him. I needed to know what was going on, where we were, why I was here, who Luke was working for, how I could even help … why I should.

If this was indeed the sky, it was an impossible situation. I'd never be able to lift it off him. If it wasn't … Could it be a trap?

I still didn't understand how Luke could be here. The last I'd known, Luke had been with his giant ally, the mysterious General who had wanted me dead.

The General. I'd seen him in a dream, listening with Luke to Thorn's report. Luke had been standing in my exact position, next to the giant who had stooped as though under a heavy load. This heavy load. It was him—the original bearer of the sky, the Titan Atlas. He was the General.

Had they punished Luke because he'd stopped them from killing me? Or was it part of some greater plan?

*You think like a strategist, boy,* the General had said.

'Why—why should I trust you?'

Luke's answer nearly cracked my heart in two. 'You shouldn't,' he rasped. With great difficulty, he
lifted his head to look up at me. I felt my knees bend, lowering myself to meet his gaze. 'I've been—
terrible to you.' He closed his eyes briefly. 'But, if you don't help me, I'll die.'

As if to prove his point, he slid another inch lower. The air escaped his lungs in a pained sigh, like
each breath was being slowly crushed out of him.

'You were right—all along,' he breathed, so softly that I had to lean closer to hear. 'I should never
have … I know I don't deserve your help, but … I don't want to die …'

He was crushed so low now that there was practically nothing between the funnel of fog and the
earth—just the sliver of his thin body pressed flat against the rocky ground. There was a tremor
beneath us, like the beginning of an earthquake.

The sky above the fog shuddered. Bits began to split off from it, thudding to the ground in large
chunks of rock. I was startled by how solid it was—a real ceiling that did need to be held in place.

What would happen if nothing was left to hold it?

seemed to play on fast-forward: the sky descending like the lid of the box, only to jerk to a stop on
the shoulders of a giant; a crowd holding a collective breath and releasing it when the stars retreated
upwards.

And then the sky was falling, little pieces crumbling around Luke as the large, cracked ceiling shook,
ready to cave in at any moment. He had no chance to escape; it would collapse and crush the life out
of him.

It was just like when I'd jumped Thorn to stop the manticore from killing Percy and Thalia. I didn't
stop to consider the futility of taking on a burden that only a Titan could bear. I didn't weigh the
chances that this could be a trap. I simply acted, darting forward and squeezing myself under the
column of fog pressing down on Luke. Maybe I thought that together, we would have a better
chance to hold it up.

More likely, I simply couldn't bear to watch my friend killed in front of me.

The ceiling of sky smashed down on us. I raised my arms over our heads, palms facing up, in a
desperate attempt to stop it.

Miraculously, we weren't crushed. The sky landed against my hands, jarring my wrists worse than
the time I'd fallen from the camp lava wall straight into a handspring. I thought my joints might snap
from the force of it, but somehow, they held on. I was a wedge, shoved between sky and earth,
barely keeping a gap between them.

I did the only thing I could think of. With a Herculean effort (literally, I guess, since Hercules had
been the first demigod to attempt this), I staggered to my knees. Then, dragging one leg forward into
a lunge, I pushed up like an Olympic lifter. There was no describing how heavy it was. I could add
up the heaviest weights I'd ever carried in my entire life and I doubt the sum would even come close
to a tenth of what this thing weighed.

My whole body shook uncontrollably. I wasn't going to manage it. How could I? I was one girl—
smaller than Luke, smaller than Hercules, and infinitely smaller than the Titan whose burden this was
supposed to be.

But if I didn't, I'd be crushed. Luke would be crushed. We would both die here, and I would have
failed to save us.
Sweat poured down my face. I was wheezing and panting harder than I'd ever done in my life—and this was counting all the monsters I'd outrun and all the crazy cliffs I'd climbed. Incredibly, the sky lifted. It balanced against my shoulders like the world's heaviest barbell.

Luke lay at my feet, so still that I feared I'd been too late. Then he groaned and rolled out from under the column of sky on my shoulders.

'Luke,' I breathed. Talking was a challenge. Every breath I took was a struggle. With every exhalation, the sky seemed to bear down on me harder, crushing the air from my lungs. I didn't even know how I was standing.

Luke got slowly to his feet. 'Thanks,' he said, gulping in great, shuddering breaths.

'Help me hold it,' I pleaded. The strain in my arms and back was unbearable.

Luke straightened and looked at me directly. The emotions that swirled in his eyes were messier than the column of fog around us. There was fear and guilt, but also cold calculation and a sickening flash of triumph. 'I knew I could count on you,' he said hoarsely.

My arms shook, and it wasn't just from the impossible weight they bore. Luke was turning, taking a step away from me. He was leaving.

No—he couldn't me leaving me. Not after I'd saved his life.

'Help me!' I begged again.

Luke hesitated. He looked back and I saw the indecision in his eyes, hovering over the flurry of complex emotions underneath. 'Don't worry, your help is on the way,' he promised. 'It's—it's all part of the plan.'

He smiled weakly, like he was trying to convince us both. It wasn't any comfort. Whatever he had in mind—even if he had a way to make this right in the end—there were clearly so many layers to the plan that it couldn't be Luke alone orchestrating it.

It was the poisoning of Thalia's tree all over again—layer upon layer of deception, beginning with one terrible betrayal. He must have looked exactly like this when he'd injected poison into her trunk last summer.

This wasn't the Luke I'd just rushed in to save. It couldn't be.

Tears mingled with the sweat on my face and fell to the ground at my feet. Luke turned like he couldn't bear to look. Of course he couldn't. It was how he'd known I'd take the load. Even suspecting it was a trap, I couldn't have done anything else. He knew I couldn't have stood there and watched him die, no matter what he'd done.

Luke raised his head. 'In the meantime …' His mouth moved silently, as though in prayer. Still not looking at me, he whispered, 'Try not to die.'

He disappeared down the hill.

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I didn't know how long I stood there, with every muscle in my body shaking like a leaf. Luke's betrayal seemed to double the weight of the sky, until I folded in on myself, trembling and crying. My knees buckled and hit the stony ground. The sky shuddered as it had earlier, when it threatened
to collapse on Luke.

He didn't return.

He hadn't said how long I had to hang on. I didn't think I could manage even a minute longer.

Then the ground began to glow.

The shock distracted me momentarily from the untenable pressure pushing me down. I gasped as I locked eyes on my dagger. Its celestial bronze glow was shining through the heavy darkness.

How could it be here? The last I'd known, it had been stuck in Thorn's mane when I'd stabbed him. My dagger wasn't magic like Percy's sword; it couldn't reappear if I'd lost it.

Yet here it was, glowing on the ground. And even more impossibly, rising to hover in the air, level with my eyes. I couldn't believe it. I had to be seeing things. Maybe I'd already been crushed to death and this was some pre-afterlife hallucination.

But wasn't I already accomplishing something impossible? I had the sky on my back. What was one more impossible thing?

Hallucination or not, my dagger was a comforting presence. Besides its warm, soothing glow, it seemed to issue a steady stream of encouragement: *'Hang on, don't let go, we'll find you—just hold on!'* The voices were a mix of everyone I had ever loved—everyone who loved me.

I knew it was probably just my own wishful thinking. I wanted them to help me, to save me before my limbs gave out and the sky collapsed on me. But no one except Luke knew where I was. The last anyone had seen of me, I'd been tumbling to my death on the back of a killer manticore. They probably thought I was dead, either dashed against the bottom of the cliff, or slain by the manticore.

Thorn *would* have killed me, if it hadn't been for Luke.

Luke's plan. I still didn't know what it was. Could I hold out until the help he promised arrived?

How long had Luke held the sky before I found him?

These thoughts just made me weaker. I focused instead on the knife and its steady, encouraging glow.

And the voices. Although they could not lift the sky from my shoulders, they made the weight less difficult to bear.

*'Take heart, Annabeth,*' Chiron murmured.

*'You're my brave girl,*' my father said.

*'We're coming for you,*' Thalia promised.

*'Don't give up!*' Grover insisted.

*'I'll find you, Annabeth.*' Percy's voice was so clear, I could almost see him standing before me, a fierce promise in his green eyes.

In fact, there was an image in front of me. Reflected in the shiny surface of my blade was a single eye—my own reflection, maybe? But then I saw the pale, almost colourless iris, and the light sprinkle of freckles on the fair skin under it.
'Hold on, Annie.' It was Izzy's voice, though I had never heard her sound so earnest. She'd also never called me Annie before. 'I'm going to break the spell, and then you can come out.'

Puzzled, I stared harder into the blade. The reflection zoomed out, showing me Izzy's whole face, staring through the opening of a cave. Inside was another girl, as dark as Izzy was fair, but who shared the same pale eyes and large, bumpy nose. I understood then—-Izzy wasn't talking to me. This was a vision, a memory like the ones I'd seen in my dreams.

A boulder rolled over the cave entrance, shutting Izzy's sister away from the sunlight. I watched Izzy run off, clutching a package to her chest. She was dressed differently, in an old-fashioned chiton dating back thousands of years. Her flaxen hair was in braids piled atop her head instead of pulled back into a ponytail. But her face was exactly the same as the one I'd seen a few weeks ago—exactly the same as it would be for the rest of her life.

The image grew larger, like it was sucking me into a different world. I could see the whole countryside—a maze of trees, a winding river, a mountainside. Izzy wound through the forest, which twisted and turned in such a labyrinthine manner, I wondered how she could tell where she was going. She forded the river and stumbled up the mountain slope, one hand pressed to her side as though holding back a stitch. The other hugged her package tight, like it was a baby she didn't dare drop.

A circular, open-air temple sat on the stormy mountaintop, encircled by a ring of standing stones. Each was carved in the image of a sternly beautiful goddess, with the imprint of an owl etched into her stone chest. The statues seemed to turn their faces as Izzy passed among them.

My breath caught in my throat. One of my mother's stone statues was looking directly at me. I heard in my head, 'Focus, Annabeth. Watch and hang on.'

I kept watching. It didn't really matter what the knife was showing me, whether this was relevant or just some random history. Having something to focus on other than my screaming muscles and the ache travelling down my spine seemed to lessen the pressure of the sky. It kept me steady beneath my burden.

Izzy reached the centre of the temple, where a raised mound was surrounded by a low marble wall. She emptied her package onto the altar. Out slithered the jewel-encrusted golden necklace with the snake-head clasps: the Necklace of Harmonia.

'Hear me, O goddess of wisdom!' she cried. From inside her chiton, she drew a bronze dagger not unlike my own and raised it high above her head. 'This dagger has seen the bloodshed and destruction of the line of Thebes. I present it as a sacrifice, to lift the curse that this necklace has wrought on my family, and beg for your protection.' She struck the necklace dead centre with the dagger.

Lightning arched through the sky with a rumble that I'd always associated with oaths on the Styx, or the wrath of the gods. The sky clouded over. Rain began to fall, intensifying into a torrential downpour so thick I could no longer see Izzy or the temple.

Then I heard a different voice, from a scene I'd replayed a thousand times in my nightmares.

Thalia stood at the crest of Half-Blood Hill, shouting, 'Go, Luke! Get Annabeth to safety. I'll hold them off!'

Luke's face swam into view, streaked with grime. 'We'll fight together—'
Thalia shook her head vehemently. 'They're after me. I'm sick of running. You guys can make it.'

'Thalia …'

'We're her family now,' Thalia reminded him. 'You promised.'

Her words echoed around me: Promised, promised, promised …

The next flash of lightning was so bright, it whitened out the entire scene. When it resolved, I was staring into the calm face of my mother. She smiled at me, more tenderly than I had ever seen her look before.

'You are strong, my daughter,' she said. She reached out as if to smooth my hair, but before her hand could reach me, her image dissolved, fading into the contours of a dusty attic. A boy stood facing a mummified husk of a girl, his hands clasped in supplication.

'How can I save her?' Percy asked the Oracle.

He turned away and became Luke, standing over me in the rain, blinking back tears as the tree that had once been Thalia stretched its branches towards the sky. 'There's still me. I'm your family.' he said.

The celestial bronze glow faded, but Luke didn't. I kept staring at him. He looked so solid, I would have sworn that if my hands were free, I could reach out and touch him.

I blinked. How delirious was I? My dagger was no longer in front of me, but I could feel it under my sleeve, warm and comforting against my skin.

Then I realised I was staring at Luke—the real Luke, with his hard eyes and scarred cheek. He still looked haggard and grey, like the colour had been washed out of him. He seemed relieved to find me still standing.

'Impressive,' boomed a voice. 'Who would have thought—a daughter of Athena.'

I squinted into the darkness, only to find it was no longer pitch black. While I had been immersed in my knife's visions, the sun had risen, casting little pink fingers of dawn through the overcast gloom. A hulking figure was approaching me, dressed in an impeccably tailored suit. What was it with immortals and formal wear? A good twenty feet tall and thick with muscle, from his beefy arms to his elephantine legs, he looked like he'd been built to carry the weight that now rested on my back.

'Our spies report that the Hunters are at Camp Half-Blood,' Luke said. 'The plan—'

Atlas laughed. It had a cruel ring that sent shivers down my already trembling spine. There was no way he was the help Luke had promised me.

'Yes,' he said. 'This may work after all. You may be right, Luke. Perhaps the girl is not entirely useless after all.' He weighed me with a critical glance, taking in my crumpled posture, my shallow breathing, my struggle against his burden. I wanted to spit in his face, only I didn't have the energy to work up the saliva. 'In fact, she has held it longer than I believed possible. Longer than you could have, I warrant.'

Luke said nothing.

Atlas laughed again and turned away. 'Come,' he said. 'It is time for you to prove yourself. You will be part of the hunting party.'
He strolled away down the mountain path, utterly unconcerned about my fate.

Whatever strength my knife had bestowed seemed to desert me. My knees were weaker than ever, shaking worse than a leaf in a hurricane.

'Luke,' I called weakly.

He hesitated, fingers clenching and unclenching at his side. Slowly, he turned to me.

'A little longer,' he said softly. 'Just a little longer, Annabeth. I—I promise.'

And he left me again, with his final words echoing in my aching head.

Chapter End Notes

Most of the dialogue where Annabeth takes the sky from Luke is, of course, from *Percy Jackson and the Titan's Curse*, although I've played very liberally with the perspective.

'Annie' is a loose reference to Sophocles's *Antigone*, who is Ismene's sister. In the actual play, Ismene does not have such an expanded role as I have depicted here; this is completely my embellishment. The temple where Izzy sacrificed the necklace is based on the *Temple of Athena Pronaia at Delphi*. 
I Am Used As Bait

Chapter Summary

Luke makes an exchange for Annabeth.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

In my state of dazed numbness, time ceased to have meaning. I was a statue, a pillar, frozen in place, scarcely noticing the passage of the sun over my head. On the fog-shrouded mountaintop, daylight barely penetrated the gloom. I spent most of the time with my eyes closed, replaying the images my knife had shown me.

Darkness fell again, though it seemed impossible that I had been here for a day. The sky continued to weigh me down, crushing my knees into the rock, but I had reached a point beyond pain. All I knew was that I had to keep pushing upwards.

*It'll crush me eventually,* I thought wearily.

*'You can't give up.*' The voice in my head sounded so much like Percy. *'How will I find you if you give up?"*

So I held on.

By the time Luke returned, I was curled over my knees, my spine so curved I was afraid that even if I escaped, I'd never walk straight again. It took all my energy to breathe. I didn't even have the strength to look up, let alone plead for help.

It was Atlas I heard first, his booming voice reverberating all over the mountainside.

Then came the sound of quick footsteps. My eyes struggled open—just lifting my eyelids felt like heaving the sky. Luke's scuffed trainers came into focus, then the ratty fabric of his jeans. His hand cupped my chin, lifting my head to look up at him. My vision was blurry. There seemed to be two copies of his face shimmering before me, both gazing at me with identical concern.

*'She's fading,'* he said. His voice was tinny, as though coming across a bad Iris-connection. It was a lot less real than the voices I'd been imagining in my head.

There was a rumbling laugh, followed by the clink of chains. A pair of tiny bare feet came into view, their ankles wrapped tight with celestial bronze chains. They were cut all over, but no rust-brown blood matted these feet. Instead, they were covered in what looked like golden dewdrops.

Ichor, the blood of the gods.

The sight of it shocked me into alertness. My head creaked up.

Standing before me was the twelve-year-old Artemis, held captive in bronze chains. Gone was her ski parka, replaced by a silver dress that was hardly more than rags hanging off her body. Her arms and face were as scratched up as her feet. Ichor dripped from them to the ground. But her eyes were
as coldly defiant as when she'd given the order to finish Thorn at Westover Hall.

'You heard the boy—decide!' Atlas barked.

Lightning flashed in Artemis's eyes, not unlike Thalia's expression when she got mad. 'How dare you torture a maiden like this!'

'She will die soon.' There was a hitch in Luke's voice. 'You can save her.'

This was the help he had promised. This was his grand plan—to use me to ensnare a goddess. I choked on the repulsiveness of it. Did he think I would consent? I'd let the sky smash me flat first!

But the only sound I was capable of was a hoarse groan. My head drooped again, losing the strength I'd found to lift it.

Artemis's feet turned away slightly. 'Free my hands,' she commanded.

There was the swish of a sword through the air, followed by a clang as it struck Artemis's chains. The next thing I knew, the lithe body of the goddess was crouched next to me.

I managed a feeble gasp—'No!'

It seemed laughable that a twelve-year-old girl could lift a weight that had overcome me and Luke, but of course, Artemis wasn't really twelve. Like Atlas, her material form was only a façade of what she could be.

It was like when you stabbed a monster and it crumbled into ash—only I was the disintegrating monster. My body, relieved of its overwhelming burden, was strangely insubstantial. My legs gave out, as did my back. I fell to the ground, still trembling from the exertion.

The sky shook as Artemis adjusted her hold on it, stumbling as she strained to keep it up. She managed it with greater ease than Luke or I had, but I could still see the golden sweat beading on her forehead, the lines of effort drawn across her youthful face.

'You are as predictable as you were easy to beat, Artemis,' Atlas said with smug satisfaction.

Artemis's voice was strained, but disdainful. 'You surprised me. It will not happen again.'

Luke bent over me while Atlas continued to taunt the goddess. His hand stroked my head gently. 'Annabeth,' he whispered, pulling me away from Artemis. 'You did it.'

I wanted to tell him to get lost, that he was insane if I thought I'd thank him for using me like a pawn against Artemis, but blackness was encroaching on my mind. My eyes closed involuntarily.

'You may kill the girl now,' Atlas said coldly.

There was a rattle of chains. The ceiling creaked, like Artemis was shifting it on her shoulders again. 'No!'

The insistence in her voice jerked me back to the hard, rocky mountaintop. Was she fighting for my life? Why would she do that?

She took the sky from you, I reminded myself. But this didn't make sense, either. Why had Artemis allowed herself to be trapped under the sky, for what could be eternity? She could have just let me die. Instead, she'd sacrificed herself, a queen taking the fall for a pawn.
It was as if I were someone special, like Thalia, or Percy—a demigod of importance. Someone who mattered to the gods.

I didn’t know what to make of it.

Luke leaned over me. 'She may yet be useful, sir.' There was a pause, like he was thinking hard. 'Further bait?'

Atlas sneered. 'You truly believe that?'

'Yes, General.' I heard Luke sheathe his sword. His hand rested on my shoulder. I could feel it trembling slightly. 'They will come for her, I'm sure.'

My pulse quickened. Were my friends looking for me after all? Did they realise I was still alive, and in enemy hands?

'I'll find you, Annabeth,' Percy whispered in my head.

'Then the dracaenae can guard her here,' Atlas said at last. 'Assuming she does not die from her injuries—' he gave a soft snort, as though he fully expected me to expire within a day, 'you may keep her alive until winter solstice. After that, if our sacrifice goes as planned, her life will be meaningless.' He clapped his hands together. It sounded like a gunshot. 'The lives of all mortals will be meaningless.'

Luke’s arms found my knees and back. I was scooped up, carried close to his chest like I was seven years old again. The movement sent a wave of dizziness rushing through my head. Darkness enveloped my thoughts.

The last thing I heard was Artemis’s cold voice calling after us, 'Your plan will fail!'

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'Annabeth. Annabeth!'

I didn’t want to wake up. There was a battering ram against the inside of my forehead, like Athena struggling to burst from Zeus’s skull. I wanted to sink back into blissful unconsciousness.

Something hard pressed against my lips. I breathed in, inhaling the unexpected smell of warm chocolate. My tongue touched the corner of the little square that was forced into my mouth.

'You have to eat it, Annabeth,' Luke whispered. 'Quickly, before—'

My teeth closed around the hard square. It tasted sweet and creamy, like the hot chocolate Percy’s mom had made for us at his apartment, or the rich, moist muffins Sally had baked. One bite spread soft, tender comfort through my veins.

Ambrosia.

Its healing power washed through me, reviving my broken body. The pounding in my head lessened. My limbs felt less like limp noodles.

I opened my eyes. I was lying on hard ground, with Luke bending over me. We might have been in a jail cell, except there were no bars. It was a little square hollowed into the earth, away from a main passageway. It was hard to tell, lying down, but I suspected there wouldn’t be enough room for me to stand up straight—if I even had the strength to, that is. The ceiling was barely a foot above Luke’s
head as he kneeled beside me.

Standing just outside my cell, so large that he filled the entire passage, was the giant Atlas. His arms were crossed and his expression was impatient.

'I am not entirely convinced this is necessary,' he grumbled. 'The Hunters will come, and you've already confirmed that the girl is with them. They will bring her straight to us.'

'But not Percy Jackson,' Luke said. He got up and moved out into the passageway. 'My spy indicated that their fifth member is Grover Underwood.'

'And this is important, why?'

'Because I know Percy Jackson. I know his fatal weakness. It was how we enticed him to the Underworld last year. It was what led us to the Fleece last summer. He will not leave a friend.' There was a bitter note in Luke's voice as he said this. 'And he—' Luke stopped, cleared his throat, and said, more harshly, 'She will be our bait. He will take it, and we will finally be rid of him.'

My eyes widened. All hope that Percy would indeed come for me crashed around my ears. I'd already been a trap for Artemis. I wouldn't—I couldn't be one for Percy as well.

But Luke had sized up Percy well enough. From our very first quest, even before I'd realised we were friends, Percy had thrown aside his own safety to save me and Grover.

Atlas huffed. 'Do not think I fail to see your concern for this half-blood, Luke. What makes you think anyone still believes her alive?' His lip curled as he considered me. 'By all rights, she should be dead. But these mortal bodies are harder than we realised. Perhaps … yes, it would be good to have a back-up.'

'Sir?'

'She was able to take the sky. It is not meant for mortals to carry, and yet she achieved it.' Atlas bent down to look at me more closely. 'You are awake, daughter of Athena. What say you? Your friends have allowed you to be captured and left you for dead. Shall you join our cause now?'

I spat in his face.

Atlas reeled back. I expected him to hit me, or punish me in some other way, but he merely wiped his face and chuckled. 'Pity. It would only work if the vessel were willing. But you …' He turned to Luke with a calculating gleam in his eyes. 'You managed, too. Yes, you might just do, Luke Castellan. With some … adjustments, you have potential.'

Luke took a step back, bumping his head against the overhang from my cell. 'What do you mean, sir? Potential for what?'

Atlas straightened and adjusted the tie on his silk suit. 'We will speak of it later. For now, let us hope your plan will work. And—ah, here come the guards.'

Two *dracaenae* slithered up to the entrance of my cell, their upper bodies swaying hypnotically over their serpentine lower halves.

'Watch the prisoner,' Atlas ordered.

'If you are right and the Jackson boy comes, we will kill him then. If not, he will die anyway, as long as the plan goes as intended. And on that note, we have a quest team to intercept.'

Atlas strode away without a backwards glance.

'We can eat her?' hissed one of the *dracaenae*.

'No!' Luke said sharply.

'She is a prisoner,' the other *dracaena* complained. 'We eat prisoners.'

'I said no!'

The *dracaenae* looked sulky. Luke threw me a worried glance. 'The General needs her alive,' he lied. 'He'll be really pissed off if she dies. We'll be back shortly. Guard her, but don't hurt her!'

'We got to eat the last prisoner,' muttered the first *dracaena*, once Luke had retreated down the passageway after the General.

'Maybe later, Sssssue,' the second suggested hopefully. In her sibilant voice, the words sounded like they had at least five S's. 'Prisoners don't stay prisoners forever.'

'That is true,' Sue said.

The *dracaenae* settled themselves outside my cell. Their chunky dragon legs almost blocked the passage outside completely from my view.

'Cards, Sssssandra?' Sue extracted a deck from her blouse pocket.

'Oh, is that the Ancient Islands Expansion Deck?' Sandra said excitedly. The pair of them started to flip through the cards.

My eyelids felt heavy again. I didn't want to fall asleep under monster guard, but there was no fighting my exhaustion. Although the ambrosia had helped to mend some of the damage the sky had wreaked on my body, I was far from healed. Every muscle ached as though I'd climbed ten lava walls and then sprinted the perimeter of camp. Twice.

Fatigue closed in on me. Against my will, my eyes closed. My last thought was a silent, tortured prayer that Percy wouldn't walk into Luke's latest trap.

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In my dream, I was being chased by an angry mob with flaming torches. A heavy necklace slapped against my chest as I ran, thumping in time to my pounding heart. I was dressed in a long chiton and golden sandals, staggering over loose gravel on the path. A man ran beside me, holding my hand and keeping me steady when I stumbled. On my other side, a woman with flame-coloured hair kept pace with us.

My gasp caught in my throat. Although she couldn't do anything to me in a dream, I couldn't help the shudder that ran through me when I recognised Kitsune.

Around us, circling like protective guards, were five men so thin they were practically skeletons, with smart, military uniforms that seemed to wear them instead of the other way round.

'Sir!' croaked one of the skeletal guards. 'We could fight—'
'They are still our people, Echion,' the man holding my hand said sharply. 'We will not harm them.'

'Your people,' the guard said. 'And they have turned on you.'

'It is the work of the gods—one god, in particular.'

' Cadmus,' I said, panting, 'it wasn't—'

'Where else did the boar come from?' Cadmus said wildly. 'The people are terrified. They believe we were responsible—and the spartoi—' he nodded at the five skeleton men, 'do not put them at ease. We will leave the city for now and regroup.'

The mob chased us out of a gate in a long stone wall that stretched for miles, encircling the city behind us. The mountainous countryside beyond looked familiar. It was the same terrain that Izzy had traversed on her quest to destroy the Necklace of Harmonia.

As we fled down the slope of a hill, a burly man with a cruelly handsome face stepped into our path, raising one hand to halt our progress. We crashed to a stop as though he had raised an invisible barrier.

'D-Dad,' I stammered.

'Very good, Harmonia,' Ares said icily. 'I see someone has finally told you.'

With a flick of his fingers, the men around me vanished. The guards crumpled into a pile of bones, which sank into the earth, leaving only five sharp teeth. Cadmus's hand released mine, replaced by a thick, coiled snake.

I screamed and dropped him.

Ares smiled coldly. 'I've wanted to do that for a long time.'

'Why? What has he done to you?'

'What hasn't he done?' Ares said. His eyes darted to the necklace I wore. For a moment, he looked confused. Then he shook his head, clearing his expression. 'Your husband commissioned temples to Aphrodite and Hephaestus—in your name!'

'Yes—I asked him to!'

'In the name of peace!' Ares shouted. 'My daughter, goddess of peace!' Spittle flew from his mouth. 'Yes, I am your father, not that—that—cripple!' His eyes bulged. 'As if he could have produced a child this fine.'

'I didn't know!' I shrieked. 'I didn't know you were my dad! And—you didn't know either! Not until—' My eyes darted desperately to the left. Kitsune had vanished as well, but there was the familiar flash of a bushy, red-orange tail darting behind a bush. 'How was I to know it was wrong to pick peace as my domain?'

'You're still wearing his necklace.' Ares jabbed an angry finger towards my chest. 'Cadmus put you up to it, didn't he? If I'd known you were mine, I'd never have let you marry that lout.'

'Don't talk about him like that!' I protested. 'He didn't do anything! And I love him! Turn him back, please!'

'You love him, eh? More than your old Dad? Fine—you can join him!'
With a bright flash, I was thrown out of Harmonia's perspective. Where she had been standing, there was now a bright, mustard-coloured snake sliding out of the circle of her necklace. She slithered off to join snake-Cadmus. They disappeared into the bushes.

Ares bent over the necklace. 'Aha,' he said. 'Cursed, eh?' He shook his fist at the sky. 'Should've known it, you twisted old blacksmith!'

There was another flash of lightning, and Ares disappeared.

Kitsune emerged from her hiding place, transforming back into a woman as she approached the necklace with slow, cautious steps. Her nose turned upwards. She sniffed at it as though she were still the sleek fox.

'Cursed,' she whispered. Her mouth twisted into an anticipatory grin. She reached down and her fingers closed hungrily over the necklace. Then she turned back into the fox and sprinted off. The necklace disappeared with her.

I followed her into a foxhole, but instead of diving underground, I found myself falling through an open sky. I landed with a thump on hard sand.

Wind blew across my face, hot and scorching. Kitsune was nowhere to be seen. Empty plains surrounded me, without even footprints to be seen for miles. I was alone in the vast desert, with the sand swirling around my feet.

Then a depression appeared in the sand in front of me, like an invisible finger was drawing a line through it. All around me, more lines appeared, intersecting to create a twisting pattern like the one I had sketched in Mrs Carlson's class. Walls of sand rose up along the lines. I seemed to be in two places at once: inside the growing walls, and watching from above as the invisible finger traced out a labyrinth in the desert. The wind howled harder than ever, whipping my hair into a frenzy. The sand swirled, blurring out half the maze and obscuring my birds-eye view.

I was inside the walls, which had turned to stone. In my hands, I held one end of a glowing grey thread. The other end extended away from me, floating in mid-air. It led down the passageway of the maze.

I followed it.

The maze twisted around corners, forks, and side passages. Down some of them, I saw brief glimpses of places and people I knew—my old house in Richmond, the tall spire of the Empire State Building, Sally Jackson's careworn face. I kept following the thread, trusting it to lead me to my goal.

I turned a corner and found the end of my thread. It was wound around Luke's kneeling form. His sandy head was bowed before a golden sarcophagus, and his body was shaking. Behind the sarcophagus, Atlas towered over him, wearing a furious expression.

'The daughter of Zeus has failed to kill the monster,' he accused. 'It seems you were wrong.'

Luke looked up hesitantly. 'I—I can convince her,' he said. 'If I just—if I could just talk to her myself —'

'You had better be right,' Atlas said coldly. 'Because if the plan falls apart … well, it will have to be plan Beta then, won't it?'

He turned on his heel and marched away.
'Are you having second thoughts?' It disembodied voice rose from the sarcophagus. It had a scratchy, chilling quality, like nails dragged across steel.

'N-no,' Luke said, although he was shaking as badly as when he'd carried the sky.

Kronos's laugh issued from his golden casket, cold and humourless. 'Remember, Luke Castellan, you promised to secure my rise—whatever the cost.'

The sarcophagus glowed violently. Then its light subsided, leaving us in semi-darkness. Luke put his head in his hands. He didn't seem to notice the blue thread leaving his fingers, joining the end of my grey one. Both blue and grey drifted off towards a third thread, this one a pale green. They all connected and twisted into an intricate plait. There was something familiar about the way they joined together. For some reason, I could hear the clickety-clack of knitting needles, and the sharp snip of scissors.

My ears buzzed with snatches of song, different lyrics overlapping each other—Daughter of wisdom awaits her prophesied fate/A circle of three, tightly woven/A final choice shall end his days …

The green thread jerked, yanking me towards it. The grey thread was all tangled around my legs. When I took a step forward, it tripped me up, making me fall flat on my face. Luke turned to face me when I got up, but he wasn't Luke any more.

Percy stood there, the green thread wound brightly around him. In the space between us, the tricoloured threads wove themselves into a brilliant tapestry. Percy held out his arms and it fell into his hands, becoming a thick lion's pelt. The ground between us melted into a flowing river.

'I'm not Hercules,' Percy said, and he released the lion skin. It dropped into the water, floating at first like a golden raft, then sinking beneath the surface. In the murky water, its colours merged into a new, indescribable shade, like a twinkle in a raindrop or the gleam of sun off a puddle.

A grey thread trailed from the pelt, still tangled around my legs. It pulled me into the water and dragged me down. Underwater, the lion skin became a tapestry again. Its pattern shone as though backlit by an undersea glow. A group of symbols appeared on it: three Greek letters, closely intertwined—Pi, Alpha, Lambda—the sign from the Orobas. And then the circle of prophetic spit appeared. I was finally able to read it in full:

A circle of three bound in love and hate;
An unwitting choice will seal their fate:
One that threads grey through their hair.
Upon the Mountain of Despair,
Only one life shall be forfeit.
The curse of betrayal must one defeat.

I kicked hard, trying to free myself from the sinking tapestry. I found my knife in my sleeve and slashed at the threads binding me. The tapestry fell away from me into the watery depths. I was left with two threads in my hand. One was grey. It was impossible to make out whether the other was green or blue.

There was a rushing in my ears, like I was travelling through a wind tunnel. Whispers drifted to me on the wind, repeating the words of the Orobas’s prophecy.

Holding tight to my two lifelines, I pulled myself up to the surface.
Chapter End Notes

Dialogue from the Artemis scene comes from *Titan's Curse*. 
I awoke with the groggy feeling of having overslept.

It was impossible to tell how long I'd been out. My cell was underground, giving no indication of the passage of the sun above. For all I knew, I was in a magical place, where the rules of time did not apply.

The *dracaenae* were still standing guard in the passageway. They were occupied with their card game, but every so often, one of them would turn and glance into my cell.

'Aha, I got a Cyclops!' One of the *dracaenae*—I couldn't tell if she was Sue or Sandra—slammed a card triumphantly on the ground. 'That's two thousand attack power. Your hellhound's toast!'

'Aw, shucks!' The other *dracaena* flicked her card at her friend. It missed and fluttered into my cell. Both *dracaenae* turned and looked at me. Quickly, I shut my eyes.

'Hey, Sssssandra, are half-bloods supposed to be so lifeless?' The *dracaena* who'd tossed her card into my cell scratched her chin.

'Dunno,' said Sandra. 'Do you think it's already dead?'

'Can't be,' Sue said. 'We didn't do anything to it. And it still smells … mmm!' She leaned into the cell and took a deep, appreciative sniff. 'Still fresh. They lose some scent when they're dead, you know.'

Sandra slapped another card down. 'Shove off, I'm getting first dibs.'

'Who says?'

'We agreed—winner gets first pick when they let us kill her. And I'm *so* winning.'

'Oh yeah?' Sue shuffled her cards ferociously. 'Take this! God card!'

'Puh-lease …'

As they returned to their game, I opened my eyes carefully. The card Sue had tossed over was outlined in purple. It was just like the ones Nico di Angelo had dropped at the Westover Hall dance. This one had a picture of a hellhound with sharp, pointy teeth and a line of drool dripping from its open mouth.

Thinking about Westover Hall made me remember Percy, Thalia, and Grover. Luke and Atlas planned to use me as bait for them. I couldn't let them get drawn into the trap.

Somehow, I had to escape. But the *dracaenae* were blocking the entrance to my cell. I'd have a hard
enough time taking on one *dracaena* in my current condition, let alone two. There was also the fact that I had no idea where I was or where the passageway beyond my cell led.

*First things first, Annabeth.* If I couldn't break out with force, I'd have to use stealth. Unfortunately, my invisibility cap was gone. I couldn't even remember when I'd last seen it. Had it been on the cliff at Westover? Just in case, I checked my pockets. One was empty; the other was completely ripped through. My jeans and sweater were in tatters. I didn't even know where my coat had gone.

The only weapon I had on me was my bronze dagger, strapped to my arm under my shirt sleeve. I still didn't know how it had returned to me, but as long as I had it, I was at least armed. *Dracaenae* were fast and dangerous, but they weren't the hardiest of monsters. A good stick with a celestial bronze blade would take care of them. The only question was how I'd sneak up on them one at a time. Without invisibility.

I curled my fingers around the hilt of my dagger and prayed hard.

*Help me, Mom. Let me think of something.*

My dagger was warm against my skin. No sudden burst of inspiration hit me, but it sent me a wave of comfort. My grip tightened. Maybe my mother *had* helped me. Maybe she was the one who had made my knife reappear when I needed it most. I imagined her counselling me on strategy: *Be patient—wait for your opportunity.*

'Ha!' bellowed Sandra. 'I win!'

Sue let out a howl of outrage and flung all her cards towards the ceiling. A good number drifted my way. 'Best of three!' she insisted.

'Not a chance.'

'I'll up the stakes. Not just first pick on the half-blood—winner takes *all.*'

Sandra began to shuffle her cards. 'You're on. Get your cards.'

Sue slid into the cell to pick up her scattered trading cards. I lay perfectly still, hoping she wouldn't hear my heart pounding. Here was my chance.

Watching through slitted eyes, I waited until Sue bent close to me to pick up the hellhound card. Just as she turned away, I rolled to my knees and stabbed her in the back. She collapsed with a sharp hiss.

Before her body could disintegrate, I pulled my knife out of her flesh and shoved her with all my might. Sandra, whose head had snapped up at Sue's dying hiss, turned just in time for her friend's corpse to smash into her. Sue exploded into a million snakey bits, stunning Sandra long enough for me to hurl my dagger straight into her stomach.

Sandra's mouth widened almost comically. She, too, exploded into scaly flakes. They fell to the ground along with her trading cards.

I got to my feet, breathing hard from this minor exertion. The world spun. I put my hand out, steadying myself against the cell wall until it stopped. Clearly, I was still weak.

But not useless. This would teach Luke and Atlas to underestimate me.

Or had they?
Had Luke left me on purpose with an easy pair of guards to give me a chance?

I had no idea what his game was. He'd kept Thorn from killing me, then tricked me into taking a burden that had nearly killed me. He'd used me to ensnare Artemis, but talked Atlas out of disposing of me. Did he really intend for me to be bait for Percy?

I couldn't figure it out.

When the vertigo passed, I hobbled out of the cell. My knife lay on the ground, covered in *dracaena* guts. I wiped it off on my jeans and slid it up my arm.

The passageway was dark and smelt of damp earth, like a root cellar. The walls were made of cold, wet stone. It was a lot like the maze in my dream, except there was no glowing thread to guide me here. The cracks running through them were filled with soil, which I guess explained the earthy smell. There was also the inexplicable scent of cough drops permeating the air.

I picked a direction at random and started to limp my way along. I'd gone maybe fifty, seventy feet when my breath and luck ran out. I had to lean against the wall to rest. While I did, a light appeared from down the tunnel, accompanied by the sound of footsteps.

My first instinct was to run, but my legs wobbled so hard when I moved away from the wall, I knew I'd never outrun anything in this state. Cursing my weakened body, I pressed myself flat against the wall, trying to make myself unnoticeable. If only I still had my invisibility cap!

Luke turned the corner, at the head of a gaggle of monsters. They bore a heavy golden coffin on their collective shoulders: Kronos's sarcophagus, which was the source of the light coming down the tunnel. Luke spotted me at once. He held up a hand to halt the sarcophagus's progression.

'Annabeth? How did you—?' He threw up his hands and growled. I guess he hadn't intended for me to escape after all. 'Those useless guards! I don't have time for this now, I swear—'

He grabbed my hands and pulled me roughly to him.

'Let go!' I gasped, swaying on my feet. There was no contest—I was in no shape to fight him off.

Luke frowned at me. His face and grip softened. 'You'll have to come with us.'

He motioned behind him. Another *dracaena*—how many of them did he have?—came forward and handed him a pair of bronze handcuffs. He snapped them across my wrists.

I blinked. Maybe it was my vertigo, coupled with the dim light in the tunnel, but I could have sworn that the heavy metal cuffs were wound through with pale threads. Luke clipped a leash to them. That, too, seemed to have ghostly threads curling around it. They blurred in and out of focus, so that I couldn't be sure if they were actually there or not.

Luke tugged me forward on the leash and I joined his little march through the tunnel.

We emerged onto the same mountainside where Thorn had left me—was it days ago now? It was nearly twilight. A final burst of orange-gold light shot across the slope, casting our faces in the glow of sunset. I got my first proper look at Luke. He'd recovered since I'd last seen him, looking less haggard, though he was still too thin. A streak of grey ran through his sandy hair.

Luke glanced at me. Seeing my struggle with the steep climb, he recuffed my hands behind my back and started pushing me from behind like he was marshalling a prisoner towards an execution. We made our way slowly up the mountain, the *dracaenae* carrying the sarcophagus along behind us like
a bizarre funeral procession.

Atlas was waiting for us at the entrance of the old marble ruins, reaching out to the stones with a faraway expression. He seemed lost in a memory.

'This used to be the grandest palace in the universe,' he said. There was a queer, almost sorrowful note in his voice. 'On the tallest mountain in the world. Yet it has reformed this way.' He paused, shook his head as if to clear it, and continued, 'No matter. We shall rebuild the palace of the Titans. When my uncle is restored to power, we will crush Olympus and Mount Othrys will reign supreme once more!'

'Never!' I burst out. 'You'll never win!'

Luke clamped his hand over my mouth. Atlas turned his cold eyes on me.

'You know nothing, little girl.' He frowned at Luke. 'You took long enough. Our … guests … have already arrived. It is time to see if you are right about your friend.'

I tried to bite Luke's hand. He yelped as my teeth scraped his palm.

'Gag her,' Atlas ordered. 'And hold her at sword-point. She may provide an added incentive.'

Luke stuffed a foul-smelling rag into my mouth and bound it around my head. I felt the point of his sword press against my throat. My eyes burned, both from the smell and his rough treatment.

Atlas led the way through the ruins to the tip of the mountain, where Artemis laboured under the burden she had taken off my back. She was not alone.

Percy and Thalia had arrived. And with them, to my utter astonishment, was Zoë Nightshade, leader of the Hunters. She was on her knees in front of her goddess, crying as she tugged at the chains around Artemis's feet.

I didn't know why Zoë was with them instead of Grover, but this was no time for questions. Not when Percy and Thalia were here, caught in the trap Luke and Atlas had sprung. The trap in which I was the bait. My insides churned with guilt.

'Ah, how touching,' Atlas said in a tone that held no sympathy whatsoever.

All three of them turned. Percy locked eyes on me. There were a million exclamations in his gaze: *You're alive! What did he do to you? Oh shit …* Taking in Luke's grip on my shoulders and the sword at my throat, his expression hardened. His posture shifted slightly, into a battle-ready stance.

I blinked helplessly at him. Part of me—okay, nearly all of me—was glad to see him, thrilled that he had come despite the danger, but I was also terrified for him. Even though Luke had me at sword-point, he would be hesitant to actually kill me. I was sure also that he didn't want Thalia dead. But Percy … Luke had already tried and failed to kill him twice.

This was a battle I couldn't bear to see.

'Luke.' Thalia sounded stunned, hurt, and angry at the same time. This had to be the first time she had seen him since that night on Half-Blood Hill, so long ago. 'Let her go.'

'That is the General's decision, Thalia.' Luke's hand on my shoulder trembled slightly. There was a hint of awe in his voice, like he couldn't quite believe she was actually here. 'But … it's good to see you again.'
Thalia did not answer in words. Her spittle flew with such vehemence, it splattered the ground at our feet.

'So much for old friends,' Atlas said lightly, as though the scene amused him. 'And you, Zoë. It's been a long time. How is my little traitor? I will enjoy killing you.'

Zoë shot to her feet, looking murderous. Behind her, Artemis said something that I couldn't hear. Zoë hesitated.

Only now did Percy drag his eyes from me and Luke to take in Atlas's giant form, like the giant hadn't been worth his attention before. 'Wait a second—you're Atlas?'

Atlas raised his eyebrows. 'So, even the stupidest of heroes can finally figure something out,' he said, in a voice that oozed with condescension. He continued to deride Percy as he introduced himself and promised him death.

Percy didn't flinch at the insults or the threat. I guess he'd received so many before, it probably didn't even register with him any more. He simply stood a little straighter and said calmly, 'You're not going to hurt Zoë. I won't let you.'

His loyalty and courage filled me with admiration, but his words made my stomach turn over. He couldn't have known Zoë for more than a week. Yet he was already stepping in to challenge a Titan for her.

_He's going to get himself killed_, I thought. Obviously, this was what had me sick with worry.

But although my fear for him was very real, the tiniest flutter in my heart whispered that maybe, I might not feel quite so sour if he'd challenged Atlas for _me._

'You have no right to interfere, little hero,' Atlas said. 'This is a family matter.'

'A family matter?'

Zoë took a step forward and touched Percy's arm briefly. 'Yes—Atlas is my father.'

If the gag hadn't been in my mouth, I would have gasped. As it was, I choked a little.

Now I knew why Zoë had seemed so familiar when I'd seen her at St Catherine's. I had dreamt of her on this very mountain—or at least, its previous incarnation. She was one of the daughters of Atlas who had been on trial at the Olympian council. One of the cold, proud sisters sentenced to guard their father in the Garden of the Hesperides.

The resemblance between Zoë and Atlas was suddenly striking. Their eyes, identical in their icy pride and powerful glare, locked in a challenge. The air seemed to sizzle as Zoë bargained for Artemis's release and Atlas taunted her in return.

There was a change in the air behind me, a churning that could only have come from the golden sarcophagus. It was like something was grinding, the gears of a machine slowly coming to life. I felt a deep chill in my bones. My vision blurred. Scenes I had only seen in dreams swirled around the mountainside like the fog on Artemis's shoulders: the lines of the Orobas's prophecy, the threads of blue, green, and grey, two bodies lying in twin pools of blood … A wind like the one from the desert maze howled in my ears. I heard a distant chanting that sounded like the lines of the Great Prophecy.

There were threads everywhere. They surrounded all of us, connecting Atlas to Zoë, Zoë to Artemis; Percy and Luke and me; Thalia and Luke, Thalia and Zoë—so many that it made me dizzy trying to
sort them out. Several swirled maliciously around a bulge in Zoë's pocket. I didn't need to be told that she was carrying the Necklace of Harmonia with her, and it had set something in motion that would not end well.

A seething black thread curled from somewhere behind me—Kronos's sarcophagus, no doubt—and joined the web of interconnected lines. It snaked through Luke and drew a line between him and Percy that was so thick, it was almost as solid as my handcuffs. If curses were visible, I was sure this was what they would look like.

Was this how the three Fates saw the world?

There was a snapping sound, like a rubber band stretched too tight. The line connecting Zoë and Atlas was cut in half. And then it was all gone—the light, the thread, the wind. It was just Percy, Thalia, and Zoë facing Luke, Atlas and their dracaenae army, with Artemis straining in the background. None of them seemed to notice anything amiss.

I stared from Luke to Percy, terrified by my vision. What did it mean? Was this to be a final fight between them?

I couldn't lose Percy. He was my best friend. We'd been through so much together. I couldn't imagine making it out of here without him at my side. And there was so much I still hadn't told him …

But if I were to be honest with myself, I didn't want Luke to die, either. Even after everything he had done, I couldn't look at him without seeing the ghost of the boy I had once revered. I couldn't look at him without seeing family.

Family. The word seemed so empty on this godforsaken mountaintop, where father and daughter stood on opposing sides and a boy who had once promised to protect me held a sword to my throat.

It destroyed my family, I remembered Izzy saying, and my blood ran cold.

A fight, two bodies, spear on sword, a pool of blood that grew and grew around two heads, one sandy, one dark …

'Fight us,' Percy challenged Atlas. My vision blurred again, this time with tears. He'd gotten away with plenty before—taunting Ares, defying Hades—but this time I didn't think he'd be as lucky. Not here, with curses encircling the mountain and Kronos's sarcophagus sitting there on the shoulders of the dracaenae like an evil overseer.

Upon the Mountain of Despair … one life shall be forfeit …

I couldn't breathe.


'As for you, daughter of Zeus,' he sneered, 'it seems Luke was wrong about you.'

'I wasn't wrong!' Luke's grip on my shoulder went slack. 'Thalia, you can still join us. Call the Ophiotaurs. It will come to you. Look!'

What was he talking about? What was the Ophiotaurs?

Luke lowered his sword from my throat and waved his hand towards Thalia. A dark pool sprung up from the earth, ringed by the same black marble as the ruins of the Titans' palace.
'Thalia, call the Ophiotaurus, and you will be more powerful than the gods.'

'Luke …' Thalia stepped back from the pool. Her eyes didn't leave Luke. 'What happened to you?'

The entire mountain seemed to hold its breath when Luke spoke. 'Don't you remember all those times we talked? All those times we cursed the gods? He held a hand out to her beseechingly. 'Out fathers have done nothing for us. They have no right to rule the world!'

For a second, anger flashed in Thalia's eyes. Then she shook it away. 'Free Annabeth,' she insisted, and my eyes filled again. 'Let her go.'

'If you join me, it can be like old times. The three of us together. Fighting for a better world.'

I wanted to punch Luke in the stomach. That wasn't the way it had been at all! We'd been fighting just to survive, to protect each other. When had we ever wanted to change the world?

'Please, Thalia.' Luke's voice turned soft. 'If you don't agree …' There was a tremor in it as he spoke his next words. 'It's my last chance. He will use the other way if you don't agree. Please.'

The desperation in his plea was even thicker than when he had begged me to lift the sky from his shoulders. I could see Thalia softening, her eyes darting to the pool Luke had raised. A hulking shadow was taking shape in it, like the outlines of a large sea mammal.

Zoë turned away from Atlas. Her face was drawn in tight, warning lines. 'Do not, Thalia. We must fight them.'

With another wave of Luke's hand, a bronze brazier appeared next to the marble pool, lighting the darkness with its flickering flame.

Percy gasped. His face was turned not to Luke's creations, but to a point behind me. I twisted my head to see the sarcophagus glowing brighter than ever. Shadows rose above it, taking the shape of a maleficent castle. It was not unlike Westover Hall, if the school had glittered with obsidian and malice.

Atlas gave a satisfied grunt. I knew this had to be the palace of the Titans, the way he had known it, before it had been smashed to rubble in the first Titan War.

In a low, terrible voice, Luke painted a picture of a renewed Mount Othrys, a mightier seat of power than Olympus, so strong that it could never be challenged. He gestured down the mountain, towards something I couldn't see, but which made Percy suck in his breath.

I'd heard this sales pitch before. Last summer, Luke had tried to entice us with a similar vision. I knew how alluring it could be. At least, until a single sticking point broke the spell. This time, it was his threat to camp: 'Soon, we will be ready to storm Camp Half-Blood. And after that, Olympus itself. All we need is your help.'

Surely Thalia could see his lies for what they were?

But she just stared at Luke with eyes that were a million years old, as though she had taken on the age of an ancient tree.

Maybe his declaration of war on our parents, on our camp, hadn't fazed her. Thalia had never felt the same way about camp as I had.

Every fear I'd ever had of Thalia joining Luke, turning her back on me, fighting Percy, flashed
before me. I strained against my gag, trying to get her attention, to tell her to snap out of it.

Then she raised her spear, pointing it straight at Luke.

'You aren't Luke,' she said hoarsely. 'I don't know you any more.'

Luke's eyes widened. The pool, the brazier, the pictures of Mount Othrys in its Titanic glory—all of it shimmered. 'Yes you do, Thalia! Please—don't make me …' He gulped. His eyes darted frantically to the sarcophagus and back to Thalia. 'Don't make him destroy you.'

Near the edge of the sky, Atlas pounded a fist into his palm and smiled dangerously.

My eyes swept across the scene. The five of us against Luke, Atlas, and six *dracaenae*, and who knew how much back-up Luke had? I still hadn't seen Thorn or Kitsune or any of his other minions.

Plus I was bound and weak, and Artemis was stuck under the sky.

Percy caught my eye. I tried to signal to him that I was sorry, that it was my fault he'd been led into this trap. His expression couldn't have been plainer: *If I die fighting for you, it's worth it.*

I could only nod sadly. His loyalty to me—the very concern I had coveted when he'd stood up for Zoë—left a bittersweet feeling in my chest. The flutter created by the knowledge that he'd come to save me was drowned by the sinking certainty that I was about to lose him.

'Now,' Percy commanded, and the battle began.

Thalia engaged Luke, charging with spear and Aegis held high. The pallbearing *dracaenae* scattered in a panic at the sight of Medusa's head on the shield. Kronos's sarcophagus thudded to the ground. Unfortunately, it did not crack. The air was filled with the tingling static of ozone. Thalia and Luke circled each other in an almost familiar way, like a deadly dance they'd practised before.

Percy went straight for Atlas, only to be slammed aside on first charge. Zoë lodged a volley of arrows at her father, but he swept them aside as easily as if they were pesky flies.

As for me, I was completely useless. I struggled to free my hands, bashing the cuffs against a stone pillar that had risen out of nowhere. Percy flew into another rising wall of marble. I cried out, but he picked himself up and returned to the battle.

I gritted my teeth and slammed my wrists down harder. Then I remembered my knife. Lying on the ground, I managed to wriggle it out of my sleeve. I slid my cheek carefully against the blade, slicing through my gag. I spat out the disgusting wad of cloth in my mouth. Then I grabbed the hilt of the dagger between my teeth. With a jerk that made me see stars, I shoved it into the stone. Positioning myself so that my cuffed hands made a right-angle to the blade, I pushed against it with all my might.

The cuffs broke. I pulled my hands apart and yanked my knife out, just as Zoë came soaring through the air and landed with a thump at my feet.

'Zoë!' I dropped to my knees and turned her over. Her skin felt like a glowing ember, burning up under my palms. In spite of this, she shivered, her eyelids fluttering feebly. This wasn't just from being thrown. Something had hurt her inside.

'An-na-beth?' she breathed.

'Zoë, hang on—you'll be okay, we'll—' I didn't know what to tell her. I didn't know if any of us would be okay.
Her fingers stirred. Without warning, they clamped around my wrist. 'This is my fault,' she whispered.

'What? No, it's not. It's mine—I was the bait. Luke meant for you to—'

Zoë shook her head. 'I thought I would break the curse,' she said. From her pocket, she drew out the brilliant necklace she had taken from me at St Catherine's. She coughed and dropped the Necklace of Harmonia into my hands. I wanted to drop it, now that I knew its history, but my fingers closed around the snake-head clasps.

'I don't understand.'

'I thought perhaps as a true maiden, one unencumbered by the love of men …' Tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. 'Izzy tried to warn me. But I thought, with the steadfast vows I had taken—I thought I was better than anyone else. I thought I was stronger than the curse.'

Zoë closed her eyes. 'I was stubborn. I was proud and foolish. I misunderstood. The curse was not about men. It was not about love. It is about family. I think I brought it on us all. I cursed—' She took a long, ragged breath. 'My goddess, trapped … my father, released …'

I wanted to drop the necklace right off the edge of the cliff, but something told me that would be disastrous. I could see now what Luke had pointed out to the others: an army of monsters making its way up the winding mountainside path. Even if I didn't fully understand how the necklace's curse worked, I knew Kitsune had tried to wield it. And she was still out there, maybe even marching with the Titan army, minutes away from us. We couldn't let the necklace fall back into their hands.

'You will survive, Annabeth Chase,' Zoë whispered. 'And you will destroy it. You—you must.'

'I—I will,' I promised. 'But you're not going to die, Zoë. You—you've lived for thousands of years! You're a Hunter! You can't—'

Zoë smiled faintly. 'We are mortal in battle, Annabeth. And time is immaterial when it can end.'

A deafening bellow rang through the air, catching our attention. I turned to see Atlas on his knees, the sky crashing to a halt on his shoulders. My heart jumped into my throat. Had Percy—how—?

He lay on his side only feet away from Atlas, covered in blood and sweat, and shaking all over. His face and hair were ashen. He looked like he'd aged ten years.

Several feet away, Artemis knelt in a crouch, like she had just landed after doing an aerial flip. Somehow, she and Percy must have collaborated to force Atlas back under his prison.

I knew then what Percy must have done—why he looked like he'd just been trapped under a pile of rocks. I started towards him, but before I could take two steps, another terrible sight had me riveted.

Thalia and Luke stood on the other side of the sarcophagus, near the edge of the cliff. Luke was weaponless, frozen in place with Thalia's spear against his throat.


My chest seized up. It wasn't the battle I had dreaded after all—Thalia against Percy, or even Percy against Luke. This was even more wrong.

Thalia's knuckles were white against the shaft of her spear. A bead of blood appeared at its point.
I couldn't stand it.
'Don't kill him!' I cried.
Thalia didn't take her eyes off Luke. 'He's a traitor.' The hurt in her voice resonated deeply through my bones. 'A traitor,' she repeated, this time with a note of bewilderment.

Why, Luke? It was the question we would never know the answer to, if she killed him.

'We'll bring Luke back to Olympus,' I said. 'He … he'll be useful.'

Luke gave a harsh laugh. 'Is that what you want, Thalia? To go back to Olympus in triumph? To please your dad?'

Thalia lessened the pressure of her spear against Luke's throat. Indecision wavered in her eyes.

Luke jerked aside. His arm shot out, reaching for the spear. In one terrifying instant, I saw the tables turned, with Luke at Thalia's throat instead. I saw once more Polynices and his brother, lying in pools of each other's blood.

'No!' I yelled.

Thalia's legs kicked up instinctively. They slammed into Luke's side and he toppled back. Rock crumbled under his feet and disappeared over the side of the cliff.

Time seemed to stop for the split second he teetered on the edge, eyes wide with alarm. In that frozen instance, I believed he would regain his balance, or that Thalia would pull him back, or even that I would somehow close the distance between us and catch him before he could go over.

But the scream had barely left my mouth when he fell.

Chapter End Notes

More dialogue comes from Titan's Curse.
My Dad Kicks Some Serious Monster Butt

Chapter Summary

Professor Chase shows up most unexpectedly.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Percy was the first to react.

'We gotta go,' he said, pointing to the monsters at the bottom of the cliff.

Thalia and I remained horror-struck at the edge of the mountain, staring as the monsters swarmed Luke's motionless body. I barely heard Atlas bellowing for his army to kill us, or the answering roar from a giant down below.

Luke couldn't be dead. He just couldn't. I'd taken the sky from him. Thalia hadn't speared him. He hadn't even fought Percy!

The fact that none of these were logical reasons for him to survive a fifty-foot fall onto rocky ground didn't seem to matter.

The world teetered on the cliff's edge. Fog settled around me, thick and heavy. Bright bursts of light and colour exploded in the corners of my vision.

I pinched myself hard and they disappeared. The heaviness in the air did not. The wavering threads that I'd seen before seemed to hang over us in wet, cobwebby filaments, clinging to me, to all of us.

'Come on,' Percy insisted.

I followed on wooden legs as Percy dragged a frozen Thalia away from the cliff, narrowly avoiding the sharp point of the javelin that landed in the spot where she'd been standing.

Thalia's tear-streaked face was stricken, like she wished the javelin had hit its target. She looked at me and mouthed soundlessly, I killed him.

I took her hand as we retreated from the incoming wave of long-range weapons. 'He's not dead. He's not dead.'

Percy led the way to the black rocks where Zoë had fallen. Artemis was kneeling with Zoë in her arms, heartbreak stamped across her exquisite features. Zoë's breathing was shallow and ragged. Her eyes were open, but glassy, as though the life was already seeping out of them.

Artemis turned Zoë onto her side, revealing the deep, jagged cut running down her torso. It had sliced through her shirt to expose her raw, red flesh. Sickly green pus oozed from the wound. Bright red streaks spread all around it, like evil fingers reaching towards Zoë's heart. I didn't need Artemis's confirmation to know that there was poison inside the wound.

'Not Atlas,' Artemis said, but she didn't clarify how Zoë had been wounded.
I didn’t ask. It didn’t seem important how she had been hurt, only that she had been dealt a fatal blow and there was nothing we could do.

Percy called for nectar and ambrosia, determined as always to save a friend, but I knew from the anguish on Artemis’s face and the silvery tears dripping onto her beloved lieutenant’s body that it was too late. Artemis had put herself in harm’s way just to save me. Zoë was her right-hand maiden. If anything could be done to save her, Artemis would be doing it, not kneeling here crying.

Zoë caught my eye for a second, with an intensity like she was laying a charge on me. My hand drifted to my pocket, where I’d stuffed the Necklace of Harmonia. She was telling me to break the curse—the curse she believed had led us here.

My heart was heavy. This was my fault. Zoë might think otherwise, but I knew better. I was to blame for her death, not the curse. I’d trusted Luke, trapped Artemis, and led them all here. From the moment I’d chosen to save Luke from the sky, I’d set this whole chain of events in motion.

*An unwitting choice will seal their fates.*

The rest of the Orobas’s prophecy unfolded in my head. *Only one life shall be forfeit* … Zoë was losing her life on the Mountain of Despair, just like it said. But it also said that only *one* life would be claimed …

*That's why he's still alive.* The whisper seemed to fall from the stars. *You chose him.*

Zoë turned and rested her head against Artemis’s chest. The goddess held her close, murmuring a steady stream of comforting words.

I would destroy the necklace for Zoë. It was the only thing I could do to atone, after unintentionally trading Luke’s life for hers.

The triumphant roar of an invading army intruded on our grief. The first wave of *dracaenae* appeared on the far side of the marble ruins, armed to the teeth with the bronze weapons they had stolen in Richmond. They ran at us, spear-points glistening as brightly as the stars overhead.

Percy leapt to his feet, sword drawn. But before the monsters could fall on us, the sky erupted in an explosion of gunshots. A spray of glowing bullets knocked out the front line of *dracaenae*, reducing them to yellow dust. The ones who hadn’t been hit scattered in alarm and backed up into the giants coming up behind them.

I thought at first it was a helicopter like the ones that had attacked us at Westover Hall. Then I realised it was a plane, an old-fashioned one with a whirling propeller on its nose and double-layered wings. It looked like the fighter models that peppered my dad’s study, except this one was outfitted with machine guns that shot—could it really be?—celestial bronze bullets.

And the pilot leaning out of the cockpit was yelling at the top of his voice, ‘Get away from my daughter!’

‘Dad?’ It was impossible. Yet it *was* him, in aviator glasses and a flight helmet, banking and swooping in his biplane above the heads of a monster army.

‘Run!’ he yelled at me.

‘A brave man.’ Artemis rose, her eyes flashing. Out of nowhere, she produced a large, silver hunting horn. ‘Come,’ she told us. ‘We must get Zoë away from here.’
She blew the horn, a long, crystal-clear note that reverberated through the valley.

My dad's plane soared back over the mountaintop. It made a spectacular sight, dodging the javelins aimed at it and firing back another quick succession of bullets.

'That's my dad,' I said in wonder. It was amazing. When had he learnt to fly like that? How had he known to come here? Where had he gotten celestial bronze bullets, of all things?

The biplane banked again. As it came back round, it was accompanied by a delicate silver chariot that looked like it had been crafted from moonlight. It was pulled by four golden deer. Their hooves beat against the sky as if it were solid ground. They landed neatly on the mountaintop, sliding the chariot to a stop by Artemis's feet.

'Get in,' she ordered.

Percy and I each took one of Thalia's arms and hefted her in. She was still rigid with grief. Artemis lifted Zoë and, with Percy's help, settled her on the seat. I found a neatly folded blanket in the chariot and wrapped it around her.

Artemis took the reins and we took to the sky, leaving the tragic mountain behind.

My dad followed us in his biplane all the way to a large, grassy field with a thin landing strip running down the middle. Artemis landed the chariot smoothly, without so much as a bump when the wheels hit ground. The plane touched down and rattled down the landing strip to stop beside us. My dad climbed out of the cockpit and snapped off his helmet.

'Dad …'

He blinked at me through his aviator glasses. Then he held out his arms hesitantly.

I ran into them. 'You flew … you shot … oh my gods!' I still couldn't quite believe that it was my dad who'd saved us from the monsters. Not Artemis, or Percy, or anyone with supernatural powers, but my mortal father. 'That was the most amazing thing I've ever seen!'

My dad squeezed me tightly, then held me at arm's length. He was grinning broadly, his face flushed from all the excitement. 'Well,' he said conversationally, as though he'd done nothing more impressive than give an interesting lecture, 'not bad for a middle-aged mortal, I suppose.'

'But—the celestial bronze bullets!' I pointed to the machine guns fitted at the side of his plane. 'How did you get those?'

'Ah, well.' He grinned a little sheepishly and scratched the back of his neck. 'You did leave quite a few half-blood weapons in your room in Virginia, the last time you … left.'

I twisted the college ring on my camp necklace. The memory of my last night in Richmond hung in the air between us—our fight, the house packed up in boxes … Of course—the long box Janet had packed in my room, the one I hadn't bothered to check. I'd completely forgotten about the stash Thalia and I had salvaged from the Myrmekes at the war museum.

'I decided to try melting some down to make bullet casings. Just a little experiment.'

'Dad …' The words, I'm sorry, played in my head, but I wasn't entirely sure what I was apologising for. Running off at Thanksgiving? Refusing to move to San Francisco with him? Believing he didn't really care about me?
Thalia called to us, gesturing urgently. She was finally moving again, helping Artemis to wrap Zoë's wound in thick, white bandages. We all hurried over.

'Is there anything—the plane has a first-aid kit …' my dad faltered.

'That won't help,' I said.

'Unless you have nectar or ambrosia?' Percy said hopefully.

'Er—' My dad shook his head helplessly.

Zoë shivered in her cocoon of blankets.

Percy turned to Artemis. 'Can't you heal her with magic? I mean … you're a goddess.'

'Life is a fragile thing, Percy.' Artemis touched Zoë's brow gently. 'If the Fates will the string to be cut, there is little I can do. But I can try.'

I drew in a sharp breath at her words. In my mind's eye, I could see the thick threads twined around us on Atlas's mountain. The one between Zoë and her father seemed to snap with a crisp snip of finality.

I could tell Zoë knew her time was up. She blocked Artemis's hand as it moved to her wounded side.

'Have I … served thee well?'

Artemis's eyes did not leave Zoë's. 'With great honour. The finest of my attendants.'

Peace fell over Zoë's face. She smiled faintly. 'Rest. At last.'

How long had she led the Hunt? It had to be nearly three thousand years. I would never get a chance to ask her about it, or learn how she had come to join them, or why she'd left her sisters. Had she missed them? Three thousand years seemed an unimaginably long time to bear any regrets.

'I can try to heal the poison, my brave one,' Artemis offered again.

Zoë shook her head. She turned to Thalia and lifted a hand to her. Thalia took it in both of hers.

'I am sorry we argued. We could have been sisters.'

Thalia's voice wobbled. 'It's my fault. You were right about Luke, about heroes, men—everything.' Her words made me choke up as well.

Zoë looked at Percy. 'Perhaps not all men,' she said, and I couldn't help wondering what had passed between them during their quest. It didn't really seem to matter now, though, not with Zoë so close to her dying breath. 'Do you still have the sword, Percy?'

Riptide was back in pen form. Zoë held out her free hand. Percy placed it in her open palm.

'You spoke the truth, Percy Jackson,' Zoë solemnly. Her fingers closed around the pen, touching it like it was something dear to her. 'You are nothing like … like Hercules.' Her words were lined with a sliver of an old hurt. 'I am honoured,' she continued, in a more regal tone, 'that you carry this sword.'

Percy bowed his head as she let out a great, shuddering gasp. 'Zoë—'
She looked up with her eyes full of wonder. 'Stars. I can see the stars again, my lady.'

'Yes,' Artemis said through her tears. 'Yes, my brave one. They are beautiful tonight.' But she did not tear her eyes away from Zoë to look at them.

Zoë's breath escaped her in one final word: 'Stars.' Her chest heaved one last time, and was still.

A wave of sorrow rose from my own chest and stuck in my throat. Warm hands fell on my shoulder's—my father's, strong and comforting. I blinked repeatedly as Artemis brought her hands together over Zoë's lifeless face and whispered an ancient blessing. Misty silver smoke rose from Zoë's half-parted lips. With a faint shimmer, her body dissolved, leaving only the silvery essence that settled in Artemis's cupped hands.

Artemis got to her feet, murmuring softly over her hands. She blew into them, and Zoë's spirit floated upwards, soaring into the starry sky. I watched in wonder as the stars glowed brightly and a new pattern sprinkled itself across the sky. It formed the outline of a girl carrying a shining bow as she danced through the other constellations.

Artemis kissed her hands and raised them to Zoë in farewell. 'Let the world honour you, my huntress. Live forever in the stars.'

There wasn't much to say after that. Artemis seemed more upset than ever. Her form wavered as she paced back and forth next to her chariot. One of her golden deer nuzzled her shoulder. She stopped, stroking it with trembling fingers.

'I must go to Olympus immediately,' she announced. 'I will not be able to take you, but I will send help.'

To my amazement, she looked first not to Thalia or Percy, who had accompanied Zoë in search of her, but to me. 'You are brave beyond measure, my girl,' she said, placing her hand firmly on my shoulder. Her touch was as weighty as her words. They brought another sob rising to my throat. 'You will do what is right.'

In my pocket, next to my dagger, the Necklace of Harmonia felt heavy.

I forced myself to meet Artemis's gaze and nodded. A satisfied look passed through her eyes. She released me.

Artemis moved on to Thalia and Percy. I gazed out towards the mountain we had just descended. Atlas was trapped at its peak once again, holding a stormy sky that seemed to reflect his boiling rage. It crackled with thunder, illuminated occasionally by angry flashes of lightning. To the right, rising out of the low-lying fog, was a bridge of lights. Its brilliant red colour was difficult to make out in the dark, but there was no mistaking the gateway bridge that was the iconic landmark of the west.

The Golden Gate Bridge. Which meant …

I hadn't put two and two together earlier, but of course, we had been on the Mountain of Despair. It was the same mountain Clarisse had seen shrouded in fog and monsters. Mount Tamalpais—now the new seat of Mount Othrys. We were in San Francisco. The most dangerous city in the country for demigods.

Where my dad lived.

I almost laughed at the irony. After all my protests about staying away from this treacherous city, I had ended up here anyway.
And my dad had flown in to save the day.

My eyes and throat burned.

Artemis finished with Thalia and Percy and returned to her chariot. It took on the same transcendent glow that surrounded the gods when they were about to take on their divine form. We averted our eyes and she disappeared, deer and all.

My dad was the first to speak. 'Well, she was impressive.' He tapped his chin thoughtfully. 'Though I must say I still prefer Athena.'

There was a lump in my throat as I turned to look at him. 'Dad, I …' In my head, I could still hear his battle cry—'Get away from my daughter!' I'm sorry that—'

He crushed me to him, cutting off my apology. 'Shh,' he said. Again, he held me at arm's length. This time, he crouched a little so that we were eye to eye. To my shock, he no longer had to bend his knees much to reach my height. 'Do what you must, my dear. I know this isn't easy for you.'

Words wouldn't come. I threw myself back into his arms, hoping he would understand the thank you I couldn't form.

A flurry of wings beat the air overhead. I let go of my dad to see three of Camp Half-Blood's pegasoi, two white and one black, land in the field.

'Blackjack!' Percy waved down the pure black pegasus, who whinnied back at him. They carried on an incomprehensible one-sided conversation (well, incomprehensible for those of us who, unlike Percy, couldn't speak horse).

My dad seemed to have forgotten me entirely. He stared transfixed at the winged horses, with the same hungry gleam in his eye that he got when studying a particularly intriguing airplane model.

'Fascinating! Such maneouvrability!' He cocked his head to the side and began to mutter about flight design and its possibilities in historical warfare.

I laughed shakily. 'Dad!'

He stopped mid-sentence, like I'd snapped him out of a trance. He looked sheepishly between me and the pegasoi. This time, I didn't mind his distraction. He would always be crazy about military history and his precious planes. But he had risked his life and his biplane for me.

'I'm sorry, my dear,' he said, hugging me yet again. 'I know you must go.'

'Thanks, Dad,' I managed.

The nearest pegasus, one of the white ones, knelt to let me climb onto his back.

'Annabeth.'

I looked back. My dad's Adam's apple was quivering.

'I know … I know San Francisco is a dangerous place for you. But please remember you always have a home with us. We will keep you safe.'

For the first time, I believed it might be possible.
Dialogue from this chapter comes from *Percy Jackson and the Titan's Curse*. 
We Stand Trial For Existing

Chapter Summary

Annabeth attends the modern-day version of the Olympian's tribunal … as a defendant.

Chapter Notes

I just want to say thanks to thegoddessinzerogravity and the guest who left comments on chapter 20, because this week I felt like I was being treated as a fic-churning robot who is expected to keep producing chapters every week on no encouragement whatsoever ... which isn't a nice feeling at all. I know reviews and comments are not a right or deserved especially if the fic isn't good enough. But if you're still following after 20 chapters, I guess I'd like to know what was done satisfactorily or (if it's just a train wreck you can't tear your eyes away from) what wasn't, because I do want to get better at this!

So thank you to those of you who have taken the time to offer your thoughts on my work! I really, really appreciate it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was a long flight to Olympus. My pegasus, whose name turned out to be Guido, flew alongside Percy's Blackjack while Percy filled me in on the quest he'd undertaken with Thalia and Zoë (and as it turned out, Grover and Bianca). I was astonished to learn of the lengths to which Percy had gone just to join them.

'You ran off from camp because you wanted to … find Artemis, too?'

Percy became flustered. 'Well, not exactly. I—uh—'

Thalia smirked. 'I'm sure he had a burning desire to rescue a goddess.'

Percy turned redder than a tomato and quickly resumed telling the story. Thalia flew up close to me and whispered conspiratorially, 'I don't think Artemis was his goddess, though.'

It was my turn to go red.

Thalia contributed to Percy's tale up to the point where he admitted they'd lost Bianca to a malfunctioning metal giant in Arizona. Then she fell silent and went still again, just as she had after Luke had fallen off Mount Tam. Percy, too, seemed to find this part of their adventure hard to tell. I wanted to reach out and give him a hug, but that wasn't really possible five hundred feet in the air.

I didn't know Bianca at all, but my insides were wracked with guilt. Here was one more death I was responsible for.

Percy continued the story. He told me about Hoover Dam and the enigmatic woman he'd met there
(‘I really think it was Athena!’), whose clues had helped them to activate flying stone statues that had carried them to San Francisco. He described his wrestling match with Nereus, the Old Man of the Sea, and Thorn's ambush and attempt to entice Thalia to the Titans' side. (I expected Thalia to add something here, but she stayed silent. When I glanced over, she appeared to have fallen asleep on her pegasus.) He talked about the Ophiotaurus, an ancient sea cow whose entrails, if sacrificed, would confer the power to bring down Olympus. (Grover, he explained, was with the poor creature now.) Finally, he got to their journey through San Francisco, where they'd gone to my dad's new house to ask for help.

'Your dad seems cool,' Percy said.

I looked over my shoulder, as though I might see my dad still flying after us in his little biplane. But the skies were dark and silent. I sighed.

'I guess so.' I thought of my dad's last letter, which had been in my backpack at Westover Hall. Percy and Thalia must have found it. Had Percy read it? 'We've been arguing for so many years.'

'Yeah, you said.' His tone was cautiously neutral.

'You think I was lying about that?' To be honest, I was wondering myself. Not about the fights I'd described to Percy, but about the reasons behind them. All those times I'd wanted my dad to make accommodations for me and pick me instead of his job and family.

Selfish, Janet had called me. Could she actually be right?

'I didn't say you were lying,' said Percy. 'It's just … he seems okay. Your stepmom, too. Maybe they've, uh, got cooler since you saw them last.'

This was Percy through and through. Always finding the best in people. I hadn't forgotten that he'd been the one to convince me to give living with my dad another chance last year. Was he trying to talk me into it again?

We will keep you safe. My dad's promise rang in my ears.

'They're still in San Francisco, Percy,' I reminded him. 'I can't live so far from camp.' So far from the other things—other people—I cared about. Although the argument no longer seemed to hold as much weight. With planes and pegasi—one of which my dad actually had now—the distance might not be so much worse than living in Richmond.

'So what are you going to do now?'

'I don't know.' I was toying with the beads on my necklace again. I snuck a glance at Percy. He was fiddling with Blackjack's mane, but otherwise he was a lot less fidgety than he used to get on long trips. He seemed older than the last time I'd seen him, though that couldn't have been more than a week ago. There was a light streak in his dark hair just like the grey one in Luke's. It had to be from the fight on the mountain—from coming to save me.

'Thank you for rescuing me,' I said softly.

Even in the dark, I could see Percy's cheeks glow. 'Hey, no big deal. We're friends.'

'You didn't—believe I was dead?'

'Never.' His voice was firm and clear. I wondered what had made him believe so strongly that I'd survived my fall off the cliff at Westover. Had he had a dream like mine? Or seen anything like the
threads of Fate winding among us?

Had he seen the way we were all connected? Me, and him, and—and Luke.

In my head, I replayed Luke's fall. Only this time, I was filled with a certainty as solid as the dagger in my pocket that Luke had survived. Whatever the Fates had in store for us, it wasn't over.

'Neither is Luke, you know,' I said. 'I mean … he isn't dead.'

'Annabeth, that fall was pretty bad. There's no way—'

'He isn't dead.' Surely if Percy could believe I'd survived my cliff dive, he could accept that Luke had survived his fall from Mount Tam. 'I know it. The same way you knew about me.'

I was about to tell him about my visions of the winding thread and the rest of the Orobas's prophecy, but he was staring at me like I'd lost my mind. And there was a hard, angry look in his eyes that scared me. It reminded me of the insidious black line that had snaked out from Kronos's sarcophagus and tangled with the line connecting Luke and Percy.

Binding them in hate.

Percy didn't want to believe that Luke had survived. He wanted Luke dead, just as badly as Luke wanted to kill him. I knew then that they would face each other eventually. Kronos would see to it.

Bright lights appeared on the horizon, the icon of the city that never slept. We were almost at our destination.

'You don't believe me about Luke, but we'll see him again,' I said quietly.

It wasn't a hopeful thought. When I imagined the reunion, I saw cold hatred mirrored on both of their faces. I couldn't stand seeing it on either of them. Not Percy, whose heart was bigger than anyone else's. And not Luke, who had been my world before Kronos had corrupted him.

I remembered how he'd summoned the stone basin and raised the terrifying image of Mount Othrys—magic that should have been beyond him. The flashes of desperation breaking through his composure when he seemed to be failing. The way he'd pleaded with Thalia at the very end, as though he needed her to save him from something …

'He's in trouble,' I realised. 'Percy, he's under Kronos's spell.'

Percy didn't reply. He kept his eyes fixed stonily on the highest point of light in front of us—the needle of the Empire State Building.

'There it is,' Thalia said. If she'd heard what I'd said about Luke, she didn't let on. She pointed to the top of the Empire State Building, where the shining peak of Mount Olympus was becoming visible. 'It's started.'

'What's started?' Percy asked.

'The winter solstice. The Council of the Gods.'

The pegasi did a loop around the floating mountains, giving me plenty of time to worry about whether we would be blasted out of the air for our audacity in coming here. The skies were as threatening as the ones we'd left in San Francisco. Flying into the thunder and lightning was unnerving.
I guess Artemis must have gotten us clearance, because we weren't catapulted down to earth. The silver gates of the palace courtyard even opened for us when the pegasi set us down before them.

The Olympian Council turned in unison to stare at us when we walked in. Hera, Hephaestus, Aphrodite … so many pairs of eyes. I could feel their X-ray glares boring into me. The gods were dressed for business—well, except Poseidon, whose bright Hawaiian-print shirt contrasted sharply with the smart pin-stripes on Zeus's tailored suit.

Figures, Percy's dad would be the oddball. I hadn't really appreciated how much he took after his dad before this. It struck me that Percy would probably look exactly like the handsome sea god if he reached his twenties and grew a beard.

The gods filled all twelve of the U-shaped collection of glittering thrones. I'd only seen the council in session once. That first time had been a pretty awe-inspiring experience, with thirteen of them all together in one room …

A chill went down my spine. I did a quick count, though I didn't really need it to verify that the last god, the one who only ever visited Olympus at the winter solstice, was not here this year. I should have felt more at ease without Hades around, oozing his waves of terror, but the Lord of the Underworld's absence seemed ominous to me.

Artemis stood to welcome us, and when she waved her hands towards the central hearth, I noticed the other difference in the room. There was a large sphere of water floating by the hearth. It encased a weird beast with a long, serpentine tail attached to the body of a bull with flippers. The creature gave a low moo.

Grover was on one knee at the front of the room, his head bowed before Zeus. At Artemis's greeting, he turned and his face lit up.

'You made it!' he cried, just as he had at Westover Hall. He jumped to his hooves. With Zeus's assent, he rushed to hug Thalia and me. He didn't comment further on my presence, but the extra big squeeze he gave me told me how glad he was to see me alive.

To Percy, he said, 'Bessie and I made it! But you have to convince them! They can't do it!'

'Do what?'

Artemis descended from her throne and came towards us. Her face was a perfect mask of emotion. Her tattered dress had been replaced by flowing silver robes that shimmered as they swished around her.

'Heroes,' she said, 'the Council has been informed of your deeds. They know that Mount Othrys is rising in the West. They know of Atlas's attempt for freedom, and the gathering armies of Kronos.' The slightest shadow of satisfaction flickered across her face before it went poker-straight again. 'We have voted to act.'

She gave us a run-down of the Council's decisions—to hunt Kronos's monsters, to sink Luke's cruise ship … My mother was involved as well, tasked to survey the prisons of the other Titans. I shivered. Most of the Titans had been thrown into Tartarus for eternity. Surely that didn't mean Athena would be visiting …

Her face gave nothing away. She was even more impassive than Artemis.

'As for you, my heroes,' Artemis said. She faced the council and spread her hands like she was presenting us. 'These half-bloods have done Olympus a great service. Would any here deny that?'
I tried to look like I deserved Artemis's commendation. I didn't feel like I'd done anything worth mentioning.

_You are brave beyond measure_, she'd told me. I wanted to sneak a glance at my mother to see if she agreed, but I knew it was wiser to keep my head respectfully bowed.

The god sitting directly opposite Artemis's empty seat was the first to speak. 'I gotta say, these kids did okay.' He leaned forward and ruffled a lazy hand through his golden hair. 'Ahem. Heroes win laurels—'

Hermes, sitting in the nearest throne to us on the left, cut Apollo off quickly. 'Um, yes, first class. All in favour of not disintegrating them?'

My jaw dropped, along with my anxiety. It was replaced by a wave of righteous incredulity. Okay, so maybe _I_ hadn't done anything particularly outstanding, but surely my mistakes weren't dastardly enough to land me on trial before the full Olympian council? And Percy and Thalia _definitely_ hadn't done anything to warrant disintegration. After all they'd done to save Artemis and Olympus, even the mere suggestion of destroying them was an insult. I couldn't believe Hermes would even put something like that to a vote.

For a moment, I could understand Luke's anger, his animosity at his dad, why he was fed up with our godly parents and their whimsical favouritism.

Ares banged his hand on the armrest of his throne. 'Wait just a minute. These two are dangerous.' He stuck one beefy finger in Percy and Thalia's direction. 'It'd be much safer, while we've got them here—'

I fought to contain my rage as the gods debated our annihilation. Ares, unsurprisingly, was in favour of killing us—or more specifically, Percy and Thalia. Poseidon and Zeus rose a little in my estimation when they stepped in to defend their children. The king of the gods's grudging praise seemed to floor Thalia.

And then Athena spoke and my anger evaporated. 'I am proud of my daughter as well.'

My heart swelled.

'But there is a security risk here, with the other two.'

The bubble of pride blossoming in my chest burst. 'Mother! How can you—'

'It is unfortunate,' she said, with a quelling look in my direction, 'that my father, Zeus, and my uncle, Poseidon, chose to break their oath not to have more children. Only Hades kept his word, a fact that I find ironic.' Her eyes swept to the end of the thrones, where the missing temporary seat was once again conspicuous by its absence. 'As we know from the Great Prophecy, children of the three elder gods … such as Thalia and Percy … are dangerous. As thickheaded as he is, Ares has a point.'

'Right!' Ares said. Then the insult registered. 'Hey, wait a minute …' He rose halfway out of his seat, only to be dragged back down by a creeping grapevine.

Mr D looked bored, as always. 'Oh, please, Ares. Save the fighting for later.'

Ares swore at him. As I watched them bicker back and forth, I realised something. They were just like a family—a big, noisy, dysfunctional family. Ares continued to yell for our blood while Mr D adopted a holier-than-thou approach to it all. Artemis, thank Olympus, was firmly on our side. I thought Apollo might be, too, but it was hard to tell, the way he kept tweaking her about it. They
sounded for all the world like Bobby and Matthew in a squabbling match. Athena crossed her arms and doggedly reiterated her point, while Aphrodite rolled her eyes and combed her fingers through her long, luscious hair—a rich chestnut brown today—as though the discussion bored her. Hera crossed her arms and looked upon their antics in a manner reminiscent of Janet's most exasperated mood.

They were a family, not that different from any mortal family after all—just as flawed, just as (dare I think it?) human. And like it or not, we were their family, too.

They finally conceded the point that they couldn't kill us, and turned instead to the issue of the Ophiotaurus in the watery sphere. Their vote on this was unanimous.

'You want to destroy Bessie?' Percy protested. He immediately went to bat for the Ophiotaurus. It was harmless, he insisted. Killing it wouldn't stop the prophecy; it would only emulate the Titans.

It was a dangerous thing for him to do, given how close the gods had come to voting on destroying him. But Percy had obviously inducted this magnificent creature into his family circle. I knew better than anyone how protective he was of everybody he cared about. He'd never stand for Bessie's senseless destruction, even if it earned him the wrath of the gods.

The mingled pride and exasperation that it sparked inside me was pretty familiar by now.

'And what of the risk?' Although Zeus was responding to Percy's impassioned speech, his eyes shifted to Thalia. 'Kronos knows full well, if one of you were to sacrifice the beast's entrails, you would have the power to destroy us. Do you think we can let that possibility remain? You, my daughter, will turn sixteen on the morrow, just as the prophecy says.'

I inhaled sharply. He was right—if today was the winter solstice, then tomorrow, December twenty-second, was Thalia's birthday. Except I hadn't realised she would actually be sixteen. I guess if anyone knew her true age, it would be Zeus.

We were standing on the cusp of the Great Prophecy and I hadn't even realised it.

Olympus to preserve or raze.

I stared at the Ophiotaurus, a little more in sympathy with the gods now. I didn't agree with them, but I could see why they feared it—or the danger its existence posed.

But something Percy said struck a chord with me, too: controlling the prophecies never worked. Surely the gods knew that better than we did. They just hated uncertainty, wanted to take action to thwart it because doing something—anything—was better than waiting, not knowing …

I knew the feeling well. How often had I wished for things to be secure, unchanging, permanent?

Yet there were some things you just had to take on faith.

I thought of Luke's promise of family—one he'd betrayed several times now—and then of my dad charging into battle with his biplane.

I found myself stepping forward. 'You have to trust them, sir.' I willed my voice to remain steady as Zeus scowled at me. 'You have to trust them.'

After all, family did come through sometimes. My dad had proven it to me.

Artemis smiled at me like I'd articulated words of great wisdom. 'Annabeth is right. Which is why I
must first make a reward.'

Percy and Thalia looked confused when she followed up with what seemed to be a non-sequitur, informing the council of Zoë's passing. However, as she drew Zeus into a private conference, I understood her strategy and marvelled at the brilliance of it.

She must have planned this all along. All the times I'd run into the Hunters—always with Thalia. It had always been her they were scouting.

Someone murmured something. I realised Percy was whispering to me.

'What?'

His face was as grey as the pale streak in his hair. His eyes were wide, not with confusion, but panic. 'Look—need to tell you something—couldn't stand it—don't want—'

'Percy? You look like you're going to be sick.'

'I shall have a new lieutenant, if she will accept it!' Artemis's voice rang out, as clear as her hunting horn.

Percy looked ready to pass out now. I wondered if he had guessed after all what Artemis had in mind. My stomach twisted a little. Was he really this worried about Thalia leaving us? I mean, I was sad, too, but he looked as stricken as … well, almost as stricken as Thalia had looked after Luke's fall off Mount Tam.

Thalia's mouth fell open as Artemis turned and offered her Zoë's newly vacated position. Her eyes darted sideways to look at me. There was a question in them, like, *is this okay?*

I took her hand, squeezed it once, and let go. This decision was Thalia's, not mine. I already knew it was the right thing for her. She'd continue to fight battles, but on her own terms—not tied to a prophecy or hunted by anyone. That was what she had wanted all this time. I could see the tentative acceptance blooming across her face, no longer fettered by the threads that had always held her obstinately back from the Hunters' overtures.

'I will,' Thalia said. And as she pledged herself to Artemis, she seemed to shed a weight that had hung over her for years.

'**All you need is one thing you can't give up on yet,**' she'd told me before. I guess she'd finally let go of her one thing.

Artemis drew an arc in the air with her finger. A silver circlet like the one Zoë had worn materialised in Thalia's hair.

Percy and I looked at each other. He had relaxed slightly, but there was still a touch of wariness amidst his relief, like he was waiting for the other sandal to drop.

Like he was afraid I might be the next one to take the Hunter's oath.

It made me feel warm all over.

Before I could ask him about it, Thalia finished her vows and came to us. To everyone's surprise, it was Percy she hugged first. He turned red as a beet and patted her awkwardly on the back.

'Aren't you supposed to not do that any more? Hug boys, I mean?'
I glanced at Artemis. She was smiling serenely, clearly not considering this a contravention of Thalia's oath.

'I'm honouring a friend,' Thalia said. Then, more seriously, she told him what I already knew—that with the Hunters, she would find peace. They were the family she'd always been meant to find. 'But you're a hero. You will be the one of the prophecy.'

Percy made a face. 'Great.'

'I'm proud to be your friend,' Thalia said. And then she turned to me. Words seemed to fail her.

I couldn't speak either. Thalia put her arms around me and we held each other for a long, hard moment. She didn't ask if I would join her. I think she knew, even when I'd been toying with the idea, that I wouldn't do it in the end.

You'd think that after I'd seen Artemis's compassion and the care she'd shown for all of us, I would have been sold on becoming a Hunter. But just as certainly as I knew Luke was alive, I was sure about my choice.

You will do what is right, Artemis had said to me. What was right for me wasn't the same as what was right for Thalia.

It was the force that had sent me in search of Grover and the Golden Fleece last summer, risking expulsion from camp. It had spurred me to take the sky from Luke, even when I might die doing so. Seven years ago, I'd been marked by Thalia's sacrifice. It had set me on a path that wasn't really about quests or heroism or saving the day.

It was about standing by my friends. My family.

There was my dad, waiting in San Francisco, in the hope I might return. There was Luke, under Kronos's thumb—if I gave up on him now, there'd be no one left to care about him.

Most of all, there was Percy, on whose shoulders the fate of Olympus now rested.

I couldn't leave him to face it alone, even if the thought of saying goodbye to him for good didn't make my insides curdle.

It meant, though, that I would say goodbye to Thalia.

I blinked back my tears and gave her another tight squeeze.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter wasn't the easiest. To begin with, connecting Annabeth's canon dialogue was a challenge, given that the stuff she says … actually doesn't follow all that fluidly from Percy's sentences in the story. (And indeed, a lot of times, when RR uses her to deliver key plot information to Percy, a lot of her dialogue comes across as out of the blue. It does, however, work well with a character who has a strong introspective monologue … and I guess that's why I've written her very much that way here!) Then there's the winter solstice council, which seriously, I don't want to repeat entirely, so a lot of summarising got done there, which isn't my favourite thing to do with the canon chapters. But with that done … I definitely wanted to showcase Thalia's moment, the
end of her 'story arc', so to speak. Although this has been Annabeth's story, and will continue to be, Thalia's story was one I wanted to try to expand on more. I hope that seeing her through Annabeth's eyes in this story has managed to flesh out her backstory in greater detail as well. I do think that she and Luke had feelings for each other (I feel like it's kind of obvious in *The Diary of Luke Castellan*, and the eagle-eyed among you may have spotted that appearing earlier in this fic), but that ship sank in *Titan's Curse*—on both ends. I did not want to write it explicitly into the narrative, but I hope it came out in the subtext!

A note on Thalia's age—although Percy and the others know at this point that Thalia is fifteen going on sixteen, that crucial conversation with Apollo took place while Annabeth was kidnapped, and thus couldn't possible know Thalia's exact age post-de-arborification.
The Gods Throw A Victory Bash

Chapter Summary

Olympus goes from war council to victory party in zero seconds flat.

Chapter Notes

Quick thank you to RazeKaiser768, Claire, thegoddessinzerogravity, Thefanfictor, and Anon+Shumpert for stopping by to cheer me up last week! I really, really appreciate your kindness. I hope you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The speed at which the gods went from our death row trial into a full-on, no-holds-barred victory bash gave me whiplash. Zeus dissolved the council and everybody migrated to the courtyard, where decorations and refreshment stands sprang out of the ground faster than you could say, 'Party!' Free-flow nectar and ambrosia poured from golden fountains. Rich, juicy fruit dripped from quick-growing vines. Live music filled the air, courtesy of the nine Muses. A sudden flood of minor gods appeared out of nowhere to join the festivities.

'A good party does fortify us in the face of imminent danger,' said a voice behind me.

'Mother!'

'Annabeth.' Athena reached out to me, just as I'd imagined when I'd been trapped beneath the sky. This time, she tucked a stray curl behind my ear. She smiled when she saw my owl earrings.

I didn't know what to say to her. Part of me yearned for her approval. The other part was still miffed that she'd spoken against Percy and Thalia.

'You object to my counsel earlier,' Athena observed.

'I know Percy, Mother. He's not dangerous—not to Olympus.'

'Would you have said the same about your friend Luke?'

I flushed and stared at my feet.

'Choices have consequences,' Athena said. 'It does not do to rush into them, especially when a great prophecy is concerned. I did not advocate for either side; I merely raised the relevant considerations. The Fates are still weaving together the threads of the future. Certain paths may be set in stone; others will be determined by our actions—the consequences of which are so diverse that predicting them is a tricky business indeed.'

Her words were a reminder of the Orobas's prophecy that had played out on the Mountain of Despair—my instinctive, unthinking choice that had brought everyone together there; the grey threaded
through both Percy and Luke's hair; the battles and betrayals on the mountaintop; and Zoë's tragic
death. For a moment, I could sense the gossamer threads of Fate clinging to my skin again.

Athena tipped my chin up with her finger. 'Your heart is big and your courage deep, daughter. It
gives me pride, but be wise. I warned you before not to get too close to Percy Jackson.'

'Because his dad's Poseidon? Mom, he—'

'Because I do not wish to see you hurt,' she said. 'I do not like how close you are to the danger that
surrounds him.'

In spite of the curt tone in which her words were delivered, her rare show of concern rendered me
speechless.

'Do not commit your heart unwisely,' Athena warned.

'Well, what fun is that?' Aphrodite sashayed up to us, shaking her head disapprovingly at my mother.
'The romance, the heartbreak, the UST …' She winked at me. 'You still have a long way to go, my
dear, but such potential you have!'

My cheeks burned hotter than ever at the memory of my first meeting with Aphrodite. She'd gone
into raptures about how interesting my love life could be.

I hadn't wanted her butting in then, and I certainly didn't want her help now.

'My daughter displayed great fortitude,' Athena said coldly. 'I would not reduce her to a simpering
damsel in distress from the quest of a lovesick hero.'

Aphrodite's laugh sounded like the tinkling of a wind chime. 'But quests for love are the best of all!
Why, you remember Paris and Helen … Romeo and Juliet … Tristan and Isolde …'

'I remember how they ended,' Athena said.

Aphrodite waved her hand as though the tragic endings of those love stories were inconsequential.
'Lighten up. It's a party!' She pursed her lips at my ragged t-shirt and torn jeans. 'Now, this won't do.
Here—' She produced a little hand mirror. The moment I looked into it, my grubby appearance
faded. My tattered clothes were replaced by a feather-light blue dress that felt like I was wearing a
cloud. It was tied around my waist by a silver sash that doubled up as a pouch that cleverly hid the
contents of my pocket in the folds of the skirt. The sash matched a long streak of grey in my hair that
I hadn't noticed before.

Aphrodite beamed at me. 'Now go have some fun!' She gave me a push in the direction of the
dancing crowd. I tripped over the hem of my long dress and stumbled into a preppy-looking boy
with an angular face. He caught my elbow and steadied me.

'Sorry,' I muttered.

'It's fine,' he said, peering down at me with unveiled interest. He was probably an immortal, maybe a
godling—the offspring of two minor gods. He had strange, yellow eyes, a bit like a cat's, and a
ferrety nose that twitched constantly, as though he was on the lookout for anything suspicious. His
straight, brown hair was neatly combed and parted down the middle. The immaculate, smart blazer
and silk tie he wore made me think of Melanie Richards.

'Can I have this dance, Annabeth Chase?'
I didn't ask how he knew my name. I wasn't keen to dance with him, but couldn't find a good reason to refuse. He looked like the kind of kid who would run off and tattle on me if I offended him. I let him take my hand, and we began a slow waltz.

In the middle of the dance, my partner said casually, 'You're carrying a curse.'

My feet faltered. He caught me smoothly and waltzed on as if he had commented on nothing more shocking than the party decorations.

'Excuse me?' I said.

'I can tell a cursed object from miles away. They're my domain, after all.'

Inside the pouch on my sash, the Necklace of Harmonia bumped up against my trusty dagger. *The curse of betrayal one must defeat* ... I shivered. 'Your domain?'

'Curses. I deliver them—well, only a specific subset of them. Horkos, god of broken oaths at your service.'

'Broken oaths? Like, on the Styx?'

'We-ll, not exactly. Styx likes to see to those herself. I only get the smaller stuff. Solemn vows and promises and such. Still, can't complain. I never really go out of business. Not like some of the other minor gods. Weddings keep me especially busy—fifty percent of them end in divorce, you know.' Horkos frowned. 'Not sure if you're carrying one of mine, but I definitely sense an active curse. Though I don't think it's meant for you. Seems like it just snagged you along the way. Any bad stuff happen to you recently?'

'Um …' Holding the sky for a day probably counted. 'How do I break a curse?'

'Well, I don't know the specifics for every curse, but there's always a sacrifice or two involved.'

The song ended. Horkos released me and bowed. 'Thank you for the dance. And I'd watch my step if I were you. Curses can build on the actions of their owners.'

And with this ominous pronouncement, he disappeared into the crowd.

I made my way back towards the palace, wondering where Percy, Thalia, and Grover had got to. The throne room was empty except for a young girl who knelt by the hearth, stoking the fire. She looked up when I entered and smiled at me sweetly.

I gasped. 'I know you!' She was the same ghost girl who tended the central fire at camp.

'Not many do,' said the girl. Her voice was surprisingly deep and throaty for a girl who looked no more than eight. But then, Artemis also appeared as a twelve-year-old. 'Do you know my name?'

I thought for a moment. It was right there on the tip of my tongue. The way she was here in the throne room and at the heart of camp, tending to the fires that never went out … 'You're Hestia. Goddess of the hearth.'

Hestia nodded happily. 'Of the hearth—of home—of family.'

Now that I'd placed her, everything I knew about her came flooding to the forefront of my mind. 'You were one of the original Olympians! One of the six children of—'

'Of Kronos, yes,' Hestia agreed. 'I have not sat among the Council of Twelve for eons, though.'
'You gave your place to Dionysus.'

'I took the place that was needed,' she corrected. 'I live at the heart of every home.'

'You come to camp sometimes.'

'I am always there.'

'But I only saw you a few times.'

Hestia climbed into the hearth and settled herself cross-legged among the flames. 'The children who notice me are the ones who crave a home. Once you settle in, it is easy to take for granted something that is always there.'

'I saw you on my first day at camp,' I said. 'And at Thanksgiving this year. And—' I couldn't remember every single time I'd spotted her, but it did seem to be as Hestia suggested. She appeared when I was aching for a real home.

'When you needed a home. A family.' She smoothed her flickering skirts. 'My fire burns within each one of us.'

'What do you mean?'

'Home isn't just a place, Annabeth,' Hestia said gently. 'It's wherever you make it.' She pointed towards the courtyard, where a group of gods parted slightly to reveal a lanky, black-haired figure in their midst. 'Whoever you make it with.'

I twisted two of the beads on my camp necklace together, not knowing what to say to this.

'He had something to tell you earlier, didn't he?'

'Um, yeah …' At the thought of Percy's expression when Artemis first made her announcement, and his garbled, panicky words, my heart began to race.

No, it had not been Thalia he was worried about losing.

Hestia gave me a knowing smile and disappeared into the dancing flames.

I broke into a run, wanting to get to Percy before he was swamped again. When I reached him, he was backed up against a marble column with a cornered look on his face.

'Percy!' I said. Then I noticed which goddess was glaring at him. 'Oh … Mom.'

I twisted my hands nervously in my sash, wondering what she had been saying to Percy. After our conversation earlier, I highly doubted she was offering him congratulations.

Athena glanced between us. Her face was an inscrutable mask again. 'I will leave you for now.' Her grey eyes flashed a warning at me before she departed.

I winced. 'Was she giving you a hard time?'

Percy shook his head quickly. 'No, it's … fine.'

I studied his face. There were deep shadows under his eyes and lines that hadn't been there when we danced at Westover Hall. His brow was furrowed, like he was still deeply concerned about something. The streak of grey I'd noticed earlier was still there, running through his dark hair. It was
the same shade as the one in my own hair. I knew without question that Luke still had his, too.

Grey, threaded through our hair. The mark of the sky, connecting the three of us.

Percy seemed to be wrestling with a tough decision. He looked just as he had before Artemis's announcement, although maybe not quite as green. I reached out to touch his grey hairs and he relaxed slightly.

'So what did you want to tell me earlier?' I asked.

Percy stared at his toes. 'I, uh, was thinking …' He played with the frayed hem of his t-shirt. 'We got interrupted at Westover Hall.'

This wasn't what I had expected. Frowning, I thought back to the snowy school, to the dance and our conversation there. I couldn't even remember what we'd talked about. It seemed like a million years ago.

'And …' Percy took a deep breath and said, very quickly, 'I think I owe you a dance.'

In the background, the Muses struck up a slow song, possibly the exact one we'd tried to slow-dance to at Westover Hall.

'All right, Seaweed Brain,' I said.

Our hands found each other's perfectly this time. I guessed there was more that Percy hadn't said, and I knew there was plenty that I hadn't managed to say either. But none of it seemed to matter as he held me close and we revolved in time to the music. For now, this long, slow dance was enough.

Chapter End Notes

Athena’s speech on the consequences of our actions and predicting the future is indeed a bastardised quote from Dumbledore in *Harry Potter in the Prisoner of Azkaban*: *The consequences of our actions are always so complicated, so diverse, that predicting the future is a very difficult business indeed.* (I can never resist a good HP reference … and hey, it is very apt here.)

**Horkos** is a son of Eris, the goddess of Strife, who personifies a curse inflicted on any person who swears a false oath. So basically, god of broken oaths. You might know him better by his Roman name … he got a brief mention by his son in BoO, if anyone spotted that. Percy did say he'd last seen Annabeth dancing with a minor godling … ;)
After we finished our dance, Percy and I found Grover feasting on a tray of tin cans and double espresso shots. He was surrounded by a small group of satyrs, all hanging on his every word as he related the breakthrough he'd had in his quest for Pan.

'I swear it was the coffee,' he said. 'I felt him out there in the desert, I really did.' His eyes were wide and bloodshot, and he was nodding so quickly, it made me dizzy just to watch. He drained his espresso and chewed up the paper cup.

'I'm sure you did,' I said, pulling him away from the bottomless coffee supply. 'I think that's enough caffeine for now, though.'

'What do we do now?' Percy asked. 'Are you coming back to camp?'

'I … guess so.' I hadn't really thought about what I'd do in the immediate future. Would I still go back to St Catherine's? Now that Thalia had taken Zoë's place, I'd be alone there. Anyway, it was still winter break. I might as well spend it at camp while I figured out where to go from here.

_Or you could spend it with your family_, suggested a voice in my head.

'How are we getting back?' Grover asked. 'I have to tell the Council of Cloven Elders about Pan, and his gift, and—'

'Whoa, slow down, G-man,' Percy said, laughing. 'I guess we can get a taxi or something … but do you guys mind if I make a call first? I gotta let my mom and Tyson know we're okay.'

'You told them about the quest?' I asked.

'Well, yeah,' he said, like it was the most natural thing in the world. 'They were really worried about you. They'll be glad to know you're okay.' He reached into his pocket, searching for a drachma, and his eyes widened. 'Oh. I almost forgot.'

He withdrew his hand. In it was my missing Yankees cap.

'You found it!'

'You dropped it at Westover Hall,' he said. 'I just held on to it until I could give it back.'

Our fingers touched when he handed it over.

'Thanks, Seaweed Brain.'

Percy smiled, and then he headed off to a quieter part of the garden, with a fountain perfect for
making rainbows in the wintry sunlight.

Thalia came over to Grover and me. She'd apparently spent the whole party talking to Artemis.

'We're heading back to camp to pick up the rest of the Hunters,' Thalia said. 'And then Artemis wants to be off right away … so I guess this is goodbye. For now.'

Grover looked disappointed. 'You guys won't stay at camp for longer?'

Thalia shook her head. 'Monsters to hunt, creatures to protect …' Her eyes gleamed with excitement. 'Don't look so sad, Goat Boy. We'll see each other again. I'm still gonna be fighting Kronos. Just not under the damn prophecy.'

'Do you think this is how it was supposed to be all along?' I wondered. Chiron had spent the last few months trying to prepare Thalia, certain that Kronos's hand in bringing her back had placed her in the prophecy's spotlight. But now this confluence of choices—hers, Artemis's, Zoë's … even mine, indirectly—had thrown it back on Percy.

It was just like my mother had said: the consequences of our choices were so diverse, so imaginable …

'Prophecies are complex.' Artemis appeared out of nowhere. 'Who can say how our actions affect them? Do not worry too much, Annabeth. You will do what is right, and that is enough.'

She smiled at Grover. 'I did not get a chance to thank you, my young satyr friend. Your assistance to my Hunters is much appreciated.'

Grover looked like he was about to faint with happiness. He stuttered over his reply, eyes wider than ever.

'Come,' Artemis said to Thalia. 'The chariot is ready.' It was parked at the foot of the palace hill, waiting with the four golden deer.

'Would you like a lift to Camp Half-Blood, my friends?' Artemis asked.

'Oh, yes!' Grover said. 'But Percy's …' He looked towards the garden fountain where we'd last seen Percy headed.

'He's making a call,' I said. 'Can you wait?'

Artemis shook her head. 'We must be on our way. You may come with us and I can send transport for Percy later.'

Grover looked torn, but I was less conflicted. 'We'll wait with Percy. But thank you.'

Artemis nodded. 'I will tell Chiron to send someone for you, then,'

Thalia gave us one last hug—'Say goodbye to Percy for me!'—and then she climbed into the silver chariot after Artemis. It leapt into the air and vanished among the clouds.

When Percy finished his calls, we took the magic elevator down to the ground floor. My Aphrodite-created dress disappeared once I left the elevator, reverting to my tattered t-shirt and jeans. The security guard on duty did a double-take, but muttered to himself, 'S'not my business,' and went back to reading his book.

It was cold on the streets of Manhattan, a lot chillier than the temperature in San Francisco or the
carefully-controlled climate of Olympus. Percy took one look at my ragged clothing and shrugged out of his coat, offering it to me. We shivered in the foyer for half an hour before Argus showed up in the strawberry van. Percy and I got in the back, letting Grover ride shotgun.

'Everything okay with Tyson and your mom?' I asked.

'Yeah. Sorry I took so long. Tyson wanted to hear everything.'

I grinned, imagining Tyson's wide-eyed curiosity. It had taken me a while to warm to Percy's Cyclops half-brother, but after Tyson had saved our lives a couple of times last summer, he'd more than proven that Percy's faith in him wasn't misguided. 'I miss him.'

'He'll be at camp next summer. He said he got time off.' Percy found a stray, half-squashed strawberry on the van floor and rolled it around in his fingers. 'And my mom … well, I didn't get to tell you this before, but she's got a new boyfriend.'

'Oh.' I remembered Percy's last stepfather, the one who made Janet look like a model stepparent. 'Are you worried that he'll be like Gabe?'

'What? No—it's not like that at all. Gabe was … well, she married him for me. To protect me, I mean. So I think she deserves to be happy now, you know? And if she likes Paul … I guess I'm happy if she is.'

His sincerity made my eyes mist up. It was really something, the way he trusted his mom to decide for herself, even when he might have to live with the consequences, too. I guess it helped that Sally Jackson was a super cool mom.

Then again, maybe my dad was kinda cool, too.

'Your stepmom,' Percy said suddenly.

'What about her?' I frowned. If he'd been to my dad's house in San Francisco, he must have met Janet there. 'Was she mean to you? I know she can be—'

'No, no, she was really nice! She made us snacks and everything. It's just, she told me to tell you that you had a home there. She wanted me to remind you.'

I was silent for a long time. 'She said that?'

'Yeah.'

I didn't know what to make of this. I was only just beginning to accept my dad's overtures. Something like this coming from Janet—and through Percy … well, it like if Ares had started adopting fluffy bunnies.

Our friends at camp were expecting us. They had already seen the Hunters off earlier in the morning (Silena Beauregard looked particularly pleased about it), so they'd been forewarned of our arrival. Chiron ushered us into the parlour of the Big House, where he had a roaring fire going. We warmed up over hot chocolate and toasted cheese sandwiches, sitting in a circle with the other senior campers—Silena, Beckendorf, the Stoll brothers … and Clarisse.

She had finally returned from her mission—just popped up in Manhattan without warning, according to Chiron. Her hair was bleached blonde and cut jaggedly so that it hung unevenly around her ears. She actually looked sunburned, which clashed completely with the winter scenery outside.
'I got news—bad news,' she muttered to me.

'I'll fill you in later,' Chiron said. He raised his mug to Percy. 'The important thing is you have prevailed. And you saved Annabeth!'

Percy blushed and stared into his mug.

The others wanted to know about our escape from Atlas's mountain. Apparently, they'd all heard the prophecy that had sent the Hunters on their quest. To my amazement, the Oracle had wandered out personally to deliver it.

I told them about the fight with Atlas, how Percy had freed Artemis and trapped him back under the sky, and how Thalia had fought Luke, leading to his fall from the top of Mount Tam.

Silena's face was very white as she listened to all this. She twisted the bracelet on her wrist so hard, she nearly snapped it. 'Luke is … dead?'

'No, I don't think so—'

'But you said he fell—what, fifty feet?' Beckendorf said sharply. 'How could he survive that?'

'Luke is alive,' Percy cut in. 'Annabeth was right.'

I straightened, surprised. He'd staunchly refused to believe it when I'd told him before. What had made him change his mind? 'How do you know?'

Percy seemed offended by my question. 'My dad told me,' he said, with a touch of steel in his voice. 'He saw him—Luke, I mean. He's back on the Princess Andromeda, and he's got Kronos's coffin on board. And he's going to attack us again.'

The room was quiet for a while, with only the crackle from the fireplace as we took in Percy's information. The knowledge that an attack was coming was bleak, but surely we had time to prepare. The gods were forewarned. Atlas was no longer free. Even if Luke had survived his fall, he wouldn't be in any shape to lead Kronos's army for a while.

And Thalia was no longer the centre of the prophecy. The only half-blood child of the eldest gods who could ever turn sixteen was sitting in front of me, scowling into his hot chocolate.

'Well,' I said bracingly, 'if the final battle does come when Percy is sixteen, at least we have two more years to figure something out.'

Percy's eyes flickered towards me and back down to his mug. His expression was stonier than ever. I wanted to catch his eye, to tell him that it wouldn't be so bad—we would figure out a way to help him—but he wouldn't meet my gaze.

Chiron sighed heavily. 'Two years may seem like a long time, but it is the blink of an eye. I still hope you are not the child of the prophecy, Percy. But, if you are, then the second Titan war is almost upon us. Kronos's first strike will be here.'

Beckendorf and the Stoll brothers exchanged an uneasy look. Silena buried her face in her hands. Clarisse crossed her arms and looked grim. I guessed she must have discovered a lot more about Kronos's plans during her mission.

Chiron confirmed a moment later that she had. But before he and Clarisse could explain further, there was a knock on the door. I didn't immediately recognise the boy who traipsed in with snow on his
shoulders and a big grin across his face. It wasn't until he said, 'Where's my sister?' that I remembered
Nico di Angelo.

You could have heard a pin drop. My insides clenched horribly as I stared at the kid who was about
to find out he'd lost his sister … to a quest I'd been responsible for.

Percy got to his feet. He looked as though he'd just been handed the weight of the sky again.

'Hey, Nico,' he said, and drew the boy aside. They headed out onto the snowy grounds.

'He will be all right,' Chiron said. 'Percy will break the news gently. And he is the best person to
answer any questions Nico may have.'

'Did he get claimed yet?' I asked.

Chiron shook his head.

Clarisse cleared her throat. 'Kronos's attack,' she reminded us.

'Yes.' Chiron looked around at the six of us. 'Clarisse was on a secret mission for the past two
months. We did not say anything because we did not wish to cause undue panic before we were
certain. But now, she has found—'

'The Labyrinth,' Clarisse said.

'Like Daedalus's Labyrinth?' Beckendorf asked. 'What's that got to do with camp?'

I waited for Clarisse to answer, not liking the conclusion that was forming in my head. With the
week I'd just had, I hadn't spared a thought for the Labyrinth and Clarisse's mission. But some parts
of my adventure were starting to fall into place: the strange detour to Costa Rica with Thorn, my
guarded underground cell, the mazes in my dreams.

'It's back,' Clarisse said. 'And Kronos is trying to use it.'

All four other counsellors began talking at once, their voices rising over each other's.

'What do you mean, back?'

'Is it a weapon?'

'Were you actually in the Labyrinth?'

'Shit up, all of you!' Clarisse raised her voice above the din. 'I don't know how or if it really is
possible, but I do know it's not just in a single place. It reaches all over America. I went in under
Phoenix and ended up in San Francisco. And then when I went back in …'

To everybody's shock, her voice actually shook. Her eyes grew distant. 'The walls move, and the things down there …' She shuddered. 'I thought I'd never get out. There was this really weird section, like it was all sunny and hot even in the middle of
winter.' She shook her jagged bangs out of her eyes, making her out-of-season tan more obvious.

'Costa Rica?' I guessed.

'Maybe.' Clarisse's eyes narrowed. 'How do you know?'

'I think I might have been in it.' I told them about my woozy journey with Thorn and the half-blood,
Huh,' Clarisse said. 'Well, that just proves it, right? Luke's people are using the Labyrinth. But they haven't figured it out. Because the damn thing's worse than a monster. And who knows where it goes? It's probably everywhere. Maybe even here. I don't know. In the end I got out in Manhattan, and I came straight to camp.'

'Thank the gods for that,' Chiron said. 'We were—'

He was interrupted by a huge explosion. Silena screamed. Beckendorf jumped to his feet so fast, his chair toppled over Connor's lap. Travis spilt his hot chocolate all over the carpet.

'It's coming from the mess hall,' Clarisse said. She snatched up her spear from the corner of the room.

We ran out to the dining pavilion, which was empty except for Percy. He stood before a long, jagged crack in the floor. It was as if someone had carved a twenty-foot line into the marble with a giant knife.

'What happened?' I asked. 'Where's Nico?'

Percy turned very slowly. His face was scrunched up like he was trying to figure out a difficult reading assignment. He had his fingers clenched around what looked like a chess piece.

'Skeletons,' he said shakily. 'Skeleton warriors—they were chasing us on our quest. Atlas grew them from dragon's teeth. They were tracking us—they must have followed me.'

'Skeleton warriors—like spartoi?' Chiron said sharply.

'Yeah, they, um, rose out of the ground.'

Clarisse jabbed her spear at the crack in the floor. 'Out of the ground?'

I knew what she was thinking. If our enemies had appeared from underground … could the Labyrinth be underneath us already?

Percy ran a hand through his hair. 'I was telling Nico about Bianca, and the ground, um, split apart. And they came out of it.'

'You fought them off?'

'Uh huh.' Percy wouldn't meet my eyes. 'I told Nico to run. He was really scared. I'd better go find him.'

Chiron murmured in assent. He knelt over the crack, running his fingers along it. I could tell he was alarmed by the thought that Kronos might have broken through this way.

Percy grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the others, heading towards the woods.

'Percy, what—where are we going?' He was walking so fast, I had to jog to keep up.

'I need your help.'

'What weren't you telling us?'

We'd reached the edge of the woods. Percy paced back and forth between two snow-covered trees. 'Nico didn't run from the skeletons. And I didn't get rid of them. He opened the ground and they fell
in.'

His hand fell open, revealing a tiny black figurine. Its metal face glowered at me, a perfect replica of the Lord of the Underworld.

'It's Hades,' Percy said. 'Nico's dad is Hades.'

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Percy must have called Grover on the empathy link or something, because he joined us a few minutes later, clutching a steaming mug of coffee. We headed into the woods to search for Nico di Angelo, but although we combed the trees for hours, he didn't turn up. It was like he'd vanished into thin air.

I still couldn't believe he was the son of Hades—which meant that Bianca had been the daughter of Hades. Two more children of the eldest gods. No wonder Thorn had been so excited to find them. I shivered, thinking about what could have happened if we hadn't intervened at Westover Hall. If the Titans had gotten to Bianca and Nico before us, would they have convinced them to kill the Ophiotaurus?

Kronos had already attempted to control the prophecy through Thalia. Now he had another chance. The thought was both frightening and consoling. On one hand, Kronos stood to gain another powerful half-blood ally. On the other, Nico was even younger than Percy. If the prophecy were to shift to him, the day of reckoning would not arrive for at least five years.

And even more optimistically, maybe Percy could avoid the prophecy entirely. Just as Thalia had unexpectedly side-stepped it with only a day to her sixteenth birthday, maybe this was the twist of Fate we needed to save Percy from its clutches.

Maybe I didn't have to fear a showdown between Percy and Luke after all.

I tried not to think about the fact that helping Percy escape the prophecy might mean shackling a ten-year-old kid to it. Maybe it made me an awful person, but I couldn't pretend I would rather Percy survived its foretold doom than Nico di Angelo. I mean, I'd known the kid for maybe five minutes, if that.

But Percy acted like Nico was his personal responsibility. 'It's my fault,' he said. 'He ran away from me.'

'He was probably just scared. You don't know—'

'He told me he hated me and wished I was dead. I think that's pretty clear.'

When the sun began to sink, we had to admit defeat. Percy kicked the ground angrily and sprinted out onto a ledge. It extended over a large, pristine patch of ice that had probably been a pond in summertime. Percy dropped to his knees on it and stared at the little metal Hades in his hand.

Grover and I ran up to him. I put a hand on Percy's shoulder.

'We have to tell Chiron,' I said. He'd help us find Nico. Once he heard about Nico's parentage, he'd know how important it was.

'No.'

'Um …' Grover bit his lip. 'What do you mean, no?'
Percy pushed himself to his feet and slipped the figurine into his pocket. 'We can't let anyone know. I don't think anyone realises that Nico is a—' 

'A son of Hades!' I burst out. My breath came out in little puffs in the air. 'Percy, do you have any idea how serious this is? Even Hades broke the oath! This is horrible!' 

'I don't think so. I don't think Hades broke the oath.' 

I couldn't see how he could believe that. I mean, the proof was right there. 

'He's their dad, but Bianca and Nico have been out of commission for a long time, since even before World War II.' 

Grover snapped his fingers in understanding. 'The Lotus Casino! Bianca told us, when we were on the quest. She didn't remember a lot of things, but she said she'd been in a hotel in Vegas—she and Nico were stuck there for decades. They were born before the oath was made.' 

'But …' I remembered our time at the Lotus Hotel and Casino vividly. Extracting ourselves had been hard enough, and the time we'd spent in there had been comparatively short. 'How did they get out?' 

Percy ran a hand through his hair. 'I don't know. Bianca said a lawyer came and got them and drove them to Westover Hall. I don't know who that could've been, or why. Maybe it's part of this Great Stirring thing. I don't think Nico understands who he is. But we can't go telling anyone. Not even Chiron.' 

The air temperature felt like it had just dipped ten degrees. I wrapped my arms around myself, but the chill was inside me as well. Kronos couldn't have extracted the di Angelos, or we wouldn't have needed to send Thorn after them. The only person who could have known they existed was their father. And if he was the one who had hidden them away and brought them out after all this time … 

I thought uneasily of the missing throne at the winter solstice council. The implications of revealing that a son of Hades was on the loose were suddenly crystal clear. 

'If the Olympians find out—' Percy said. 

'It might start them fighting among each other again,' I finished. It had been bad enough a year ago, when Kronos had tried to play the three eldest gods against each other. We'd only narrowly averted that war. 'That's the last thing we need.' 

Grover nibbled at the edge of his coffee mug. 'But you can't hide things from the gods. Not forever.' 

Percy ruffled his hair again. The setting sun illuminated his new grey streak, making it stand out vividly against the black. 'I don't need forever. Just two years. Until I'm sixteen.' 

I stepped back, aghast. 'But, Percy, this means the prophecy might not be about you.' Hadn't he realised? 'It might be about Nico. We have to—' 

'No, I choose the prophecy,' he said firmly. The look on his face brought me back to Mount Tam, to the moment he'd seemed to age ten years. 'It will be about me.' 

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Here was his chance to walk away, to find a loophole and save himself. Instead, he was stubbornly committing himself to it. 'Why are you saying that? You want to be responsible for the whole world?' 

'I can't let Nico be in any more danger. I owe that much to his sister. I … let them both down.'
That old, familiar feeling of wanting to smack him and hug him at the same time washed over me. Stupid Seaweed Brain. So hopelessly loyal, even to the friends he’d only known for a short while.

*You will do what's right*, Artemis had told me. I should have known that Percy would, too. Even when Grover pointed out that Nico currently hated his guts, he stood by his refusal to let the kid suffer any more.

'Maybe we can find him. We can convince him it's okay, hide him somewhere safe …'

'If Luke gets hold of him—' The idea of Nico joining Luke and *both* of them turning against Percy made me feel sick.

'Luke won't. I'll make sure he's got other things to worry about.' Percy stared up at the sky as though making a silent promise to the gods. 'Namely, me.'

There was no answering rumble, no flash of lightning of across the skies, but as we trudged back through the woods, the air seemed to tighten around us like a noose. The first line of the Orobas's prophecy rang in my head: *A circle of three, bound in love and hate.*

Percy's choice had set us on a path towards the momentous lines of the Great Prophecy. Just like the Orobas had proclaimed, Luke and Percy's fates were intricately entwined. Maybe I was the third. Or maybe it was Nico di Angelo instead, a new player who could tip the balance of the precarious future. I couldn't tell how any of it would play out. Like my mom and Artemis had said, prophecies were complex, and so were the consequences of our actions.

Chapter End Notes

And this is the last chapter (no, not of this story, pssshhhht, did you think I’d be that mean?) with any canon scenes. So yes, Annabeth’s PoV of *Titan’s Curse* really only took ten chapters—like, a third of this fic? I hope no one’s bored of our girl yet!

Thanks again to those of you who dropped by to comment last chapter! I always appreciate every one!
I Pawn My Jewellery

Chapter Summary

Annabeth checks a monument off her bucket list, and settles a tab.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When we got back from the woods, I found a surprise waiting for me in cabin six. Not only was my bag from our trip to Maine sitting on my bunk, but also a pile of stuff—clothes, books, toiletries—that I'd last seen in my dorm room at St Catherine's.

'There's a note,' Malcolm told me. He pointed to a piece of paper that was pinned to my bed frame with the point of a silver arrow.

It was from Thalia. She'd written, *I cleared out the dorm. Guessed you wouldn't want to go back after everything. If you do go to SF, keep an eye on Mt Tam.*

She'd left me her green leather diary as well, though she must have taken the photos inside with her. Or maybe she'd destroyed them. Only one was left, the first one I'd seen all those months ago. The one with *family* written on the back.

I stared at our grinning faces for a long time. Then I slid the photo back between the diary's pages.

A loose sheet of paper fell out. I was surprised to find my dad's last letter to me, slightly crumpled. Attached to it was the scrap of notebook paper with his address scribbled on it, which must have led Thalia and Percy to his door.

*You'll always have a home with us.*

Why did it feel like I'd been in this position before, turning the same decision over in my head?

That night, my dreams were full of ancient planes dive-bombing monster armies. They landed in the garden of a messy, suburban house, one that I'd never seen before, but beckoned to me anyway. *Come home,* it whispered to me.

By morning, I'd made up my mind what to do.

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The decision about where to spend the rest of the school year was just one of the problems I had to solve. There was still the Necklace of Harmonia burning a figurative hole in my pocket, and the mystery of the Labyrinth hanging over our heads.

In all the excitement over the *spartoi* attack, we hadn't gotten to finish our discussion with Clarisse. She finished telling her story to just Chiron and me. Percy might have joined us, but his mom had turned up to fetch him and Grover back to Manhattan (Grover was headed for New Mexico, insisting that the lost god Pan awaited him there). The other counsellors seemed too spooked by the whole thing. Travis and Connor were troubled that the Hermes cabin had lost another kid—they still
thought Nico was one of the unclaimed—and wanted to talk to the satyrs about how to up recruitment. Silena claimed the idea of underground tunnels freaked her out. Beckendorf was more concerned about shoring up the camp defences. He took Silena to the forge, which seemed to cheer her up.

'Wusses,' Clarisse muttered, but without her usual rancour.

'How is Chris?' I asked.

'I don't know. I haven't been back to Phoenix.' Clarisse rubbed her forehead tiredly. 'I gotta get back there. I'm not going back through the Labyrinth, though!' She glared at Chiron and me, as if we hadn't tried our best to discourage her from entering it in the first place.

'What exactly did you see in there?'

Clarisse studied her nails. They were short and jagged like her hair, with crusty dirt—or possibly blood—under the cuticles. She was silent for so long, I thought she'd refuse to tell us. Then she said, 'You gotta promise—no, swear you'll never tell anyone, ever!'

Chiron and I exchanged puzzled looks. Clarisse flushed and added quickly, 'Anyone could be a spy.'

Considering she'd already outlined her travels in the Labyrinth for the others yesterday, this was a pretty flimsy excuse. Unless she suspected … no. If Kronos still had spies among us, surely wouldn't be the senior counsellors. We'd all been at camp for years.

So was Luke. The voice in my head sounded like my mother. I pushed it away. That was different.

Once Chiron and I promised not to tell, Clarisse told us everything she'd encountered, from passages that whispered in her ears to monsters that emerged straight out of the walls. As she described her route, I drew absent-mindedly on the tablecloth, sketching out a rudimentary map. Phoenix to San Francisco, to Costa Rica, to New York—the geography was impossible to reconcile. And then Clarisse started talking about dark caverns lit by obsidian jewels in the walls, which sounded too ominously familiar. I'd been somewhere like that before, but it wasn't anywhere in the mortal world—nor should it have been possible for anyone alive to get there.

'And Mary was there,' she said.

'Mary? You mean Ariadne?'

'No!' Clarisse rounded on me so furiously, I thought she was about to punch me. 'Mary! Chris was talking about her.'

Chiron nodded sympathetically. 'A ghost?'

'Must've been,' Clarisse muttered. 'Thought I was dead at first. Mary kept telling me I had to leave. Then I saw this ferryman poling a barge down a river … well, I didn't hang around to meet him. Turned and got out of there as fast as I could.'

I felt like I was missing something. 'Who's Mary?'

Clarisse crossed her arms and closed her eyes. When she opened them, they were wet. I guessed this was the real reason she'd sworn us to secrecy.

'You can tell her later,' she told Chiron. 'I don't want to talk about it.'
'Of course,' Chiron murmured, throwing me a sharp glance.

Taking the hint, I changed the subject. I lifted the tablecloth to show them what I'd drawn. The passages looked like a misshapen creature with a long neck, body, and tail.

'I can't really get a sense of how it's structured,' I admitted. 'Before, we kept thinking that it migrated here, the way Mount Olympus or Mount Othrys did. But what if it's actually alive? Daedalus was an inventor—he could have made the whole thing an automaton. We know a lot of Hephaestus's automatons reformed, like the Colchis Bulls.'

*Truly great architecture lives and breathes.* An older demigod professor had once described the Labyrinth in those terms. In light of Clarisse's information, maybe that phrase wasn't as figurative as I'd interpreted it to be. And something else the professor had admitted, which had seemed inconsequential at the time, now surfaced in my mind.

'So it's reformed,' Clarisse said. 'Like a monster.'

'And it's not the first time,' I said. 'I think I know someone who might be able to tell us more about the last time it appeared.'

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Like most colleges, Princeton University was closed for the holidays. However, after getting my urgent IM, Professor Benjamin Daly agreed to meet us at his office the day after Boxing Day.

Clarisse and I flew a pair of pegasi onto campus. The grounds were deserted, which was fortunate because if anyone had been around, they might have been alarmed by the patrolling tiger statues that marched back and forth like guards on sentry duty.

Clarisse's hands tightened around her spear. 'Are they monsters?'

'They attacked me before,' I said. 'But they're acting different now.'

'I re-programmed them.' Prof Daly came limping across the courtyard on his cane. The tiger sentries straightened upon his arrival. If tigers could salute, these would have. 'They won't give us any trouble. *And* they'll keep a lookout while you're here. Three demigods on campus—I'd just as soon not take any chances.'

He motioned for us to follow him. The tigers leapt aside to let us pass, forming a double line like a royal guard.

'So,' he said, once we were safely ensconced in his office, 'you wanted to know about the Labyrinth.'

'Yes, sir.' I explained about Clarisse's travels and our fears that the Titan army might be trying to weaponise the Labyrinth. 'We were hoping you might know more about the last time it reformed.'

Prof Daly listened in silence. He was playing with his office keys, moving them round and round the key ring.

'Your mistake,' he said, after he had slid his keys three rounds around the ring, 'is in assuming that the Labyrinth reformed.'

'Are you saying it migrated, then? Like Olympus, and the Sea of Monsters, and—' 

'Oh no. I'm quite certain it still has roots in Crete, where it began. In fact …' Prof Daly got up and
went to his bookcase. He rummaged through a few folders before extracting a thin binder, which he set on his table. It fell open to reveal a collection of old, flaky papers. 'The original plans. I believe they still exist.'

I touched the ancient documents reverently. 'How did you get these?'

'I researched Cretan architecture for a good many years.' He waved his hand like I was missing the point. 'The original Labyrinth covered most of Crete, but look—' He pulled out a world map and pointed to the Greek island. 'That's maybe the size of New Jersey. If it migrated, it couldn't possibly do what you just described.'

'But you just said it didn't reform …'

'If it reformed, that would imply it had been killed at some point. That could be possible, I grant you, but how do you suggest it occurred?'

'Someone blew it up, of course!' Clarisse said. 'Is that what we gotta do, then?'

Prof Daly rolled his eyes. 'I expect you're a daughter of Ares. Have you ever tried blowing up a lake? Doesn't work. Because the water is still there—maybe it goes underground, but it doesn't die. It's like a cursed object—destroying it doesn't necessarily get rid of the curse. Unless you manage to cut off its life force … and nobody knows where the Labyrinth draws its life force from. Some say Daedalus himself—but the man disappeared two thousand years ago.'

'So you're saying the Labyrinth's been alive—'

'For over two thousand years. And it's been growing all this while.'

My mind snagged on a snippet of conversation I'd overheard between Thorn and the half-blood Torrington during my captivity—'Maybe because it's not part of the Great Stirrings … maybe it's been in existence all this while.'

'But that means it could probably go anywhere in the world by now!'

Prof Daly nodded. 'It's how I got here—from England.'

'But that's …' Impossible, I wanted to say. But then I remembered Costa Rica. Maybe that wasn't across an ocean, but the distance was nearly as great.

'I lived in one of the oldest recorded Roman cities in the British Isles. The entrance was in an old castle—I suspect the Labyrinth is drawn to places like that, rich with history, or with magic, or power. It was … well, I'll spare you the gory details, but on my way here, I had any number of adventures involving a chained Titan and a bunch of monsters. Anyway, I ended up at Camp Half-Blood in the end.'

He picked up his keys again. Hanging off the key ring was a cracked chain link made of pitch-black stone that shone when it caught the light. Prof Daly slipped it off the key ring and set it down on the table. 'That was part of the chains that used to bind Prometheus. There was a curse on it—don't worry, it's been broken for decades—and sadly, it strangled one of my cabin mates. I thought I'd break the curse by sacrificing it on one of the ancient altars in Greece. The Labyrinth—though I simply thought it was a magical tunnel at the time—seemed the best way to get there.'

'How did you find your way through it?'

'I didn't. I never got to Europe. See, the Labyrinth can take you places, but it will latch on to the one
place you intend to go and never send you there. It was designed to confuse and kill, and it probably picked up some of Daedalus's twisted personality on top of that.'

'But you got out,' Clarisse said. 'And you didn't go nuts.'

'I got out,' Prof Daly confirmed. 'But my companions did not. Or at least, I don't think they did. I never did see them again.' He sighed heavily. 'Venturing into the Labyrinth in a group is a tricky business. It seeks to divide and conquer, you see. I'm sure you know the stories of the Athenian tributes Crete fed to it. They entered in a group, but their dying screams were always isolated. In fact, I suspect that Theseus may have survived not only because he had Ariadne's thread, but because he entered alone.'

'Why didn't you tell Chiron any of this?' It seemed an unforgivable oversight, given the threat we faced now.

'Chiron? The old centaur? My dear girl, I never returned to Camp Half-Blood from my quest. I sacrificed the cursed chains on the altar of the Athena Parthenon in Nashville, and washed my hands of the whole affair. Anyway, most of what I learnt about the Labyrinth was after I escaped it. I never went back in, but I never forgot it.' He got an odd gleam in his eye, not unlike my dad's when the subject of planes came up. I guess it was something all academics shared—they were all fanatical about their research. 'If you want to know how to make architecture come alive, the Labyrinth is the best place to start.'

'Well, I don't care about architecture,' Clarisse said, tossing her head. 'I just want to pulverise this thing.'

Prof Daly snorted. 'Good luck with that.'

'Professor,' I said, 'you said you got to Camp Half-Blood via the Labyrinth. Does that mean there's an entrance in camp?'

'Ah.' Prof Daly scratched the bald spot at the top of his head. 'Hard to say. Remember, if we consider that the maze is alive, we have to assume that it extends to new places, but also withdraws from others. There was an entrance thirty years ago, but now … who knows? It may not exist any more.'

'How will we know for sure?'

'You could try searching for it. Every entrance I've ever seen had the mark of Daedalus.' He pointed to a triangle on one of the maps—the Greek letter Delta. 'If you want, you can take these.' He gestured to the maps. 'I doubt they're anything like what the Labyrinth has grown into by now, but like I said, I bet the ancient layers still lie deep inside it.'

I wanted to take the maps with me, but in the end I let Clarisse bring them back to Chiron. I'd have the chance to study them when I returned to camp in the summer.

Right now, I had another appointment to keep. I'd made the arrangements right after calling Prof Daly.

My dad was coming to Princeton to meet me.

+++ When I'd IM-ed my dad from camp and told him I was willing to give San Francisco a try, I hadn't expected him to offer to pick me up. But I guess he was keen for any excuse to fly the Sopwith Camel. He'd readily agreed to meet me at Princeton after my meeting with Prof Daly.
A dozen kids on Christmas morning couldn't have been more animated than my dad as he led me onto the tarmac at the airport where he'd parked the plane and handed me an aviator's helmet. This plane was different from the one he'd flown into battle. It had two seats and less weaponry.

'This one's a training model,' my dad said. 'My plane delivery came just in time for Christmas. You gave me a chance to test it out!'

We put my bag in the underbelly compartment and I climbed into the passenger cockpit. My dad explained the controls as we took off, clearly delighted to have an audience.

'I'll teach you to fly it, if you want,' he said.

'Can I?' I wasn't even old enough to get a junior driver's license. Surely there had to be stricter laws on flight?

My dad shrugged. 'Sure.'

I grinned. No crazy stunts in the Sopwith Camel, Percy had joked, before his mom had picked him up. Wait till I told him about this!

The rotary engine roared and the ground fell away from us. Over the noise, my dad yelled, 'It'll quieten down once we get going!'

Sure enough, once we reached cloud level, the engine softened into a steady purr.

'It has to work harder to generate lift,' my dad explained. 'Once there's good air flow over the wings, we can just glide.'

My dad kept us just beneath the cloud cover so I could watch the countryside roll by under us. It wasn't like flying in a commercial plane, cooped up in a little metal cylinder with dirt-streaked windows. The cold wind rifled through my hair and the warm kiss of wintry sunlight played on my cheeks. It wasn't so different from pegasi riding, just with a more comfortable seat. We didn't talk much, but in the silence space between us was the same closeness I'd shared with my dad last year, all those times we'd sat in his study quietly doing our respective work.

Our plane soared over a forested mountain range. Ahead of us, the land dipped into a basin of tall cedars and winding rivers. The scenery reminded me of the wild country I'd seen in my dreams—Harmonia and Cadmus sprinting into the wilderness; Izzy trekking through mountainous forests. Clusters of buildings appeared in the wide valley, the largest of which surrounded a great green space with an enormous monument in the centre.

I gasped. 'Dad, where are we?'

He checked his map and compass. 'Tennessee, I think. Why?'

I pointed to the monument. From this high overhead, it looked like a snow-covered box, but I was fairly certain what it was.

'Ah,' said my dad.

Of all the great monuments I longed to see, the Parthenon was probably right at the top of my bucket list. While it was the original in Athens that captivated me, I was incredibly keen to visit the one in Nashville, too. As I leaned as far as I dared out of the cockpit, trying to get a better look, Prof Daly's offhand comment earlier echoed in my head: 'I never made it to Europe … I sacrificed it on the Parthenon in Nashville.'
I thought of Horkos, saying that breaking curses required a sacrifice. Of Izzy standing in a sacred circle, making a vow to Athena.

The Necklace of Harmonia was still in my pocket. I hadn't figured out what to do with it yet.

'Can we make a stop here, Dad?'

He twiddled the dials on his transistor radio. Several minutes later, we were given clearance to land at a nearby airport.

There weren't many tourists milling around Centennial Park at this time of the year. The handful who had chosen to sightsee during the holiday season were posing before the Parthenon replica, snapping pictures and admiring the carefully carved frescoes that adorned the roof. In a misguided fit of holiday cheer, someone had strung gaudy Christmas lights between the grand Doric columns. Mistletoe dangled off the eaves, under which a couple was taking advantage of 'tradition' to engage in a public display of tonsil tag.

I scowled at them. Three thousand years ago, they'd probably have ended up as a pair of snakes for their disrespectful behaviour. Today … well, I guess my mom was busy.

But hopefully not too busy to take a prayer or two.

Inside the temple, the concrete columns seemed to echo with weighty history. I'd encountered replicas of great monuments that reminded me of cheap knock-offs—the copy of Lady Liberty in Vegas, for instance, was nothing but a tacky tourist gimmick. The Nashville Parthenon was more like the Mona Lisa painting—maybe not a real person, but still a work of art. It might be less than two hundred years old, but it had been constructed with great reverence, and honoured by the city. Athens of the South, they'd once called this place. I could sense my mother's presence here, reverberating grace and dignity throughout her holy space.

A gilded statue of Athena, mounted on a gleaming pedestal, was the centrepiece of the temple. Light fell on it through grated openings in the ceiling, shining on her golden breastplate. Her left arm rested on a massive shield while her right palm opened up to reveal a statue of Nike that was as tall as me. Coiled at her feet was a magnificent python. I didn't know how accurate a recreation the statue was; the original Athena Parthenos had been lost centuries ago.

'Remarkable, isn't it?' my dad said. 'Not a bad likeness at all.' He gazed up at Athena's stern face. 'She really wasn't one for smiling. But oh, when she did …'

'When did you learn who she was?' I wondered if it had been before or after Athena had saddled him with an unwanted baby.

'Right here, actually. We came here after I'd just graduated from Harvard … finally earned my PhD —thanks to her. And then I learned that my amazing mentor wasn't actually on the academic staff.' My dad got a misty, faraway look on his face. 'I still miss her. But at least I have you.'

The statue blurred out of focus. It was a moment before I found my voice. 'But I thought—I thought you didn't want me!'

My dad's hand found my shoulder. 'Annabeth, I—why do you think that?'

'You said—I heard you tell Janet you'd tried to send me back … and you never came after me when I left …' I tilted my head back, blinking furiously.

My father bent to meet me at eye level. He waited until I looked back at him.
'I wish I'd known you'd overheard that,' he said. 'I'm sorry you did. It was a long time ago. I was a poor junior lecturer. She was a goddess—I thought she could give you more than I ever could. And, well, obviously I messed up a lot.' He glanced up at the statue. 'When we couldn't find you after you … well, I thought she was punishing me by taking you away. I thought I'd failed and she'd found you someplace better after all.'

'But when I came back the first time—'

'We aren't perfect. And I … well, you talked a lot about camp, and that Chiron of yours. I suppose I was a little jealous. But I guess that wasn't really fair of me.'

Swallowing suddenly seemed to require a Herculean effort. 'I could've tried harder, too,' I admitted. 'We aren't perfect,' my dad repeated. 'But you're my daughter, Annabeth. You'll always be my daughter.' He reached across the cordoned off space at the front of the statue to touch the hem of Athena's gown. 'My gift from Athena.'

I buried my face in his jacket, no longer able to hold back tears. My dad stroked my hair gently. We stood like that for a few minutes. A third presence seemed to hover over us, shining down her approval.

'You know,' said my dad when I had composed myself again, 'there's a secret altar in back. She showed me when we came.' He pointed to the back of the pedestal, where a section had been cordoned off, restricting access to visitors.

It was suddenly clear to me what I had to do. 'Do you mind if I go check it out? I'd like to, um, talk to her.'

My dad blinked owlishly. 'Will she … show up?'

'I don't know. I think she's busy. But I'm going to make a prayer to her anyway. Just give me five minutes, okay, Dad?'

He nodded. The distant look was back in his eyes. I ducked behind a column, out of sight of the tourists who had wandered in, and pulled on my Yankees cap. Invisible, I crept round to the back of the temple.

A tiny alcove nestled between Athena's shield and her feet. Tucked away inside it was the altar my father had spoken of, with my mother's owl carved into the marble. An olive branch was laid across the top, one end burning with an everlasting flame. It was my mother's private corner, shielded from mortal eyes.

I placed the Necklace of Harmonia on the altar.

'Athena,' I said. 'Mother.' Horkos had said breaking curses required sacrifices. What did I have to offer? Izzy had struck the necklace with a dagger, but I sensed that that wouldn't work for me.

I closed my eyes. The Necklace of Hermonia brought misfortune. It created divides. It split up families. To combat it, I needed its antithesis. I needed a vow that could match its destructive power.

_You'll always be my daughter. My gift from Athena._

In my backpack, I found Thalia's green leather diary. My dad's letter was still tucked inside, along with Luke's photo. I laid both letter and photo on the altar next to the necklace.
'I promise to do right by my family,' I said. 'Please protect us, Mother.'


I took back the dagger. The necklace lifted off the altar, hovering inches above its surface. I had a brief glimpse of a parade of faces in its moonstone sheen—all its previous victims, I guessed, though the images passed too quickly for me to make out any individual person.

The owl on the altar lit up so brightly I had to avert my eyes. When the flash receded, the altar was empty again, except for the eternal olive branch. My palm was no longer bleeding. There was only a long, thin scar where I'd cut it.

I knelt respectfully and closed my eyes. 'Thank you,' I whispered.

When I stepped out of the alcove, the light falling through the ceiling grates seemed to take the pattern of a constellation—the one Artemis had newly created, Zoë's spirit forever running in the stars. I hoped she knew, somehow, that I'd completed the last task she'd set me. I hoped it was enough.

Chapter End Notes

Mary is one of those unsolved mysteries of BotL. I figured Clarisse was due a backstory (which will appear at some point … something to look forward to, eh?) Prof Daly last appeared in my previous fic, The Golden Fleece. His story includes a shameless plug for my current town, which no joke houses the oldest Roman castle in the British Isles.
My Stepmom Makes Spider Lemonade

Chapter Summary

Annabeth comes to terms with her stepmother.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I arrived into the worst winter storm San Francisco had seen in two hundred years. Hail pelted our plane as my dad struggled to land it. When we finally touched down, it skidded the length of Crissy Field.

Janet and the twins met us in a taxi. I wondered where my dad's Volkswagen was, then remembered guiltily that Percy, Thalia, and Zoë had wrecked it on Mount Tam.

'Get a load of that storm, eh?' our cab driver said, shaking his head as he ferried us through the ice. 'Never seen anything like it.'

I glanced out the back of the taxi, towards Marin County in the north. The clouds were thickest there, obscuring Mount Tam in swirling gloom.

My family's new house was in the suburbs of Pacific Heights, on a long, straight row of whitewashed buildings. It had the same design as its neighbours, but the bright red curtains in the front-facing windows stood out sharply from the pastel-coloured draperies of the other houses.

Janet paid the cab driver and ushered the twins quickly up the empty drive. My dad and I followed with my bag. The front door looked like it had been recently redone to match the curtains. It reminded me of the paint job on the Ares cabin. What in Zeus's name had made my dad or Janet pick this colour scheme?

Janet pushed open the door and I stepped over the threshold into my new home. Inside, the walls were a soft beige. The paintings and photos from our old house in Richmond hung proudly all over them. Janet bent to pick up a few of Bobby and Matthew's toys, which had been strewn haphazardly across the hallway. She pursed her lips—there seemed to be a lecture about putting things away in the offing—and shooed them down the hall.

'Frederick, would you get them a snack?'

'I want Pop Tarts!' Bobby yelled, racing ahead to the kitchen.

I started to follow, but Janet touched my shoulder. 'Annabeth …'

We looked at each other. Neither of us seemed to know what to say. I still wasn't sure whether to believe what Percy had told me about her. Janet looked as forbidding as ever, with her tight bun and the deep crease in her forehead.

She steered me gently through an open doorway into the living room, where the garish red curtains clashed vividly with the rest of the décor. Janet gave no explanation for them. She pointed to the fireplace opposite the window.
'It took a bit of work,' she said, 'but we had it put in the old-fashioned way. Maybe you won't need to appropriate my oven at every meal now.'

I could have taken her words as an accusation or a complaint. She might not have openly voiced her disapproval for the way I burnt offerings to the gods at mealtimes, but I was sure she resented the trouble it took to accommodate my godly heritage. Yet, she was going out of her way to mention the hearth. It had traces of embers from a recently-lit fire. They'd had it specially built in where most people had electric or ornamental fireplaces these days.

This was a peace offering.

Maybe Percy had been right about her after all.

'Thanks,' I said.

Janet's arms stretched out stiffly. I hesitated, unsure if she actually meant to hug me. I probably looked just as awkward, staring at her hands and wondering if I could bring myself to embrace her.

In the end, we compromised on a handshake.

'Welcome home, Annabeth,' she said. She sounded almost as surprised as me to hear the warmth in her own voice.

In the glowing embers of the fireplace, I thought I saw the shade of Hestia flicker with approval.

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Storms continued to batter San Francisco throughout my first week there. On New Year's Eve, my dad took me to Fort Point even though the city council had cancelled their usual fireworks display due to inclement weather. The dark peak of Mount Tam rose above the lights of the Golden Gate Bridge, glowering like an angry Titan over the entire city.

Out to the west, the waves of the Pacific crashed against the fortifications. The ocean was a churning mass that reminded me of Charybdis and her infernal whirlpool. Was Luke's ship out there now, waging war against Poseidon?

The shadow of something massive and round rose amidst the frothing waves, dipped beneath the surface, and appeared a moment later closer to the gateway bridge. It continued its undulating passage through the water into the storm-tossed bay. As it approached, the darkness over the city seemed to intensify.

Something told me it wasn't a whale, or even your average sea monster.

'It's almost time!' My dad tapped his watch, which was blinking 11:59. 'Ten … nine … eight …'

At the turn of the year, thunder crackled over Mount Tam. It sounded like the sinister laugh of Kronos. Next to it, the half-hearted cheers of the handful of people who had braved the weather to come out and celebrate sounded weak and muted.

My dad sighed and put an arm around me. 'Not the best start to the year, I guess.'

'It's okay, Dad.'

A bright flash illuminated a mountain in the east. For a moment, it appeared to be ablaze, sending flames shooting towards the sky. Then all was pitch-black again.
I pointed to it. 'What's on that side?'

'Hm.' My dad scratched his chin. 'Berkeley Hills, I believe.'

With a final boom, the storm that had plagued the city all week dissipated. Rain stopped pelting from the skies. The clouds over the south parted to reveal starry skies and a sliver of moon. But to the north and east, the towering storm front remained like a barrier over Marin County and Berkeley Hills. It was a sharp, contrasting line, like two fronts of a battle.

I imagined Luke sailing across that line, and shivered.

The next morning, we woke to find the city covered in a thick, nearly impenetrable fog. My dad was disappointed; he'd wanted to give me my first flying lesson, but all flights—commercial and private—were grounded for safety reasons. The newscaster delivering this information on the television looked as though she was bobbing in a swirling white sea.

We went to Crissy Field anyway to check on the planes. Traffic was at a standstill, since drivers could barely see ten feet ahead of them, so we walked. I didn't know if it was due to the fog, but the temperature variations were insane. One moment we'd be walking in a light winter chill, the next we'd be plunged into freezing temperatures, as if we'd crossed some invisible door into an ice box. Cross another street, and it suddenly turned balmy again.

The fog over the bay was, if possible, even thicker. Only the very tip of Mount Tam was visible, poking out from nothingness. Berkeley Hills had been entirely swallowed in white. The bay itself no longer seemed to exist.

'It does get foggy around here,' my dad said, squinting out into the bay, 'but this is the worst I've ever seen it. Is this because of those Titans of yours?'

I nodded. It was all too easy to picture the sea monster I'd seen yesterday lurking in the ocean of fog, along with a dozen monstrous friends. Maybe it was there, on the east side of California, that the Titan army was gathering in numbers. The Mist—the magical one, not the fog, though it was possible both were related—had to be working overtime to hide their presence.

Any half-bloods who lived there wouldn't stand a chance. Just peering into the fog, wondering if a monster might suddenly emerge, was nerve-wracking enough.

My dad seemed to guess what I was thinking. He patted his bulging pocket. 'I have a few more tricks up my sleeve.'

I saw what he meant soon enough. Although he'd only been here for little over a month, his new garage was already a cluttered workshop. He'd put all the bronze weapons I'd collected from the Civil War Museum to good use. Besides outfitting the guns on his fighter planes, he'd also crafted celestial bronze bullets for an antique hand pistol, which he taught me how to fire, experimented with a mace canister so that it now sprayed bronze mist, and replaced the blade of a decorative eighteenth-century broadsword that had used to hang, framed, over our mantle in Richmond.

'Wow,' I said, picking it up and giving it an experimental swing. 'I can't believe you did all this.'

My dad shrugged. 'Always, always have a plan, right?'

Startled, I nearly dropped the broadsword. His eyes were gleaming with a mixture of pride and excitement.

I started to laugh. Clearly my mom had chosen wisely when she'd picked him (not that I should ever
doubt Athena's wisdom).

My dad's plans turned out to include more than just my protection. A few days later, I found myself sitting in an office while Janet argued with the principal of my new school. Bobby and Matthew had transferred into the second grade here last semester, but Laurel Academy seemed hesitant to take an eighth-grade transfer student in the middle of the school year.

'It's highly irregular, Mrs Chase.' Principal Brown was a weedy man with bushy eyebrows that moved a lot and the thickest moustache I'd ever seen. 'I know your husband wrote in, but under the circumstances …' He glanced at me and lowered his voice so that I could only hear snatches of his next words: 'Advanced curriculum … sketchy record … unsuitable … keep up …'

My cheeks heated up. Of course my school records would be found lacking. From being marked as dyslexic since kindergarten and diagnosed as ADHD in the first grade, to being held back and never officially completing the year (I'd run away before school let out) … Without the Mist to gloss things over, there was no way a fancy private school with a stellar academic record like this one was going to want me.

The sting of not being good enough pierced me like a manticore's spike, making me feel numb all over.

Janet drew herself up impressively. Her bun was tighter than ever today, the red highlights in her hair pulled into stern streaks across her head. Unlike Principal Brown, she didn't bother to keep her voice down. 'Annabeth is very advanced. We've had her home-schooled, with a concentration in Greek and Latin, specialising in architectural design.'

Principal Brown's thick eyebrows almost disappeared into his hair line. 'She's dyslexic,' he pointed out.

'Which has no bearing on her ability to learn other languages, especially those with different alphabetical systems, or her creativity and reasoning ability. And I assure you, those are off the charts!'

'Well …'

I wanted to tell Janet to forget it. Even if she got me in, I'd probably end up suspended or expelled once the monsters showed up (and they inevitably would). But then her next rebuttal floored me: 'And I have here a letter of recommendation from a teacher at her previous school.' She dug into her purse.

My head shot up. To my amazement, she produced an official-looking envelope with St Catherine's crest on the seal. Had she actually written to ask them for a reference?

Principal Brown scanned the letter. His eyebrows did another wave up and down his forehead. 'You didn't mention this before …'

'I'm mentioning it now, yes?'

I was wildly curious about the letter, but I never got to see it. Principal Brown filed it away and they moved on to completing the paperwork. Fifteen minutes later I was enrolled and due to start school the following week.

We left Laurel Academy and headed down California Street. Janet's parents lived only a few blocks down. We'd left Bobby and Matthew at their grandma's while we sorted out my school enrolment. I thought we'd go straight there to pick them up, but to my surprise, Janet paused on the corner of
'How would you like to get some tea?' Her eyes crinkled as she admitted, 'I'm not in a rush to pick up the twins.'

'Um … okay.' It was weird, but after she'd just gone to bat for me, I supposed it wouldn't hurt to spend some time with her.

We found a café on Pine Street. It had oriental carvings in its wall dividers and porcelain tea sets on display. Glowing lava lamps were set in every alcove, with large, anemone-shaped bubbles oozing in the fluorescent fluid. I stared at them suspiciously, but there was no evidence that they were anything more than an eccentric design choice. A light, jasmine-scented perfume wafted around the shop.

Our tea came in a silver pot with carved figures on its sides, images of armoured men fighting wild, ancient creatures. One looked suspiciously like a cynocephalus, a dog-headed man; another had the upper half of a horse.

'Persian, I think,' Janet said, studying it. She poured the tea and we sat in awkward silence.

What were we supposed to talk about? I didn't think I'd ever spent more than five minutes in her company that hadn't involved an argument. This wasn't like the comfortable quiet I shared with my dad. Every second seemed to tick by in my head, drawn out and deafening.

At last I said, 'Thanks for—well, what you said, to Principal Brown. About me being clever and all that.'

'It is true, isn't it?'

'Well, yeah, I guess …' My smile spread involuntarily across my face. Even if I knew I was smart, it was nice to hear it acknowledged. I took a long sip of tea. 'But it probably won't end well—I can't stop the monsters coming.'

'Your education is important,' Janet said briskly. 'We'll deal with … whatever happens, if it does. And this was a cinch, compared to your last school. St Catherine's Academy took a lot more convincing.'

I nearly dropped my teacup. 'You got me into St Catherine's? But I thought Chiron … or my dad …'

'Your camp instructor is not your legal guardian,' Janet reminded me. 'And your father …' She stirred her tea and laughed. 'Frederick means well, but you know him and paperwork. If I'd left him to it, he'd have had you in the wrong grade at the wrong school.'

I stared into my teacup, my face glowing as brightly as the lava lamps.

'At least this time I had your teacher's letter to back me up.'

'My teacher?'

'A Mrs Carlson? You seem to have made quite an impression on her.'

My face grew even redder. It seemed like a million years ago that I'd sat in Mrs Carlson's office while she encouraged me to pursue my dreams in architecture.

'She even emailed me a list of summer architectural programmes in the district. I haven't had the time to look into it yet, but we'll see what we can get you signed up for.' She paused and frowned, taking
my stunned silence for lack of interest. 'Or not. Frederick gave me to understand you enjoyed architectural design.'

'I—I do,' I said quickly. 'I mean … yeah, I'd like that. It's just that—summer, well, I have camp …'

Janet pursed her lips. 'Of course. But Annabeth, at some point, you have to think of your future. You can't go to that camp of yours forever. You need to think about college, and what you want to do with your life.'

I felt a familiar stab of annoyance. It wasn't like I hadn't thought about this before. Didn't Janet understand that it wasn't so simple? Didn't she get that if Kronos was victorious, it wouldn't matter what anyone did with their lives?

Or maybe she didn't. I had no idea how much my dad had actually shared with her about my life.

'Well, perhaps we can start with after-school programmes during term time,' Janet mused.

'Why do you care anyway?' I bit my lip as soon as the words came out, realising how rude I probably sounded. Janet's brow knit together in a stern line.

'Did you know I was your age when I came to America?'

I shook my head, not knowing what to make of this turn in the conversation. I'd thought I'd definitely be in for a lecture this time.

'Transferring schools was a nightmare,' she continued. 'I'm not dyslexic, but I may as well have been. Trying to translate Chinese characters into English alphabets was a pain. I suspect that's your real problem, isn't it?'

I nodded mutely.

'I didn't believe at first when Frederick explained it to me. It seemed like he was just excusing your behaviour. I thought you needed a firm hand.' Her mouth twisted ruefully. 'It's how I was brought up, I'm afraid. Anyway, what I'm saying is—'

She was cut off by a loud bong as a clock in the corner chimed the hour. It continued to tick loudly after that, making a weird clicking noise like the tap of an insect's pincers.

I held up my hand, listening hard. Something was very wrong. There were no other patrons left in the café. Our server had disappeared as well, leaving us sitting alone in a room surrounded by lava lamps that looked like they'd grown to double their original size.

The clicking was coming from the lamps, not the clock. And the anemone-shaped blobs inside were definitely moving.

My skin prickled. A split second before the first lava lamp exploded, I dragged Janet under the table, narrowly missing the jet of fiery, incandescent goo it shot at us. The tablecloth sizzled. Through its smoking tassels, I saw the anemone blobs leap to the floor and scuttle towards me on eight hairy legs …

A wave of cold terror engulfed me. Someone was screaming, but it wasn't Janet—her mouth was moving as though in slow motion, forming words at me.

'Get a hold of yourself, Annabeth!' Janet's voice barely registered over the screaming—my screaming. 'They're only—'
'S-sp-SPIDERS!' There were about ten of them, no bigger than my palm, but the sight made my brain freeze up. My limbs felt like they’d been injected with Myrmeke poison.

Something came shooting out of the spinnerets of the lead spider, but it wasn't silk. Sparks danced in the air around the ball of fire that sailed towards me.

**CRASH!**

The sound of breaking china shook me out of my paralysis. Janet had seized the tablecloth and upended the contents of our table. The teapot caught the brunt of the fireball. Being metal, it didn't ignite. It landed on the nearest spider, sending it skittering back. Our porcelain tea cups smashed around its companions.

'What in heaven's name are those things?'

I managed to stop hyperventilating long enough to gasp, 'Monsters! M-monster spiders!'

Janet hauled me to my feet. The spiders were now in a ring around us, clicking menacingly with their pincers. Panic was a fluttering bird in my chest, intent on bursting from my rib cage. I finally remembered my knife and drew it, but though the spiders hesitated at the dreaded celestial bronze, they did not retreat.

'Really!' Janet brandished a big red handkerchief from her purse. To my astonishment, the spiders actually drew back at the sight of it.

Maybe we could make a break between them. But I had no doubt they would pounce or shoot the moment we tried.

Fire-shooting spiders. Athena help me.

Out of the blue, Janet snapped, 'Lemons!' She pointed at the tea set on a neighbouring table. A dish of lemon slices had been abandoned by the last customer. I grabbed it, wondering what in Hades she meant to do with it.

Still waving her oversized handkerchief like a conquering flag, she plucked a few slices of fruit and crushed them in her hand. Juice oozed out onto the dish.

'Spiders hate lemons,' she explained.

Catching on, I took the dish of lemon juice. As if it were a discus, I spun it in my hands and flung it in a spiralling arc into the circle of spiders. Lemon juice splattered everywhere.

The effect on the spiders was electrifying. The moment it touched their hairy abdomens, they sizzled and burst into flames.

There wasn't enough juice to take care of all ten. But Janet's unorthodox solution had broken me out of my overwhelming terror. I rushed the remaining two and stabbed them with my knife. My skin seared where their fireballs hit my calf, but they crumbled into ash.

Janet hurried to me and doused the fire with her red handkerchief, leaving a painful burn. I gaped at her. 'How did you know that would work? The lemons, I mean? And—' I gestured at the red handkerchief.

'I didn't.' Janet looked a little dazed at what had just happened. 'I just thought of it because—well, it's Chinese mythology. Red scares off our mythical beasts. And we don't like lemons because they scare
off spiders.’

I mentally filed away this tip for future use. I'd never particularly liked lemons myself—they smelt like mazes and deception—but if they were anathema to spiders, I'd embrace the fruit with open arms. 'Why wouldn't you want to scare off spiders?'

'They're supposed to bring good luck,' Janet said. 'In Chinese tradition, anyway.' She looked at the singed ring on the floor around us. 'Perhaps not in Greek mythology. I never did understand why you complained so much about them.'

Now that the threat had passed, my cheeks burned with embarrassment. 'I … don't deal well with spiders,' I muttered. 'They hate my mother.'

'I see.' Janet brushed herself off. 'Well, I don't suppose we have to pay now. We'd better go.'

I nodded and we hurried out of the café. At the door, our blank-faced server reappeared and intoned, 'Come again soon!'

Yeah, like that was gonna happen.

Halfway down the street, I remembered something. 'The curtains on the new house. They're red.'

'Yes,' Janet said. 'Like I said, we have traditions in China. I didn't know how effective it would be, but Frederick thought it was worth a try.' A satisfied smile played around her lips. 'Looks like it might work.'

'Thanks,' I said, still trying to reconcile this new, improved Janet with the version I'd always known before. I rubbed at my father's college ring on my camp necklace. Maybe I'd misjudged her all along. 'What were you going to say before the spiders?'

'Hm? Oh. About school. Well, I wanted to tell you I know what it's like to struggle in school. And I want to give you the chance to succeed and go to college like I did.'

'You do?'

'I know we don't see eye to eye on a lot of things, but we're still family.'

First my dad, now Janet. This was going to take some getting used to. But it seemed like living in San Francisco might just work out better than I'd thought after all.

Chapter End Notes

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Lemons are apparently a real repellent for spiders. And Annabeth's previous aversion to lemon smells comes from an offhand mention in The Golden Fleece where I described the Cyclops mansion in Brooklyn as smelling of lemony furniture polish.

The stuff about red colours in Chinese mythology is absolutely the reason why everything is red during CNY (including red packets we'd get money in as kids). All we get about Mrs Chase is that she's a pretty Asian woman with red highlights in her hair, but that in itself gave me lots to think about regarding why she would clash with Annabeth so much—a different cultural background being a potential springboard for all sorts of misunderstandings. I didn't managed to work it in here, but my headcanon had
her ancestral roots in Li-Jien … the same town as Frank's ancestors.

I debated quite a bit about whether this chapter would make the cut in the whole story. On one hand, it kind of rounds off the arc on Annabeth's family relationship. On the other, it's not very important in terms of the overall plot—I have a feeling if I was being brutal, this would have to go. But then, since there was at least a fun monster adventure, and I know some of you do enjoy seeing how Annabeth gets on with her family, here it is … I just tried to keep the peripheral details as relevant as possible.
I settled into San Francisco more smoothly than I would have believed possible. The city was indeed crawling with monsters, but with my dad and Janet's precautionary efforts, I managed to avoid a good many of them. When I did run into one, my dagger and the bronze-spraying mace canister my dad had given me took care of it. I guess I wasn't doing too badly at surviving out in the real world after all (as long as the monsters weren't of the arachnoid variety).

Janet was as good as her word in enrolling me in an extracurricular architectural programme. On Thursday evenings, I started studying design history at the Architectural Foundation. Between that and school and weekend flying lessons with my dad, I was even busier than I'd been at camp. Before I knew it, the first month in my new home had passed.

Storms continued to brew over the city. They came and went, the squalls like temper tantrums that sent residents running from the hail and sleet. Even when they let up, the dark clouds over Mount Tam never receded. I tried to scout the mountain during my flying lessons, but every time we got close, a violent storm would chase us back to Crissy Field. The weathermen must have been puzzled by the abrupt storms and subsequent fogs that would descend over the city after our attempted recon missions.

It was the same with Berkeley Hills. After we'd faced several weeks of rejection from Mount Tam, I suggested flying out to the east of San Francisco Bay. I wondered if I might spot Luke's ship docked there, but the place was completely shrouded in fog and impossible to navigate. We emerged near San Jose without having seen a single landmark in Berkeley.

When February rolled around, my school organised a field trip to Alcatraz Island for grades six through eight. It was one of the rare clear days between storms. The sun was actually shining down on us as the teachers shepherded us onto the ferry boat at Pier 33. An hour later, we docked on the island. A perky tour guide gave us a general introduction to the island's history, and then the teachers split us into groups and sent us into the dark recesses of the old prison. It had long since been abandoned and converted into a museum, but I guess the curators thought the shadowy, dim atmosphere added a touch of realism to the tour experience.

I peered between the metal bars of the prison cells. Imagining life behind them was depressing. They were mere ten-by-ten foot squares, stacked up floor after floor all the way to the ceiling. Some of them had wax figures inside to depict previous inmates. They were all hunched in miserable-looking balls or lying dejectedly on the wooden beds.

'Fun fact!' said our tour guide, whose cheery demeanour contrasted sharply with the gloomy subject she was expounding on. 'The only successful escape from Alcatraz involved three prisoners who carved likenesses of themselves out of soap wax and tucked them into bed! Then they ran off down a utility corridor!'
We moved on across the prison catwalk. Several cells along, I heard a low, whiny voice that didn't sound like student chatter or a tour guide's spiel.

'This place is crawling with middle-schoolers. If I'd wanted to be surrounded by snot-nosed kids, I'd've stuck with the schoolteacher gig.'

'Shut up,' snapped another voice. 'Why don't you go track down the half-blood? She's definitely in that lot. I'm sick of waiting for Alabaster.'

I froze. The voices were coming from inside the cell. The monsters were probably hiding in there, lying in wait for me. I backed away the way we'd come, slipping among the next group of students following the tour. But the cell block was circular, and the monsters' cell was right next to the only exit. No matter which way I went, I'd pass them at some point.

There was only one thing to do. I slunk behind the bunch of sixth-graders I'd just joined and put on my Yankees cap. Invisible, I trailed behind the final stragglers in the group—a boy who was a head taller than the rest of his classmates and a tiny, dark-haired girl whom he was guiding along.

As we closed in on the cell with the monsters, their argument crept back into hearing range.

'I know the boss isn't too happy with you. Didn't you lose the two half-bloods at that school out east?'

'That wasn't my fault!'

'If you'd just quit your obsession with that cursed necklace—'

My insides turned to ice. Sure enough, inside the monsters' cell, there was a familiar bright flash of orange hair—or fur—inside.

'It's useful,' Kitsune snapped. 'I'd've been Tartarus roadkill without it. And my plan for it would've solved Lord Kronos's invasion problems!'

'Yeah, maybe it would've worked if you hadn't lost it.'

'Why, you—'

'Will you two stop fighting?'

To my shock, it was the too-tall sixth-grader who'd spoken. He glared into the cell and continued, 'I'm doing my best to keep the mortals from noticing us, and you're not helping!'

He turned and I got my first glimpse of his freckled face. It was the half-blood, Torrington, from the Civil War Museum, the same one who'd accompanied Thorn during my kidnapping. Kitsune and the other monster stepped out of the shadows, sliding through the cell bars. The latter was a woman with green eyes that flashed like warning lights and a long snakeskin belt around her waist.

'Get over yourself, brat!' Snakeskin-Belt growled. 'I've controlled the Mist for centuries.'

Torrington ignored her. He was holding the tiny girl tightly by the arm. The rest of our school group moved on, unaware that they'd left anyone behind. I could have slipped past with them, but the scared look on the girl's face made me hesitate. Her eyes were so wide, they looked like a pair of green-tinted moons in her pale, freckled face.

Torrington pushed her towards Kitsune and Snakeskin-Belt. 'You're a child of Hecate, like me. I'm
fighting for our mom. Join us, Lou Ellen.'

'I—I don't …' Lou Ellen looked from Torrington to the monster women. 'Who are they?'

'Part of the Titan army,' Torrington said. 'The winning army. Mother told me herself—victory is in the cards. You want to be on the winning team, don't you?'

'If you don't,' Snakeskin-Belt said, 'I never say no to a snack.' She smacked her lips obscenely. 'And you smell … delicious.'

Lou Ellen recoiled. 'You're disgusting!'

Snakeskin-Belt hissed in outrage and reached for Lou Ellen. Torrington inserted himself between them.

'lamia, stop!' he said. 'She's our sister, too. Besides, remember what Luke said. Kronos wants as many half-bloods on his side as we can get. She's no use to him dead!'

The sound of Luke's name spurred me into action. He was the first half-blood we'd lost to Kronos, and we'd lost enough since then. I wasn't going to let another fall to the wrong side if I could help it.

The modified pepper spray my dad had given me was in my purse. I aimed it at Kitsune, Lamia, and Torrington.

The spurt of celestial bronze mist made the two monster ladies scream. Torrington let go of Lou Ellen to shield his eyes. I didn't know what effect it would have on half-bloods, but I guess pepper spray was still pepper spray. In the confusion, I grabbed Lou Ellen and dragged her down the catwalk, through the exit and into a draughty corridor.

'Ahhhh!' Lou Ellen cried. I wasn't sure if it was because she'd been hit by the spray, too, or if she was just terrified at being dragged away by a ghost. I whipped off my cap, hoping to put her at ease.

'Who are you?" She wrenched herself free of my grip.

'Shh! I'm Annabeth. I'm gonna get you out of here.' Unfortunately, we were on an island, which made opportunities for escape slimmer. But I'd just have to figure it out.

'Are you like Alabaster? Like me? Do you want me to join some army, too?'

'No! I mean, I'm a demigod like you, but I'm trying to save you.'

Lou Ellen narrowed her eyes.

'Look, those monsters want to kill you and me. I know a place you can be safe. You have to trust me. And quickly!'

Footsteps thundered down the catwalk. Kitsune, Lamia, and Alabaster Torrington must have recovered from my assault.

'Okay,' Lou Ellen said. 'How do we get away?'

'Follow me.' I started running in the direction of the prison dining hall, where the tour groups had been headed. We turned a corner and almost mowed down a security guard.

'Sorry!' I gasped. 'We got separated from our class. Do you know—'
The guard grabbed my wrist. His fingers were as cold as the mist over San Francisco. Without stopping to think, I swung my knife into his belly. If he was mortal, it wouldn't hurt him.

The security guard vaporised, but it wasn't like killing a monster. There were no ashy remains, just a single notecard floating to the ground. It had the bright green outline of a man on it.

'Mistform!' Lou Ellen said. 'He—Alabaster—did that. He made people out of cards! He said the weird things I could do were magic, too!'

I didn't have time to ask what weird things she meant. Our run-in with the Mistform had given our pursuers time to catch up. Kitsune was in the lead, a streaking ball of orange fur that resolved into the stern, flame-haired body of my ex-Computer Science teacher.

'You!' she snarled. 'You should be dead!'

'Sorry to burst your bubble,' I said. 'I took care of your stupid necklace, too.'

'How—' Her eyes fell on my dagger and bugged out in apoplectic fury. 'Ismene. Of course …'

Lamia and Torrington came puffing onto the scene.

'Another half-blood!' Lamia shouted in delight. 'Grab your sister, Alabaster. I'll have this one for my snack instead.'

'No you won't,' Kitsune said. 'She owes me a life.'

'No one's eating me,' I snapped. 'I'm inedible. But have you tried the gift shop? You can probably get chocolates there instead. Better for digestion.'

'Don't listen to her,' Kitsune snapped. 'Disarm her!'

Torrington advanced. I raised my dagger, ready to show him just what I could do with it.

Then Lou Ellen flung the fallen guard card at our attackers. She cried out in Latin and the Mistform card grew into a large pink bird with a long pouch under its beak. It squawked at Torrington, Kitsune, and Lamia momentarily stunning them. Lou Ellen and I ran.

'A pelican?' I gasped as we charged towards the dining hall.

'It was the first thing I thought of!' she huffed. 'So what do we do now?'

We were back among the students, but that wouldn't stop Torrington and the monsters for long, especially if they could control the Mist. I dragged Lou Ellen under one of the dining tables. A trailing snakeskin belt entered the hall, moving among the legs in the crowd.

'Can you do any more magic?' I'd never fought alongside a child of Hecate before. Hades, I'd never even met one.

'I don't really know how to control it,' she admitted. 'I don't even know how I made that Mistform work.'

'Great.' I rubbed my forehead, thinking hard. 'Okay, um, can you try and make something that looks like us?'

'Er, okay.' She thought for a moment, then found a pen and some paper in her pockets. She tore the paper in half, scribbled a quick drawing on each one, and tossed them out into the crowd. A second
later, two girls, one blonde and one dark, went running for the exit.

‘There!’ Kitsune screeched. The three of them took off after Lou Ellen's Mistforms.

‘Good job! That's bought us some time,’ I said. ‘What we need now is to—’

The ground shook. I straightened up in alarm and hit my head painfully on the underside of the table. Students and teachers started to scream.

‘Evacuate!’ shouted a tour guide.

‘What's going on?’ Lou Ellen asked.

‘I don't know.’ Had the monsters already figured out our trick? Were they trying to smoke us out?

The walls of the prison rattled like they were about to collapse. Trap or not, it didn't seem safe to stay inside. We joined the flood of people pushing for the emergency exits.

The sunny day outside had been replaced by gathering storm clouds. An icy wind howled through the prison courtyard. Teachers were herding students into year groups and doing frantic head-counts. I led Lou Ellen towards the ferry dock. If we could just get off the island …

What I wouldn't give for Percy and his sailing abilities right now.

The waters of the bay had been whipped into a frenzy of white hats, tossing the ferries from side to side. Although I couldn't see Kitsune, Lamia, or Torrington, I got the sense that we were being watched. A pair of flashing alarm lights on the dock looked so much like Lamia's evil green eyes that I couldn't help shivering under their glare.

As if this thought had summoned her, the monster herself appeared on the dock, blocking the way to the ferries. I stifled a scream as she towered over us with her snakeskin belt in her hands. There were empty eye sockets where her eyes should have been, making her look twice as alarming as before.

The alarm lights on the dock floated over. Lamia caught them and shoved her eyes back into place.

‘I thought something was up with those Mistforms,’ Lamia said. ‘Good thing I can send my eyes around to keep a lookout.’ She cracked her belt like a whip. Her hands had become talons, curved and sharp. Scales bubbled up on her skin, turning her into a grotesque, reptilian creature. Next to me, Lou Ellen gave a terrified whimper.

Lamia flicked her belt at us. I swung my knife in an attempt to intercept it, but the belt strap caught my wrist, twisting it painfully. My dagger clattered out of my hand.

Lamia's lips curled in triumph. Her tongue darted out between sharp, glistening teeth. With a yank of her belt, she dragged me to the ground.

Lou Ellen made a grab for my fallen dagger, but Lamia was too quick. She released me and swung her belt at Lou Ellen. The buckle struck her in the face and she fell back with a cry of pain. Almost at the same time, Lamia pounced. Her claws ripped my shirt. Her jaws opened wide and I nearly fainted at the stench of her rotten, sulphurous breath. Athena help me, it was nasty.

Then a bright orange cannonball slammed into us, knocking me out of Lamia's clutches. It unfurled into Kitsune, who had only bothered to swap her torso for human shape this time. Two tails sprouted from her lower half, whipping back and forth in agitation.
'No! The daughter of Athena is mine!' 

I rolled away from them, reaching for my dagger. Before I could get to it, someone leapt onto me and pinned me to the ground. Torrington had arrived on the scene.

'Let me go!'

Lightning streaked across the sky, followed by a deafening crack of thunder. A pair of silver arrows whizzed through the air.

Kitsune howled. She became a bright orange blur again, darting away into the bushes. The arrows lodged into the pier with a dull thud.

'What in Hecate—' Lamia began.

Torrington gasped. Out of the fog, a glowing silver chariot descended, pulled by four golden deer—Artemis's chariot, bearing the goddess of the hunt and two passengers. The first was Thalia, a silver circlet perched in her hair and her new Hunter's bow drawn. The second made my breath catch in my throat. Dressed in full Greek armour, looking as regal and imposing as her replica statue in the Tennessee Parthenon, was my mother.

The chariot landed on the dock. Thalia leapt out at once, cursing and running after the retreating Kitsune.

Lamia faced Artemis with an expression of outrage. 'I am not a wild beast! You have no right!' Artemis studied her with glittering eyes. 'I came in search of the fox,' she said. 'She is within my purview.'

'And my daughter invoked my protection,' Athena said. My eyes widened, noticing the golden necklace that dangled from her fingers. 'I received a sacrifice for it.'

'This isn't fair!' Lamia howled. 'Who protected my children when Hera slew them? I will have my revenge on all your children—'

Lamia leapt towards me. I jabbed Torrington hard with my elbow and pushed him into her path. They landed in a flail of limbs, cursing us all to Tartarus. My mother raised her hand. In it, the necklace was a glowing ball of light. She drew back her arm to throw …

It all happened very fast. One second, the necklace was flying towards Lamia and Torrington. The next, Kitsune leapt out of nowhere in fox form and intercepted it between her teeth. Torrington flung another of his cards into the air. It glowed with the same pinwheel symbol that had flashed over the helicopter net at Westover High. Torrington and Kitsune both vanished under it, leaving behind a single shredded, orange tail.

'You left me behind, you little brat!' Lamia screeched.

The burst of power my mother had infused in the necklace slammed into Lamia and she exploded. The ground shook harder than ever. Torrington's magic symbol hung in the air, fading slowly until only the three points of the pinwheel remained, the outline of a triangle.

A sinister darkness crept over the island. Screams emanated from the terrified mortals in the courtyard. Artemis and Athena were the only source of light left on the docks, both goddesses glowing like candles against the encroaching night.
'Mother,' I said shakily.

'We must go,' Athena said, looking worried. 'We have lost this island.'

'I don't understand,' Lou Ellen piped up. 'What's going on?'

'The Titans have claimed it,' Athena said gravely. 'Come, child.' She beckoned to Lou Ellen, who went to her in awe.

'Are you really a goddess? Like my mom?'

'Your mother is a Titan,' Athena corrected. 'And she and many of your siblings have turned against the gods.'

'But Lou Ellen hasn't!' I was suddenly afraid that my mother would see Lou Ellen as a danger, as she had Percy. 'We can bring her to camp. She's on our side!'

To my relief, Athena said, 'Indeed we shall.'

Thalia returned, still cursing a blue streak. We piled into Artemis's chariot and took off. As soon as the wheels lifted off the dock, Alcatraz Island dissolved into a sea of fog.

'What will happen to the mortals?' I asked. 'They're stuck there.'

'They will be fine once we leave,' Artemis said. She slung her bow across her back. 'They will probably pass it off as an earthquake.'

I turned to my mother. 'Did you really come for me?'

A rueful smile crossed Athena's lips. 'In a sense. The protection you invoked at my temple gave us an opening to enter. But we were too late.'

'She got away again,' Thalia fumed. 'I'm so sorry, my lady. I keep screwing this up.'

'Peace, Thalia,' Artemis said. 'None of us have met with much success.'

'We have suspected for some time that the Titans were active on Alcatraz Island,' Athena explained. 'But as Kronos was working through half-bloods, the ancient laws prevented our direct interference. We could not approach—not until you gave us this loophole. I used your prayer for protection to intercede.'

'But Kitsune got the necklace back. Does that mean ... am I cursed again?'

'I do not know. The Necklace of Harmonia has certainly brought terrible misfortune on those who possessed it over the centuries. The wily fox took advantage of that. But my dear, if you had indeed fallen afoul of its curse, you should have died by now. Your ordeal on Mount Othrys, for instance—it should have killed you, as it did Zoë Nightshade.' She nodded respectfully to Artemis. 'Perhaps the goddess Harmonia could answer your question, but she has vanished from Olympus. I would deduce, however, that you are under a deeper protection. One that existed even before you prayed to me to lift the curse.'

It made no sense. Who had protected me, and how? Hardly anyone even knew I'd had the necklace, and those who did wouldn't have had the power to help. If my mother hadn't done it, then who?

Then I remembered that we still had a dire situation at hand. Putting aside the mystery of the necklace for the moment, I asked, 'What were the Titans doing on Alcatraz?'
Athena furrowed her brow. 'Raising an ancient creature. One that should have been locked away forever. When I went to check on the old prisoners from our previous war, I found many of our jailers missing.'

'Some have faded,' Artemis added sadly.

'Faded?'

'Monsters can go extinct,' Thalia said in a low voice. 'When they aren't needed any more … when people stop believing in them …'

'When the archetypes disappear,' I finished, remembering a conversation I'd had with Chiron before. Chiron was three thousand years old, but his immortality was contingent on his purpose—to train young heroes.

The weight of what Kronos had in mind for his war suddenly felt like a rock around my neck. He had to be planning to destroy every archetype that the gods stood for—wisdom, love, family … there was no other way to truly kill an immortal.

'We believe one of the jailers still exists, but we are struggling to find him,' Athena said. 'The last Hekatonkheire.'

'Do you think he's in Alcatraz?'

'Maybe,' Artemis said. 'But we can no longer go there. I think what happened when we arrived made it clear.'

'Okay, this is really confusing,' Lou Ellen said. She'd been silent for so long, I'd almost forgotten she was with us.

It took a while to explain to Lou Ellen about the gods and the war we were preparing for. I told her about camp and how we could take care of her there. Thalia explained about the Hunters and invited her to sign on. Lou Ellen considered it for a while, then said, 'Can I go to this camp place instead?'

Artemis sighed. 'Of course.'

She tugged lightly on the reins and her deer leapt into action. An impossibly short time later, we were emerging into a familiar clearing in the woods bordering camp.

Lou Ellen and I climbed out of the chariot. Thalia hopped out with us and hugged me. 'Say hi to Percy and Grover for me!'

Athena inclined her head. 'Take care, my daughter. I will not always be able to protect you.'

Her words made me think of my dad and his promise to keep me safe. I winced. Once again, I'd run off to camp without a word, even though this time it hadn't been intentional.

'I shouldn't have come,' I said. 'My dad—'

'Hm.' Artemis looked towards the sky. The sun was just beginning to set, casting long shadows on the trees. 'If you can wait until dawn, I can arrange a lift home for you.'

'You can? I mean, thank you!'

Thalia laughed. 'If it's who I think it is, don't thank her too soon.'
'Why? Who is it?'

Artemis exchanged a look of amusement with Athena. 'My brother, Apollo.'

Chapter End Notes

Lamia and Alabaster are, of course, from *Son of Magic*. I figured I might as well give her a good reason to hate him. The escape attempt the tour guide described is an actual occurrence in the prison's history.
The Bimbo Brigade Hunts Us Down

Chapter Summary

A trip to New York turns into a crazy adventure—literally.

Chapter Notes

I am so sorry this chapter is later than usual! I've been at summer school all week and yesterday was the final day and super packed with activities, so I haven't had a chance to get online and post this until now (literally doing it at the airport on airport wifi, so yeah, you readers are still high on my list of priorities!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I reported to the top of Half-Blood Hill just before dawn to meet my ride. I'd spent the night in cabin six, after delivering Lou Ellen to the Hermes cabin (we decided to keep her parentage under wraps for now) and relating all my news about Alcatraz to Chiron.

I wasn't sure what to expect from the sun god. Well, he was also the god of poetry, music, healing, archery … and I could never remember what else. Apollo was like Hermes—he covered so many domains that it was hard to keep track of them all. I vaguely remembered him from the winter solstice as a handsome golden-blond dude.

In person, he turned out to be dazzling.

He pulled up in a hot red sports convertible that I bet Percy would have drooled over. I couldn't help doing a double-take when he dropped the sun roof and leaned over the side. Apollo looked like a young movie star, about seventeen, incredibly ripped, and dressed in Hollywood casual. Even though appearances were fickle when it came to the gods—I mean, isn't it cheating if you can just choose how you want to look?—I had to admit he had style.

'Well,' he said, raising his Gucci sunglasses and flashing me a Colgate-white smile, 'it's not every day your baby sister sets you up with a hot date.'

I tucked my hair behind my ears, feeling self-conscious. He reminded me of Luke at that age—suave and good-looking. 'I'm not your date. Artemis said you could give me a ride to San Francisco.'

'Same difference.' Apollo shrugged. The passenger door popped open. 'Hop in.'

I got in beside him, hoping he wasn't going to try any funny business. 'This is the sun chariot, right?'

'Yeah. But I thought I'd keep the Maserati since it's just you and me.' He winked. 'Chicks always dig the car. So what's your name, sweetheart?'

When I told him, it was his turn to do a double-take. 'Ah,' he said knowingly.

'What'
'You're the one Percy Jackson went racing across the country to find.'

'I—' While this was technically true, the way Apollo put it made my face go the colour of his Maserati.

Apollo nodded. 'I know all about it, of course.' He started on a long-winded story about how he'd helped Percy out along the way. The way he put it, Percy and the others wouldn't have made it past Long Island without his secret helping hand. Percy, of course, had never even mentioned meeting Apollo on his quest (though since the guy was giving me a ride, I decided I'd better not contradict him).

I'd never met a person—god or otherwise—who could talk as much about himself as Apollo did. His monologue took us halfway across America. I tuned him out after a while, the way boring radio shows fade into the background during a long road trip (although I was careful to utter the occasional mmhmmm, and yeah—gods do not like being ignored). It was amazing how long he could keep going on a single breath. Maybe gods didn't actually need to breathe.

When we finally brought sunrise to San Francisco, Apollo flicked the headlights off before our descent.

'Gotta dim the heat before landing,' he explained. 'And come in real slow, else I'd torch everything for miles. You know, like that kid Phaeton did once. Your friend Thalia had some accidents, too, though Dad didn't blast her for it.'

This was news to me, but I thought I'd wait to ask Thalia about it. I didn't really want another long, exaggerated tangent about how Apollo had heroically prevented Thalia from burning up half the country.

'Thanks for the lift,' I said.

'Any time, sweetie.'

I looked up and paused. 'Wait—this isn't my house.' We had pulled up in the A&E bay of Zuckerberg Hospital.

'Oh, it's where you need to be now,' Apollo said. 'See you around, babe!'

The Maserati zoomed off before I could protest.

Concerned by Apollo's cryptic comment, I went into the ER. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. The place was crowded and busy, with doctors and nurses in scrubs running around between beds, but that was to be expected for a hospital emergency bay.

Then I heard Janet's lightly accented voice rising over the din of surgical announcements and groaning patients.

'No, you listen! My husband and I have been in the waiting room all night and nobody has been by to give us any information!'

She was at the front of the ER, heckling a harried-looking nurse.

'Ma'am,' he said, wringing his hands, 'I don't know what to tell you. We have no kids in surgery by the name of Annabeth Chase, or even any Jane Does. It's possible that—given the earthquake … well, have you checked with the morgue?'
My father buried his face in his hands. Janet actually grabbed the nurse by the front of his scrubs.

I ran up quickly. 'Dad!'

He whirled around. 'Annabeth! You're alive!'

'Oh, thank heavens.' Janet released the nurse, who scampered away quickly.

'What—why wouldn't I be?' Sure, I'd gone missing overnight, but why would they look for me in a hospital? My dad must know that I wouldn't visit a mortal hospital even if I ran into trouble.

'The earthquake at Alcatraz—we thought—' My dad crushed me in a big hug. 'They said on the news all the kids had been taken here, but none of your teachers had seen you, and nobody could tell us where you'd gone.'

'What earthquake?'

'Where were you?' Janet's voice was sharp. 'Were you playing hooky?'

'I—no! I was at Alcatraz, but …' An earthquake. Of course—the Mist. They probably hadn't even guessed that my absence was monster-related. 'Are the other kids okay?'

My dad ran a tired hand over his face. 'I think so. They insisted there weren't any fatalities, but then they thought you …' He shook his head. 'Never mind. You're obviously fine. Was this—it was one of your mythological things, then?'

'Not never mind, Frederick!' Janet said shrilly. 'This is not all right, Annabeth! Do you know how worried your father was?'

'I'm sorry,' I muttered. 'Dad, it was—um, can I tell you guys in the car?'

On the drive home, I explained what had happened. When I told them how Athena and Artemis had shown up, my dad stalled the car at the light. Drivers behind us honked impatiently.

'Athena,' my dad said faintly. 'She came to you.'

Yeah.'

'Yes, fine,' Janet broke in. Her face was like the thunderclouds over Mount Tam. 'Why didn't you call to say you were okay?'

'I … but I've never …' It struck me that this was probably the first time I'd been in a regular mortal accident—or at least, what seemed like one. The last few times I'd disappeared, my dad would have known I'd run off to camp.

I suddenly wondered what his reaction had been the first time I'd run away, when I was seven. Had he scoured hospitals in Richmond looking for me?

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I really didn't think of it. I was coming right back, so …'

'We have to do something about this,' Janet began, but my dad cut in.

'It's all right, Janet. Annabeth is home now.'

That seemed to be the end of the subject. Neither my dad nor Janet brought it up in the following weeks. Life went back to normal. In my architecture classes, I finally completed my designs for the
Ground Zero project I'd started with Mrs Carlson. Under Janet's encouragement, I submitted them as a portfolio in an application to a special art school for next year.

My flying lessons were going well; towards the end of March, my dad decided I was ready to do a mock test for my student pilot certificate. But the morning we were meant to do it, I came into the kitchen to find him hunched over his laptop with his briefcase on the chair next to him, like he was getting ready for work.

It wasn't the first time he'd seemed unprepared for my flying lesson. Earlier in the year, I'd been crestfallen when he'd seemed to have forgotten our first date with the skies—until Janet had raised an eyebrow and said, 'Frederick, it's Saturday.'

I'd become accustomed to the fact that my dad always mixed up the days of the week. Without Janet and me to remind him, he'd hare off to the university without realising it was the weekend.

'Dad, it's Saturday,' I said. 'You don't have to work.'

'No, I do—I did remember this one. I'm presenting at West Point this afternoon, special invitation …' His voice trailed off as he typed something into his laptop.

'Are you sure you got the date right?'

'Hm?' My dad didn't lift his eyes from the screen.

'It's Saturday,' I repeated. 'We're going flying.'

My dad's head finally jerked up. 'Isn't it the fifteenth?'

'Yeah …'

'I thought I had it right. They sent me a reminder email yesterday, so …' He slapped his forehead. 'It's a Saturday.'

'What's going on?' Janet came into the kitchen in her bathrobe, her hair wrapped in a towel.

'Dad's forgotten the day again,' I said. 'He was supposed to do my mock flight test—' I broke off. My dad was wincing.

'Frederick,' Janet sighed, 'you double-booked, didn't you?'

'I didn't realise the presentation was going to be on a weekend. Sorry, Annabeth. They asked me weeks ago. I just messed up.'

'So you have to go to the university.'

'I'm flying to New York, actually. It's the military academy there that wants the lecture.'

'Wait …' The perfect solution popped into my head. 'Could I fly you there? I mean, if you didn't already book a flight …'

'It's a five-hour journey—you sure you're up for it?'

'Positive.'

So I found myself proudly piloting the Camel across the country. We landed at Teterboro Airport just before three. West Point Military School had sent a car for my dad, so he gave me cab fare to go visit
camp while he gave his lecture.

I hadn't admitted it to my dad, but there was someone else in New York I'd been hoping to visit. After he went off, I found a bathroom in the airport and took my prism and flashlight into one of the stalls. After making my offering to Iris, I said, 'Percy Jackson, Upper East Side.'

The back of his head appeared first in the rainbow. He was standing on a street corner in the city, checking his watch.

'Percy!'

He turned and jumped. 'Annabeth! What—' His head swivelled around, checking the doorway of an electronics shop. An unknown man was coming out, his head turned over his shoulder to speak to someone inside. 'Uh, hang on—' Percy darted around the corner.

'Is something wrong?'

'No, just—sorry, I don't have long. Everything okay over there?'

'Yeah, I'm fine, I'm just calling because—'

'Percy?' said a pleasant male voice.

'Crap,' Percy said. 'Er, sorry I can't—'

The man from the shop rounded the corner, still calling Percy's name. Percy stepped away from the Iris-message, pretending to stretch so that he blocked my view of the man. I remembered then that he'd mentioned his mom had a new boyfriend.

'Are you talking to someone?' Sally's boyfriend sounded confused.

'No, uh, just talking to myself,' Percy said quickly. He released his hands and swung them behind him, swiping through our connection.

I sighed and put away the prism. I should have IM-ed him before I'd set out. Then again, he probably already had plans for today.

I got to camp just in time for a mid-afternoon capture the flag game. Because the camp numbers were so low, Chiron hadn't bothered to split the campers into teams. Instead, we were sent off in groups of three to find the flag, which he'd hidden deep in the woods. I ended up with Clariss and Grover.

'The woods are stocked with monsters as always, but remember, you'll have to avoid all the booby traps, too,' Chiron warned us. He nodded to the Stoll brothers and Lou Ellen, none of whom were playing. I made a mental note to watch out for magical Mistforms. 'Anyone who gets caught forfeits the game.'

We used the creek that usually marked the boundary between teams as a starting point. Chiron gave the signal, a blast on his conch horn, and we dispersed.

Grover filled me in on his ongoing search for Pan while we scoured the woods. He'd returned after a month to report to the Council of Cloven Elders, who were getting impatient with him.

'They're starting to think I made everything up,' he lamented. 'The problem is, the signal keeps appearing and disappearing. I went all the way out to New Mexico, but even there it was flickering.'

'You know what I think?' Clarisse said. 'I bet the Labyrinth is screwing with you. It's like what
Annabeth's professor friend said—it appears and disappears.'

Grover looked at her incredulously. 'You think it ate Pan?'

'Don't be silly. Maybe he's hiding in there.'

'You're being silly. Pan's got nothing to do with the Labyrinth. He's a Lord of the Wild, not man-made mazes.'

'Have you guys figured anything out with those maps Prof Daly gave us?' I asked Clarisse.

'Chiron had a look at them. He said they weren't extensive enough to explain what I'd found.'

I made a mental note to prioritise sorting out the maps when I returned in the summer. 'And did anyone find an entrance on camp grounds?'

'I went over the whole place. No stupid triangles anywhere. Except in the Demeter cabin, but Katie insisted those were grain symbols. I said we should blow it up just to be safe, but Chiron wouldn't let me.'

'You looked in here, too?'

Clarisse nodded. 'Though finding some stupid triangle of Daedalus in here is worse than trying to find this cursed flag. I mean, it could look like anything, right?' She jerked her head towards a tangle of branches that had fallen in a lopsided triangular shape.

'I doubt that's it,' I said. 'But it looks like … chuck a rock at it, Grover.'

He did so. As soon as the rock landed in the triangle, the branches snapped up into one of the Stoll brothers' traps.

Half an hour later, we'd sprung three more traps, including one that was obviously Lou Ellen's handiwork (I recognised the pelican that swooped down from the sky and vanished when Clarisse jabbed her spear at it). We'd gone deep into the western corner of the woods, but there was no sign of the flag or the mark of Daedalus.

'Do you hear that?' Grover said.

'Hear what?' Clarisse stomped through a patch of ferns.

'Shh!' I was about to grab her arm to stop her, but I thought better of it. I didn't want a spear shoved in my face.

A gurgling noise was coming from the west. At first, it sounded like a rippling brook, but as it grew louder, it was more like the high-pitched giggles of popular middle-school girls at a dance.

The trees rustled.

'Something tells me that's not any of the other teams,' Grover said.

Clarisse climbed onto a pile of rocks. 'Oh my gods,' she said. 'Bimbos.'

'What?' I hurried to join her. She pointed into a glade where a group of teenage girls were skipping around, shrieking and laughing in a drunken fashion. The way they were flailing around, they would have fit right in at a disco. 'Where did they come from?'
Grover poked his head between us. The moment he caught sight of the drunken girls, he went white as a sheet and tugged us off the rocks. 'We have to get out of here now.'

'Why?' Clarisse stood her ground. 'It's just some stupid—'

'Maenads!' Grover was practically hyperventilating. 'They're Maenads!' The group of girls heard us. One of them turned in our direction and said hopefully, 'Dionysus?'

Another Maenad whooped. 'It's party time!' 'Kill time!' shouted another.

Grover and I yanked Clarisse down from the rock.

'This is bad, this is bad,' Grover muttered. 'We need to—'

'Pssst!' The torso of a girl popped out from an enormous tree trunk—literally out of the trunk—and beckoned to us. Grover and I nearly jumped out of our skins, thinking she was one of the Maenads. Then I saw that she had the pale chlorophyll-tinted skin of a dryad. 'You can hide in here!' I stared at the tree. 'Um, we're not dryads. We can't just slide into trees.' She rolled her eyes and indicated a split in the trunk. 'It's hollow!'

Gratefully, we all slid into the large, hollow trunk. We disappeared just in time. The Maenads clambered over the rock, all clad in royal purple tunics that were streaked with what I sincerely hoped wasn't blood. Their eyes were ringed with red irises. Each of them carried a staff topped with a fist-sized pinecone. Snakes ringed their hairs in squirming wreaths. More writhed up and down their staffs.

One of the Maenads pushed to the front of the group, sniffing the air suspiciously. She wore a bright red dress and she had no viperish adornments in her honey-gold hair. Her staff was topped with a human head, which should have been the most horrific thing about her. What drew my attention, though, was the jewel-encrusted golden necklace resting against her chest.

I immediately scanned our surroundings for any sign of an orange, multi-tailed fox. Unfortunately, my hiding place in the tree trunk didn't make a good look-out point.

'What do you smell, Agave?' a Maenad asked.

'Satyr,' Agave said.

Grover gave a terrified whimper. Our dryad clamped her hand over his mouth.

Another Maenad clapped her hands joyously. 'Dionysus must be near! He always has satyrs with him!'

'This way,' Agave said. The Maenads trooped off towards the east. When their giggles had faded into the woods, we squeezed out of the hollow trunk.

'Thanks,' I said to the dryad. Then I recognised her. 'Juniper, isn't it?'

Juniper nodded. She held out her hand to help Grover crawl out. He took it, looking a little starstruck.
'Yeah, thanks, Juniper,' he echoed. 'You saved our lives.

Juniper's face turned a deep, foresty green.

'Can someone explain what these Maenad things are?' Clarisse demanded.

Grover tore his eyes away from Juniper. 'They're followers of Dionysus,' he explained. 'Crazy followers of Dionysus.'

Juniper nodded fervently. 'They're cousins of ours. But they have these totally out-of-control revels. People get ripped to pieces!'

Clarisse snorted. 'Those chicks? Let me at them! I'll show them ripped to pieces.'

'You don't understand! They can rip lions apart with their bare hands!' Grover said. 'When they get in a frenzy, they—' He shuddered. 'My great-uncle Arborius got caught in one of them.'

'One of them wasn't a proper Maenad, though,' Juniper said. 'The red one.'

'The one with the necklace?'

'You're right, Juniper!' Grover looked thunderstruck. 'Agave is Mr D's aunt!'

'What?' Clarisse and I said at once.

'Well, you know Dionysus's mom had three sisters, who were all really awful to him. So he cursed them when he became a god. He tricked them into joining the Maenads and they killed their own sons in a frenzy—just ripped them to pieces like wild animals and stuck their heads on a pike. Then he lifted the madness so they could see what they'd done.'

'He what?' I tried not to gag at the thought of the head on Agave's staff. I knew the gods could be brutal, but this was one of the worst stories. The kind that made me think Luke might have a point … if the Titans weren't ten times worse.

'The whole family had such bad luck,' Juniper said. 'Their parents were turned into snakes, Ino and Agave accidentally killed their own kids, Semele got vaporised when she looked at Lord Zeus …' She ticked off each misfortune on her fingers. 'It's almost as if they were all cursed.'

'Their parents?' I had a feeling I already knew who they were.

'Cadmus and Harmonia. They ran afoul of Ares.'

Clarisse snickered, but my stomach turned over. This time it wasn't the filicide that made me sick. I thought I knew just what curse Juniper was talking about. And it was wandering the woods as we spoke, searching for a way into camp.

I did not want to find out what would happen if the Necklace of Harmonia laid its curse on Camp Half-Blood.

'We need to find them,' I said.

'Are you nuts?' Grover said. 'They rip people to pieces.'

'And what's going to happen when they find camp?'

Grover winced.
'Okay, here's what we're gonna do. Grover, you and Juniper are going to look for one of the Stolls' booby traps—any one that's still active. Make a signal there, smoke or something, so we can find it. Clarisse, you and I are going to round up some Maenads.'

It wasn't all that difficult to track the Maenads down. They weren't precisely quiet. The hard part was following them unnoticed until Grover and Juniper were ready for us. Especially with Clarisse, who kept grumbling that we should just pulverise the little airheads. After shushing her for the tenth time, I lost my patience.

'Will you just shut up and stick to the plan?'

The Maenads' giggles stopped abruptly. I groaned as a lithe figure came cartwheeling through the trees to land cat-like in front of us.

'What's that you've found, Babette?' called one of the others.

'Two sacrifices!' Babette squealed.

The other Maenads burst through the foliage. Agave pushed between them and slammed her staff imperiously on the ground. Her eyes gleamed red.

'Where is Dionysus?' she said.

'He's, uh … waiting for you!' If we could just stall them until Grover gave the signal … 'He sent us as his, um, welcoming committee!'

The Maenads looked at each other.

'No committees!' Babette screeched. 'Only parties!'

'Er, yeah,' I said quickly, 'I mean, we're here to take you to the party.'

'Party!' echoed three of the Maenads.

'We must find Dionysus!' Agave insisted. Her fingers trailed over the Necklace of Harmonia. 'Curses to share!'

My eyes narrowed. 'Curses?'

'Oops, did I say curses? I meant gifts! Presents! Wine!'

Babette wailed. 'I can't have wine!'

'Sorry, Babette,' Agave said. 'Forgot you're underage. Punch! Punch for all!'

'You're insane,' Clarisse said. She brandished her spear. 'Parties are dumb.'

I could have smacked her. The Maenads' eyes bugged. Their smiles turned threatening. Babette's hand shot out quicker than a Hunter's arrow. Her fingernails were long, curved, and sharp. They sliced through Clarisse's spear shaft as easily as if she were cutting wheat. The spear fell to the ground in three pieces.

Agave pointed her staff at us. 'Kill!'

We ran. Even Clarisse, stripped of her spear, had no choice but to sprint along with me, cursing angrily. The Maenads stampeded after us.
I wove through the trees, keeping my eyes above the canopy. *Come on, Grover* ... We jumped boulders, splashed through creeks and brooks, chased by the murderous Maenads, who had stripped themselves of their party-girl appearance. Long claws swiped and sharp teeth snapped at us whenever we slowed. It was pretty good incentive to keep running.

At last, I spotted the spiral of smoke rising above the tree line.

'This way!' I gasped, taking a sharp left.

I spotted the trap from twenty feet away: the tell-tale tension in a rubbery vine that had been pulled back so that it would spring once touched; the glint of what I hoped was a hidden bronze net; the trip line so cleverly concealed that I'd never have identified it without years of experience with the Hermes kids' intricate pranks.

And even better, the bright scraps of paper among the leaves that were Lou Ellen's handiwork.

Our trap was ready to be sprung. The only problem was, I needed it to spring on all the Maenads at once.

I could only think of one way to herd them all in simultaneously, and it was insanely dangerous.

Then again, if anyone was ever up for insanely dangerous, it would be Clarisse.

'We need to hold them in a pack just before the trip line,' I gasped. 'It'll be tough with all those claws —'

'Leave it to me, Smarty-Pants.'

'Here—' I tossed her my knife. I half-expected her to refuse it and insist on fighting them bare-handed, but I guess even Clarisse wasn't such an idiot. She caught it and gripped it tightly.

'*Before* the line,' I reminded her.

'I got it!'

While Clarisse skidded to a stop before the trip line, I took a flying leap and grabbed hold of a dangling vine. Resisting the urge to holler Tarzan-style (as I bet Percy would have), I swung myself into the treetops. Sure enough, there was the trap net rigged to the sprung vine coil, waiting to fall. To my delight, it was one of Beckendorf's high-quality bronze nets.

I took hold of the connecting line and pulled on it hard, holding the net in place. The lead Maenads fell on Clarisse in a whirl of gnashing teeth and claws. She swung out with my dagger.

In a flash of inspiration, I shook Lou Ellen's papers out of the tree. They blossomed into a pack of weasels. The Maenads tore into them at once, giving Clarisse a brief respite.

Agave was the last to arrive. The moment she fell into the pack, I yelled, 'NOW!'

Clarisse dove out of the way. The moment she fell into the pack, I yelled, 'NOW!'

Clarisse dove out of the way. I released the line.

The trap net crashed over the frenzied Maenads, trapping them in Hephaestus-strength bronze. It took them a moment to realise what was going on. Then they started struggling to free themselves, alternating between slicing at the netting with teeth and claws and yanking at it with their hands.

'Are you okay?' I asked Clarisse. She was bleeding where the Maenads had gotten her, but the cuts were superficial.
'Yeah,' she said, handing me back my knife. 'No biggie.'

Grover and Juniper came running up. 'You got them!'

'You chose a good one,' I said, noting with satisfaction that the net was holding fast.

'Juniper found it.' Grover cast her an admiring glance. 'She knew where everything was!'

Juniper's face was once again a deep, mossy green. 'I just watched them set the traps this morning.'

Clarisse interrupted, 'Guys, flirt later, deal with these bimbos first?'

'I think we should get Mr D,' I said. 'That's what they want anyway, right?'

'Dionysus!' shrieked one of the Maenads. It might have been Babette. They were too clustered together in the net to tell.

Grover went to get Mr D while we watched over the Maenads. He returned ten minutes later with not just Dionysus, but Chiron, Argus, and just about every camper in residence.

'Oh joy,' Mr D said.

'Dionysus!' the Maenads wailed. 'We're here to party! And rip these unbelievers to pieces!'

Mr D swept his eyes over us with bored distaste. 'That's not such a bad idea.'

Chiron coughed delicately.

'But I have responsibilities to these wretched demigods, curse Zeus,' Mr D sighed. The skies rumbled. He rolled his eyes. 'Never mind. Let them out.'

Beckendorf lumbered forward and fiddled with a corner of the net. The Maenads burst out and swarmed Mr D. Babette prostrated herself on the ground.

'I am Babette! Your most devoted follower! I will party most hard in your name!'

'Yes, yes, party away,' Mr D said. 'There's one down south, I believe.' He pointed to Argus. 'Follow the eyes.'

Argus's billion eyes fluttered in panic. Chiron patted him on the shoulder. 'I have an idea,' he said. 'Come, Maenads!'

The Maenads charged after Chiron and Argus, but Mr D stopped Agave.

'Again, Aunt?' he said. His eyes narrowed at the necklace. Leaning forward, he plucked it from her neck and tossed it in my direction. I caught it reluctantly.

Agave seemed to emerge from a trance. She blinked stupidly at Mr D, her irises returning to a golden-brown colour.

'Dionysus,' she stammered. Then she stared at her staff, with the decapitated head, and started to cry. 'What madness has befallen me again?'

'Not my fault this time.' Mr D shrugged. 'I'd look for whoever gave you that.' He pointed at the Necklace of Harmonia. 'And I think that's my good deed for the day. Or perhaps for the century.' He headed back towards camp. His feet hovered an inch above the ground as he walked. A few yards
away, he stopped and turned back to look at me. 'Don't bring that thing in, if you know what's good for the place.'

'Is the game over?' Clarisse asked.

'Yeah,' Beckendorf said. 'We won. Silena found the flag.'

Clarisse cursed, but I couldn't care less who had won.

'Agave,' I said, 'where did you get this?'

The pseudo-Maenad, or whatever she was, looked about fifty years older now that her party madness had lifted. She sat on the ground like she might never get up. 'A fox,' she said. 'She told me to take it to Dionysus. She said it would avenge me. I shouldn't have believed her! I know that thing—it drove my sisters mad, one by one.'

'Is the fox … here?'

Agave shook her head. 'Your camp boundaries are too powerful. But if the necklace is taken to the heart of the camp, they will weaken.'

My hands tightened around the clasps of the necklace. If only I could break it in half. But it felt as strong as Beckendorf's net. Destroying it wouldn't be so easy.

Clarisse looked at the necklace with a contemplative look in her eyes that I didn't like. 'Can it cure madness, though?'

Agave laughed bitterly. 'Madness is just an idea, demigod. It is a frenzied notion that the mind refuses to let go of.' She pointed to her staff, with the man's head on the end. 'I was convinced that my son Pentheus was a wild lion. Sometimes I wish I still believed it. The lifting of madness is not always a blessing.'

Juniper offered to take care of Agave. Grover, looking even more impressed with the dryad, volunteered to help. I took the long way around the property line, not daring to venture into camp while I held the Necklace of Harmonia. At the foot of Half-Blood Hill, I found Chiron and Argus waving off a bus that said ATLANTIC CITY TOURS.

'Is that where you sent the Maenads?'

Chiron's torso was covered in sweat. 'Yes. They should get their fill of parties down there.' He shook his head wearily. 'I'm sure Dionysus meant well, but what he was thinking, having us herd them through camp … but I'm sure the strawberry fields can be replanted. We'll have the losing teams work on it.'

Argus shrugged and winked half his eyes.

'Well, my dear,' Chiron said to me, 'I'm glad you were with us today. If the Maenads had succeeded in delivering that necklace to the heart of camp …' He shuddered. 'We might not have had until summer before an invasion came upon us. But fortunately, our boundaries remain intact.'

I turned the necklace over in my hands. 'What am I going to do with it?' Even if my mother was right and I had some mysterious protection from the curse, I had a feeling Kitsune would be back for it soon enough.

'I do not have all the answers, child,' Chiron said. 'But I know how resourceful you are. If anyone
can find a way to break the curse, it is you.'

Just then, Clarisse came running down the hill, carrying a stuffed duffel bag. 'Chiron!' she yelled. 'I have an idea!'

Surprised, we turned to listen, but Clarisse wasn't talking about the necklace. She had decided that she was going to bring Chris Rodriguez back to camp.

'Mr D lifted the madness from the Maenads. He can do the same for Chris!'

'Have you asked him?'

Clarisse lifted her chin. 'He laughed at me when I asked if he would go to Phoenix, but if I bring Chris here, he'll have to.'

I was sceptical about this. The gods never had to do anything. But Clarisse would not be dissuaded. The determination in her eyes made me think of a broken body at the bottom of a cliff.

You didn't give up on the people you cared about, even when it seemed hopeless.

It was crazy to think of Clarisse caring about someone like that. And yet …

I thought about the story Chiron had told me before Clarisse and I had gone to see Professor Daly, the one Clarisse hadn't wanted to talk about.

'Clarisse and Gleeson Hedge had a long way to travel from Arizona after he found her. With such a long journey, I suppose running into trouble was inevitable. I believe it was somewhere in Texas that they ran into a pair of demigods who had been living on their own for some time … rather like yourself, Thalia, and Luke. One was Chris. The other was a girl named Mary.'

'But we never had a Mary here—oh. She didn't make it?'

'I believe it was a drakon in Austin. I don't know the full story, but I know that Mary was a brave girl who cared about her friends.'

I'd never thought of Clarisse as anything but a hard-core fighter, but she must have been a kid like me, with a story she didn't like to talk about either. I didn't really remember Clarisse and Chris hanging out much together, but it had been a long time ago. Clarisse had gotten claimed early on—a rarity for Ares, since the war god usually liked to see his kids prove themselves before admitting to fathering them. And Chris had languished undetermined in cabin eleven until he'd run off to join Luke. That kind of thing could drive a wedge in any friendship.

But whatever had happened between them, that was Clarisse's business. If she didn't care to share it (knowing her, she never would), I wasn't going to pry.

'Perhaps I will go with you, child,' Chiron said to Clarisse. 'After these attempts on our camp borders, it may be prudent for me to interview the lad personally.'

'My dad and I have to fly back west. Maybe we could …' I frowned. The plane didn't exactly have a lot of passenger space.

Chiron shook his head, smiling. 'I can take Clarisse myself. I daresay I could cover the distance just as quickly. Don't worry about us. Concentrate on finding a solution to your problem.' He nodded at the Necklace of Harmonia. 'If you have not found an answer by spring break, get back in touch and we will put our heads together.'
My dad got the West Point car to swing round and pick me up from camp. His presentation must have gone well, judging by the satisfied expression he wore. However, he didn't say anything about his afternoon until we got to the airport.

'I got something for you,' he said, pulling a little rectangular package out of his briefcase.

I opened it. Inside was a cell phone, the kind that folded up like a compact mirror.

'Dad, I can't use—'

'I know—monsters track cell signals. You've said. But this one's special. One of the military guys managed to get it for me. It encrypts the signal, so it's not really like normal phones. I don't know if it will work, but I thought it might scramble things enough that the monsters might have a harder time bugging your calls—or however that works.'

'Wow.' I traced the smooth back of the cell phone. I had no clue either if my dad's idea would work, but his experiments had turned out pretty well so far.

'As long as you don't stay on it for too long,' he added. 'So no long chats with your boyfriend, I'm afraid.'

'Daaaad. I don't have a boyfriend.' Had he figured out about my earlier IM to Percy? Not that Percy was … I mean, it wasn't like that.

Though I couldn't deny the appeal of being able to give Percy a call like a normal teenager.

My dad gave me his impression of a stern look—which was really just a less vague version of his usual face. 'At least keep it for emergencies,' he said. 'So you can give us a call next time something happens.'

My hand closed around the phone. It fit snugly in my palm. 'Deal,' I said. And I gave him a big hug before we climbed into the Camel and headed for home.

Chapter End Notes

Babette and the Maenads are from Leo Valdez and the Quest for Buford. Agave is indeed the daughter of Harmonia, and the aunt of Dionysus. Her mythological run-in with the Necklace of Harmonia is pure embellishment on my part (it's only recorded that Dionysus's mother, Semele, had possession of it), but hey, that thing must've made its rounds, right?

I've fudged the pilot regulations a bit here for my own convenience. There's apparently no age requirement to learn to fly, but there is one on flying solo. I've conveniently ignored that it's 16 for aircrafts. (How hypocritical of me!) It is 14 for gliders and balloons, so let's just class the Sopwiths in that category, okay?
Clarisse Plays Demolition (Wo)Man

Chapter Summary

Clarisse blows things up.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It wasn't long before I saw Chiron and Clarisse again. On the first day of spring break, I made my way to Arizona to meet them.

A wave of scorching heat blasted me in the face the moment I taxi-ed to a stop on the Womack Airstrip. It hadn't been obvious at twenty thousand feet, but now that I'd landed, I could practically see the wavy columns rising off the tarmac. It was like stepping into a furnace.

I tugged off my aviator's helmet and shrugged out of my jacket. It had to be at least twenty degrees hotter than San Francisco, where everyone was still bemoaning the unnatural spring chill.

Chiron and Clarisse met me on the runway.

'I see you've picked up a new skill,' Chiron said.

I grinned. I'd only passed my flight test a week ago. My dad had generously allowed me to fly the trainer Camel down to Phoenix, probably because his research team had just taken a new delivery of planes. They were busy organising a historical re-enactment of the Battle of Ypres with the new Camels.

'Are we doing this or what?' Clarisse looked less than impressed. Her burly arms were crossed over her tank top. She'd pulled back her roughly-cut hair with an orange bandanna.

We headed for the Labyrinth entrance on the rez, the one Clarisse had found last fall. It was the last string to tie up before she and Chiron left Phoenix to bring Chris back to camp. I guess I didn't really need to be here for it—Clarisse never needed help blowing stuff up—but I wanted to follow through. After all, I'd been in on the Labyrinth investigation from the beginning.

The entrance was in a multi-storey building that might once have been a housing block for poor families. It had obviously been abandoned for years. Moss grew out of the cracks around its dusty, broken windows. Rusty fire escape steps with broken rungs twisted up the side of the building. The plaster walls were sun-bleached and faded, the paint peeling and streaked with dirt. The mark of Daedalus was carefully hidden amidst a wild spray of graffiti. If I hadn't been looking out for it specifically, I'd never have noticed it.

A demolition crew was already moving in equipment when we arrived, including a wrecking ball that swung from a thirty-foot-tall crane. The three workmen were skeletons with ghostly eyes that shone out of empty sockets, like the spartoi guards that had flanked Harmonia when she fled from her ancient city. Clarisse had had a similar crew of dead Confederate soldiers on her battleship last year, when she'd led the quest for the Golden Fleece—the losers of the Civil War who now had to serve Ares throughout their zombie afterlives (a good reason if any never to be on the losing side of a
war). But these workmen wore a different uniform.

'Union soldiers?'

'Battle of Picacho Pass,' she said. 'The Confederates must've won that one.'

Clarisse stepped up to an elevated platform and whistled sharply. Her undead slaves turned to her and saluted.

'Ready when you are, miss!' one croaked. He hopped into the driver's seat of the crane.

'Wait!' I said. 'Are you sure that's safe? Did you make sure the foundations are—'

Clarisse threw me a scathing look. 'It's demolition, not design, Wise-Ass. Just knock it down!'

I hoped she knew what she was talking about. It was true that destroying things wasn't my forte. I usually left that part to Percy.

'Watch and learn!' With her nose in the air, Clarisse gave her undead officers the command: 'Smash it!'

The crane swivelled, swinging the wrecking ball like a pendulum. It slammed into the side of the building. Plaster crumbled. Whatever glass was left in the windows shattered. The rickety fire escape stairs snapped like a broken twig. We got a brief glimpse of the gaping hole in the side of the building before the wrecking ball came in for a second hit.

'Yeah!' Clarisse shouted, pumping her fist in the air. The building's foundations shuddered and began to give away along haphazard fracture lines. One large crack ran vertically up the splintering wall.

Chunks of plaster rained down perilously close to Clarisse's elevated platform. It looked like she hadn't planned out the fracture patterns (no surprise there). An entire side of the building was about to collapse on her.

'Clarisse, get out of there!'

She looked at me like I was a hydra. I met Chiron's eyes. He was still in his wheelchair and couldn't possibly get to her before the building fell. No time for arguments—I ran forward and pulled Clarisse off the platform. The moment our heads ducked under the hollow behind it, a ton of cement crashed onto the spot where she'd been standing.

'Geez, Chase, what's your problem?'

'Are you crazy?'

'That was foolish, child.' Chiron extracted his hindquarters from his chair and clopped over with stern disapproval stamped across his face.

Clarisse laughed and got to her feet. She surveyed her handiwork with smug satisfaction. 'That's the way you do it.'

The rest of the building had caved in on itself, forming a gigantic heap of dusty rubble. Daedalus's mark was still glowing faintly in the middle of it.

I brushed plaster dust out of my hair. 'Is the entrance still under all that? I can still see the mark.'

'Oh, we're not done,' Clarisse said. She rubbed her hands together gleefully. 'This is the best part.'
One of the undead workers got into a dump truck and reversed it up to the collapsed building. He offloaded its contents into the rubble—a truckload of dynamite.

'You are crazy!' I said. 'You're gonna blow us all sky high!'

'How else do you want to get rid of the entrance?'

'You're both right,' Chiron said. 'It will take a powerful blast to destroy it—if that is even possible. But we should put a safe distance between us and the blast site first.'

Clarisse grumbled, but allowed Chiron to carry us away. Her undead minions followed in the now-empty truck. I guess even if they couldn't die again, they were still averse to getting blown up. When we had put several football fields between us and the blast site, Clarisse pressed the detonator.

Even at this distance, the explosion shook the ground. Clarisse whooped and cheered. I could almost see the rush of heat spreading from the blast, turning the air wavy and translucent. Shrapnel exploded in all directions.

When the dust settled, we approached the smoking crater. Chiron and I cleared aside some of the debris.

'Is it gone?' Clarisse asked.

'I think so.' Chiron patted the ground with his hooves. There was no sign of an opening, nothing that resembled a possible tunnel into the earth. The mark of Daedalus had disappeared.

Then the ground trembled. Ten feet away from the crater, the earth cracked like a split seam. A jagged line zigzagged towards the nearest boulder and tunnelled under it with a deafening rumble.

We ran to the boulder. Three lines etched themselves into the stone, forming an isosceles triangle—the Greek letter Delta. Without thinking, I reached out to touch the mark.

'No!' Clarisse yelled, but it was too late. The moment my fingers brushed Daedalus's mark, the earth turned to quicksand, sucking us downwards. There was a swooping sensation in my stomach, and then my bum hit a hard, stone floor. A thump next to me heralded Clarisse's landing.

'Don't go anywhere!' Chiron's voice came from far above. I could barely make out his worried face peering into the hole. 'There must be a way back up. Quick, before—'

The sliver of sky at the top of the hole narrowed like a retractable roof. It slid shut, plunging us into darkness.

'No!' Clarisse howled. 'You idiot! You opened it!'

'So we're …'

'In the Labyrinth,' Clarisse was nearly hyperventilating. I'd never seen her so frazzled. 'The entrance is touch-activated—it opens if a half-blood touches it!'

'Okay,' I said, trying to stay calm. 'There's gotta be a way back out. How did you get out?'

'The mark,' she gasped. 'Look for the mark!'

I felt her shuffling around, banging her fists against the walls. I found two of them on either side of us, forming a passageway through which cool, damp air flowed. It had a metallic scent, like rust, or possibly blood. A steady drip, drip, drip echoed from somewhere further down. It paused as if
something had interrupted the flow of water. Then came the sound of something slithering across the hard stone floor.

'Something's coming,' I said, pulling out my dagger. The dim glow of the celestial bronze blade lit up dark streaks on the wall. I didn't want to think too much about what they were.

'Shine that here!' Clarisse ordered. Her hands ran frantically over the cold stone. As I held up my blade to give her more light, the slithering noise grew louder.

'Do you hear that?'

Clarisse wasn't listening. She'd found a triangular-shaped depression in the stone wall and pressed both hands to it. A faint blue light shone out of the recess—the same mark I'd touched on the boulder outside. Clarisse hammered it desperately.

Light flooded in from above. The ceiling slid open mere feet away from our heads. Chiron's face reappeared, his relief at seeing us evident.

A loud hiss reverberated in the tunnel, sounding alarmingly close.

'Go!' I pushed at Clarisse's back.

She was already reaching for the top of the opening and heaving herself out. I scrambled after her, wedging my feet into the uneven crevices of the wall. It was slick and slippery. Chiron caught my hand and pulled me out of the dank hole, back onto hot, sandy ground.

A pair of mustard-coloured rattlesnakes as thick as Clarisse's forearms slithered out after us. The ground slid shut behind them, concealing the Labyrinth entrance. The mark of Daedalus shimmered once on the boulder, then subsided into a faint etching.

One of the snakes raised its head to strike. Chiron backed up, lifting his hooves in alarm. Horse reflexes, I guess.

Clarisse picked up a jagged piece of shrapnel. I drew my dagger.

The snake's body spiralled so quickly, it raised a tiny whirlwind of dust. Clarisse flung her shrapnel at it. The other snake darted in front of the swirling one and batted the sharp implement away with the rattle on its tail.

'Oh no you don't!' The dust storm settled into the shape of a young woman. She tossed her head, making her honey-coloured tresses billow. Her china-blue eyes flashed angrily at the dagger in my hand. They bore a striking resemblance to Silena Beauregard's, which made me realise I actually had seen her before—and not just in dreams. She'd been on Mount Olympus nearly a year ago, arguing with her mother, Aphrodite, about her lost jewellery.

My hand flew to the necklace in my pocket.

Clarisse gasped. 'I know you! You're one of my dad's b—'

'Ares's daughter,' Chiron cut in, before Clarisse could unwisely (and hypocritically) declare her illegitimacy. 'Harmonia, goddess of peace.'

The other snake wound itself around Harmonia's legs, hissing plaintively. Harmonia picked it up and draped it around her neck, where it swayed contentedly from her shoulders.
'Wait, how can you be the goddess of peace if our dad's the god of war?' Clarisse asked.

Harmonia gave a snort of disgust. 'You sound just like him.' She mimicked Ares's loud, obnoxious tone: "'No kid of mine can stay out of a fight!' Well, it's not like I knew he was my dad when they were giving out domains.' She pointed an accusing finger at Chiron. 'You knew all about it, didn't you?'

'I wasn't always up to date on Olympus gossip …' Chiron attempted a smile that was utterly unconvincing. Aphrodite and Ares's scandalous love affair was a worse-kept secret than WikiLeaks. One of Hephaestus's hobbies had been setting traps to catch and humiliate them. (Like the one I'd unwittingly sprung a couple of years ago. Which had been humiliating for me.)

At Harmonia's derisive sniff, Chiron sighed. 'We suspected. Your mother wasn't exactly, shall we say, discreet.'

'Couldn't keep her legs shut, you mean,' Harmonia muttered.

'Harmonia was one of Aphrodite's first children after her marriage to Hephaestus,' Chiron explained. 'It wasn't until after, when he caught her with Ares, that he began to suspect his "daughter" wasn't who he thought she was either.'

'Parents!' Harmonia groused. 'Like it's my fault she was sleeping around. But he had to go and take it out on me, playing that dirty trick with my wedding present.'

'This necklace!' I took it out of my pocket. Maybe this was my chance to be rid of its mysterious curse once and for all.

Harmonia's hand flew to her chest. She made a three-fingered claw over her heart and held it out to me, a ward against evil. 'Keep that thing away from me! It ruined my life!'

'But—'

'He gave me that thing when I married Cadmus.' Her fingers trailed along the scales of her snake, who nuzzled her fondly. 'Conveniently forgot to mention he'd cursed it, of course.'

'Hephaestus cursed this necklace?'

She made a face. 'To determine if I was the product of a broken wedding vow. It used to be my mom's, see? He made it for her at their wedding. So if she'd cheated on him when she conceived me, the curse would activate. And it did—right in the middle of my wedding. Those damned snake clasps started hissing about unfaithfulness right in the middle of my vows!'

'Why didn't you get rid of it, then?'

Harmonia chewed at her thumbnail. 'Well … I was just so pretty in it …'

'Part of the curse, no doubt,' Chiron said. 'Making the wearer irresistibly beautiful. It would attract its victims like Siren song.'

'Let's pulverise it, then!' Clarisse said. 'Where's the dynamite?'

Harmonia let out a bitter laugh. 'Good luck with that, child. It isn't so easy getting rid of Hephaestus's creations. If there's one thing the old blacksmith knows how to do, it's to make stuff that lasts.' She waved a hand at the boulder with Daedalus's mark. 'Look what good blowing up the Labyrinth entrance did.'
'But Hephaestus didn't make the Labyrinth,' I protested.

'His descendent did. And when it comes to Daedalus, same difference, really. Guess Hephaestus's bitterness skipped a couple of generations. So did his genius … though some of that was his mother's talent, I suppose.' She glanced at my owl earrings. 'No worse combination than a bitter old inventor. Except maybe pineapple on pizza. Like, what is that?'

'Guess she's been hanging out in Delaware,' Clarisse muttered.

'But surely there has to be a way to break the curse,' I said.

'Why bother? You're doomed anyway. It didn't end when my real dad turned me into a snake, you know. It hung around for ages. Well, I guess Kitty had something to do with that.'

'Kitty—you mean—'

'That sly fox, of course. Heard she picked up a Japanese name at some point. What was it, again?'

'Kitsune?'

'That's the one! Should've known she had a bit of devilry in her. She served in the Titan army, after all. Anyway, she took the necklace, passed it on to all my daughters, and theirs … I lost count how many generations it passed down. None of them came to a good end. It's like Hephaestus couldn't stand to let anyone have a happy family.'

'But you just said Kitsune passed it on.'

'Oh, Kitty was just the messenger. It was still Hephaestus's curse, though she certainly parasitised it. I think she found a way to steal some of the lives the curse took. None of them were pretty: madness … filicide … suicide … look—you can see all of it.'

Harmonia shook her head at the necklace. Images wavered in its moonstone sheen, just as they had the first time I'd laid eyes on it.

I saw Hephaestus at his forge, hammering away at the necklace, a gift for his beautiful wife-to-be. Anger contorted his face when he realised he'd been cuckolded. His hurt tunneled into the necklace, lodging like another inlaid jewel, forming the base of the curse.

I saw Kitsune take it after it had fallen from Harmonia's neck—only the messenger, but a vital one in keeping the curse alive from generation to generation, preying on the foibles of her victims and feeding on their deaths.

I saw the women who had been seduced by the visions the necklace bestowed of beauty, wealth, and love. I saw the acts they committed while wearing it—the backstabbing and betrayals that wove into the necklace as well, compounding the curse. I saw the tragic fates that finally befell them.

'Agave and Ino—went mad and killed their sons. Poor Semele, everyone knows what happened to her … and maybe the worst was Jocasta—that story's not one for the faint-hearted. Took her life when she realised she'd married her own son. And then their sons ended up murdering each other …'

The twisted history of Harmonia's cursed necklace finally came together. It hadn't always claimed a life, but the families it touched had fallen irreparably apart. And whenever a life had been forfeit, Kitsune had gleefully siphoned away its essence to extend her own.

'I'd watch my step if I were you. Curses can build on the actions of their owners.'
Horkos had sensed it at the winter solstice. Every betrayal committed by its owner had intensified the curse on the Necklace of Harmonia. But it had all started with one false oath.

I knew who I had to go to if I wanted to end the curse.

Harmonia grumbled on bitterly, 'I had to wait through all of it until a daughter of Thebes finally wised up and prayed to Athena to end it all. Cadmus and I finally retired to Elysium. I thought that'd be the end of it. But these damned Stirrings, regenerating all and sundry. Next thing I knew, I was dragged out of retirement and sent to find the thing. Like it was my responsibility! And look at poor Cadmus, stuck in snake form!'

'Perhaps there is a reason for all of this,' Chiron ventured. 'It may be a good thing that you've returned. The world needs peace, after all. With a war on our doorsteps, you could be of great help.'

'Peace,' Harmonia scoffed. 'What a joke. That's all I wanted, you know. But would the gods leave me alone?' She tossed her head petulantly. 'Maybe Kitty had it right all along. The Titan army's the way to go.'

Chiron paled. 'Harmonia—'

She shook a warning finger at him. 'Don't you start. I wouldn't be the first, anyway. I hear Hecate's already cast in her lot with them. We won't be the last, either. See how our parents like it when their kids fight back!'

With a final, scathing look at her necklace, Harmonia shrank into the large rattlesnake that had chased us out of the Labyrinth. She and Cadmus disappeared into a scraggly bush.

'This is bad,' Chiron said. 'If the goddess of peace is no longer on our side …'

'Doesn't look like she was doing much to begin with,' Clarisse said. 'Hiding away in the Underworld for centuries … well, good riddance. We wouldn't get any good fights with her around!'

'We don't want a big fight!' I reminded her.

Clarisse just smacked her fist against her palm with relish. Sometimes I really wondered whose side the Ares cabin was on. Probably whichever one brought about the most mayhem.

'Olympus needs to know that the minor deities are defecting,' Chiron said. 'I must return immediately.'

This distracted Clarisse from her cheerful contemplation of a big fight. 'What about Chris? And the Labyrinth?'

'We've done all we can about the Labyrinth,' Chiron said. 'I guess it was a long shot that we could destroy it by brute force.'

'Prof Daly was right about that,' I said.

'Yes,' Chiron agreed. 'But we had to try. We will just have to hope there is no entrance at camp. As for Chris, can he stay with you here for a few weeks, Clarisse? If Gleeson Hedge is ready to extract his half-blood charge, you can all travel together. Between you and Hedge, I am confident you will be able to bring them both safely to camp. Few of our counsellors are as well-trained as yourself in fighting monsters.'

Clarisse didn't look happy at being told to wait around, but Chiron's nod to her fighting abilities
seemed to mollify her.

'Annabeth's not bad either,' she said. 'Maybe she can—'

'Annabeth has another task ahead of her.' Chiron turned to me. 'You understand what you must do?'

I nodded and held up the Necklace of Harmonia.

I had a curse to break.

Chapter End Notes

For the record, I'm fine with pineapple on pizza. But I couldn't help poking fun at the Internet debate. And according to this Delaware apparently hates it, but my apologies to any Delawareans who don't!

The stories referenced in this chapter (and alluded to throughout this fic) are all part of the legends of Thebes. Harmonia is pretty much only famous in mythology thanks to her association with the necklace, but she was the wife and queen of Cadmus, founder of Thebes, both of whom were turned into serpents. Percy Jackson's Greek Gods attributes this punishment to Ares, so that's the story I've gone with here, though I haven't followed it precisely to the letter. We saw Agave last chapter, but her sister Ino was Dionysus's surrogate mother who also ended up stricken with madness (although Hera is credited with that one). Semele, mother of Dionysus, is the most famous of the sisters, of course. And Jocasta is of course from the story of Oedipus (of Freudian fame).

The necklace's possession is traced in legend through Harmonia to Semele to Jocasta and her son Polynices, and eventually to its sacrifice at the Temple of Athena, although I have given Izzy the leading role instead of following the male-dominated stories.
I Snare A Fox

Chapter Summary

Annabeth confronts Kitsune at last.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Figuring out who could break the curse on the Necklace of Harmonia was one thing. Finding him was another. Gods didn't exactly come with handy location services.

Fortunately, Percy, Thalia, and Grover's adventure in December gave me a hint.

I would have IM-ed Percy, except our last message hadn't gone so well. If his mom hadn't yet told her boyfriend we were demigods, I didn't want to accidentally spring the knowledge on him. My new cell phone might have been an option, but I needed Percy's home number. (I made a mental note to ask him for it this summer.)

So instead, I directed Iris to Grover at Camp Half-Blood.

The woods at the edge of the strawberry fields came up in the rainbow. Then the holographic image wavered and a pleasant female voice came out of the rainbow: 'No Grover Underwood at Camp Half-Blood! Can I try a different location?'

At first, I was mystified. Then I realised he was probably off searching for Pan again. Where was it that he'd intended to go? He'd mentioned coffee, and a wild pig, and …

'New Mexico!'

'One moment, please!'

Fluffy cloud patterns drifted across the rainbow. A soft voice crooned, 'Somewhere over the rainbow …'

It took two verses of the song before the rainbow image zoomed in on a mossy stone barn under a wide, open sky. Grover's back was to me, bent over a water trough by the barn entrance. He wasn't wearing his rasta cap, so his horns were fully visible, curving up through his curly hair. They'd grown about an inch or so since March.

'Grover!'

His horns perked up. 'Hey sweetie!' he said, turning around with a bright smile that faded the moment he saw me. It was replaced by a look of chagrin. 'Oh, it's you. Um, not that I'm not happy to see you. I mean …' He twisted his rasta cap in his hands.

I grinned wickedly. 'Who did you think I was?'

'Uh, that's not … I was expecting … she was gonna …' Grover's face was bright red. 'Fine, if you must know—I'm dating Juniper.'
'Juniper? The tree nymph?'

'Yeah.' A dreamy look washed over Grover's face. 'She's so amazing … smart, and pretty, and so *natural* …'

I shouldn't have been surprised. Grover had obviously been attracted to her during our tussle with the Maenads. Still, Grover with a girlfriend … Was he even old enough? Sure, he was technically about twice my age, but satyrs aged half as fast, so it'd be like me or Percy getting together with … with someone.

I snapped my fingers to get Grover's attention back. (No, it was *not* to distract myself from the image that popped unbidden into my head, of Percy gazing at *me* with Grover's moony-eyed look. Really.) 'Okay, good for you, Goat Boy. But can we focus? I need your help.'

I explained about the Necklace of Harmonia. 'When you guys went on the quest last winter, Percy said you passed through Hephaestus's junkyard.'

Grover's face drained of its colour. 'That's where we lost Bianca.'

'It's the only place I can think of that's linked to Hephaestus. I have to go. Zoë's last request was for me to break the curse on the necklace. So I need to know where this junkyard is.'

Grover was quiet for a while. I could tell he was weighing the decision in his head. If he told me where to find the junkyard, he'd feel responsible if I got into trouble there. But if he refused, he'd be the reason I couldn't break the curse. Finally, he said, 'It's in Arizona. Near Gila Claw.'

I drew in a sharp breath. That was less than a hundred miles from me, just over the Superstition Mountains running down the centre of the state. It felt like a sign—it had to be the right place.

'Thanks, Grover. Don't worry, I'll be careful. I won't touch anything—I need to get *rid* of something there.' I tipped the clasp of the necklace out of my pocket.

'You know what?' Grover took a deep breath. 'I'm coming with you. I'm right on the state border. I can meet you at Gila Claw.'

'What? No, Grover, you don't have to—'

'I'm your friend, Annabeth,' Grover insisted. 'If you're doing something dangerous, I can't let you do it alone.' He looked me dead in the eye. 'I know you think I'm not as powerful, or as good a friend—'

'What? No, Grover, that's not …' I winced. It wasn't entirely false that I'd have preferred Percy or Thalia, but Grover had plenty of great qualities going for him, too. 'You *are* my friend. And you got us out of a lot of tight spots. If you're really okay to come, I'm glad to have you. I'll need a guide.'

Grover beamed. 'And my tracking's gotten loads better. I'll be your Sacagawea!'

'My what?'

'Your guide, duh. You know, like on the western frontier. Don't you learn about Lewis and Clark in school?' He looked like he was about to go into a long lecture on nature exploration and wilderness survival, so I cut him off quickly.

'Yeah, perfect! I'll see you in Gila Claw.'

+++
Hephaestus's junkyard was larger than I expected. Acres upon acres of it stretched towards the horizon, a sea of metal piled up in rolling waves. There was just about any invention you could think of, from old Antikytheras to Apple iMacs.

'Whoa,' I said, 'look at all this stuff!'

It was all broken, though. Bronze gears hung limply out of the ancient Greek computers. The Mac screens were smashed in. Among the mountains of cars, weapons, electronics, and household appliances, I spotted a totalled chariot, a television set missing a screen, and a wrecked guitar hanging out of a refrigerator without a door. Smaller objects littered the ground—dented shields, split containers, cracked jewellery.

I picked up a golden necklace. It looked suspiciously like the one I had in my pocket, except there were hollow spaces where the jewels should have been, and the snake-head clasps were twisted and misshapen.

I turned the fake necklace over in my hands. 'Some of these must be prototypes. The stuff that didn't come out right and got discarded.'

Grover looked around edgily, like he was worried one of the appliances might spring to life and bite us.

'Don't take anything with you,' he said. 'That's why Talos came after us.'

I dropped the necklace, but it was hard to leave the piles of junk alone. A little way in, I came across a set of adjustable architect scales that could not only switch between measurement units, but also expanded and contracted flexibly to measure around tight spaces. Although its hinges were stiff and rusty, and some of the markings were scratched through, I bet it would still work.

Grover clung to me as we clambered over the mountains of discarded inventions, jumping at every sudden noise.

'Relax, Grover, it's just the wind,' I said. It was rustling through the junk heaps with a strange whistling noise, almost like birdsong.

'No, did you see that? Look—there!'

My heart leapt as I saw it, too: something darting between a rickety rocking chair and an upturned washing machine. The chair creaked back and forth.

'I don't like this,' Grover muttered. 'It stinks of monsters.'

The mound of stuff we were standing on rumbled. Pieces of junk were thrown about, like someone was rifling through it. Grover and I skated down the side of the junk hill, our arms flailing, to find a thick-set man in a blacksmith's smock poking around at the bottom. He was sorting stuff into new piles, muttering, 'No, not that … that's gotta be destroyed … oh, that can be re-used.'

Grover and I exchanged a wide-eyed look.

'Um, sir? Hephaestus?' I said tentatively.

The god turned. He was bald and burly, like you'd expect Hephaestus to look, but something about his appearance was off. Wasn't Hephaestus supposed to be crippled because he'd been thrown off Olympus as a baby? This god—if he was one—was straight-backed and strong.
'Huh. You don't look like defects. Go stand with the re-usables.' He pointed towards a little heap of less-broken bronze appliances.

'We're not machines,' Grover said.

'Don't be ridiculous. Everything here's a machine.'

Something about the jerky, robotic quality of his movements rang a bell in my head. 'You're not Hephaestus! You're an automaton!'

Hephaestus's automaton stopped what he was doing to look at us properly. 'That's Hephaeston to you! I'm his automated proxy.' His face twisted into a ferocious scowl. 'You ain't judging the quality of my animus, now? You got a problem with machines?'

'No!' I said quickly. 'It's just that we really need to find Hephaestus.'

'Well, he's busy. Wars need weapons, you know. That's why I'm up here. Gotta sort out the old scraps.'

'I thought everything here was supposed to be—well, junk!' Grover said.

'Yeah, the gods throw stuff away all the time.' Hephaeston reached back into the junk heap and flung a dented bronze discus onto his recycling pile. 'Nothing lasts forever. But everything can always be re-used.'

'We need to throw something out, too.' From my pocket, I drew out the Necklace of Harmonia. 'It's been around long enough.'

Hephaeston's eyes narrowed. 'That looks familiar.'

'If you're Hephaestus's proxy, can you break his curses?'

'That's up to him.' Hephaeston sighed and crossed his arms. 'I can't take you to him, but I can get him on speed dial.'

A little flap popped open at the top of his bald head. We watched in astonishment as out popped a headset with an antenna and mouthpiece. Hephaeston settled it over his ears and closed his top flap. The centre pocket of his smock flattened and elongated into a blank LCD screen. With the antenna sticking up above his head and the screen over his belly, he resembled a bizarre, muscular Tellytubby.

The screen flickered to life. A gnarled face appeared in it.

'What's the trouble?' Hephaestus growled, sounding strikingly like his automaton. Or I guess it was his automaton that sounded like him, since he'd animated Hephaeston. 'Not computers again? I told you, no more PC's. I only want the Mac OS's.'

'No, I trashed the PC's. It's a demigod and a satyr looking for you. Something about a cursed necklace.' Hephaeston motioned for me to hold the necklace up to the screen.

There was a long pause.

'Ah,' Hephaestus said at last.

'Lord Hephaestus,' I said, 'I know it caused you a lot of grief over the years. But it's hurt a lot of people now, people who didn't have anything to do with your w—I mean, Aphrodite, or Ares. And
the Titans are trying to use it in the war. Can you—could you break the curse? Please? I'll, um …' I floundered for an appropriate sacrifice. The only things left in my pockets were my faithful dagger and my invisibility cap.

It was a wrench, but I retrieved them. 'These are my most precious magical items,' I offered, swallowing hard.

Hephaestus's coal-black eyes seemed to be X-raying the objects through the screen. His face was so twisted and wrinkled, it made his expression impossible to read. Finally, he said gruffly, 'Keep your trinkets, girl.'

I wasn't sure whether to be relieved that he didn't want my knife and cap, or worried that I had nothing left to offer him. Or maybe insulted that he'd referred to my prize possessions as 'trinkets'. I stowed them back in my pocket and clasped the necklace tightly in both hands, biting my lower lip. Grover gave me a worried sideways glance.

'Lord Hephaestus, I could—' He pulled out his precious reed pipes.

'Grover, you can't!' I gasped.

'I won't take your gifts,' Hephaestus said. 'I have no use for them. Or I should say, you have more use for them than I.'

'Then you won't remove the curse?'

'I ask instead for a favour.'

'Name it!' Hephaestus raised his eyebrows. 'Eager, aren't you? Very well. My workshop lies beneath this junkyard. Orders are piling up from Olympus, and how Zeus expects me to keep up when Poseidon has a monopoly on Cyclops labour … now, if only I still had the Hekatonkheires … but that's neither here nor there. Point is, my slack tub empties too quickly, and I haven't got enough workers to refill it quickly.' The screen image shifted to a large stone basin, in which several swords and a shield lay cooling in water. 'So if you want a favour, you do me one. Build me something to keep the slack tub full … and I'll consider your request.'

The screen went black. Hephaeston tucked his headset and antenna back into his head flap.

'You heard the god,' he said. 'Plenty of scrap material here to start you off.' He waved us away and returned to his recycling.

'Build something,' Grover moaned. 'That sounds really hard! Couldn't he have asked us to, like, grow something? I could've made him a nice potted cactus for his workshop.'

'It'll be fine,' I said. 'I'm a daughter of Athena, remember? I can do this!' I searched in my backpack for my sketch pad. 'Okay.' I drew a crude outline of Hephaestus's stone basin. 'We need something to keep that filled. And it's under us, so if we can get water up here and connect it all the way down …'

I drew a pipe extending upwards from the slack tub.

Grover studied my sketch. 'A water catcher? It'll fill when it rains, and—'

He stopped. We looked at the bright, cloudless sky, and then at each other.

'We're in the desert,' I said slowly. 'It doesn't rain here.'
Grover slapped his rasta cap against his thigh. 'What are we going to do?'

If only Percy were here. Then again, I guess even the son of a sea god would have a hard time finding water in the middle of a desert.

Grover and I wandered around the junk piles, hoping to be inspired. I got the sense that someone was watching us as we sifted through the various inventions. Probably Hephaestus, wondering if we'd manage to complete the task after all. I bet he had spy cams all over the place.

After about an hour of this, Grover and I collapsed under the sparse shade of an acacia tree. By then, I didn't just want water for Hephaestus's slack tub. My mouth was uncomfortably dry. The desert heat made my throat scratchy.

I wrung the sweat from the hem of my t-shirt. If only I could send that to Hephaestus's workshop.

Grover reached up and plucked a few leaves off the tree. He handed some to me and sucked on his own. 'It's not much, but I'm parched. I'll take what we can get.'

The leaves were mostly dry and tasteless, but he was right. If you sucked hard enough, you could get the tiniest bit of moisture out of the leaves.

Then it hit me.

'Grover, the plants!' I sprang to my feet, staring around at the sparse vegetation that popped up in isolated patches among the junk hills. 'They have to get their water from somewhere!'

Grover dropped his leaves. 'Lord of the Wild, you're right! There must be a water table under here.'

'A what?'

'You know, with groundwater …'

'Oh, like underground reservoirs? We learned about those in geography.' California drew on the greatest source of groundwater of all the states. Unfortunately, we'd never discussed Arizona in class.

'Yeah, even deserts have them.' Grover ran over to the nearest junk pile and rummaged through it, searching for something. 'They're harder to find, of course, but if the plants are drawing on it, we just need to trace it.' He burrowed under a broken television set and emerged with a crooked, two-pronged metal wand—a dowsing rod.

'Then we just have to figure out how to redirect the water to Hephaestus's forge!' That was still a challenge, but at least we'd figured out where we were going to get the water.

I stared at the acacia tree. For some reason, my old teacher at St Catherine's, Mrs Carlson, popped into my head. Something about the pictures on her office walls. The Frank Lloyd Wright building … architecture imitating nature …

'Grover, how do plants draw water from the soil?'

'Seriously?' Grover paused in his dowsing. 'Through their roots.' He looked like he was biting back a duh!

'I know that. I mean how do root systems actually work? Like, they have to suck water up, right?'

'Oh. It's osmosis—you know, when stuff goes through little gaps 'cause there's less of it on one side than the other. That's how water gets into the roots. Then the stems have these really skinny tubes so
the leaves can suck it up, like when you drink your soda through a straw.' The dowsing rod jerked in his hand, but from excitement, rather than the presence of an underground water source. 'Are you gonna build something that does that?'

'Exactly,' I said, slamming my sketchbook shut. 'You find the water source. I'm going to build us a root system.'

+++ 

As I worked on our contraption, I felt again like there were eyes on me. It wasn't benign or curious, but a sinister prickle in the air that a hostile glare can sometimes produce. I was beginning to think it had nothing to do with Hephaestus.

Grover, who was sitting next to me, handing me tools and materials out of the little pile I had amassed, noticed my hands pause over the roots-inspired water pump I was constructing. 'What's wrong? Do you want the mesh instead?'

I shook my head. I'd already finished with the absorption tube, which I'd lined with a fine, silver mesh. Once we sent it down the spot where Grover's dowsing rod had twitched wildly, it should start sucking in water.

'Do you feel something strange?'

Grover leaned in close. 'I told you there was something weird. I felt it as soon as we got here.'

I took the wrench Grover handed to me and screwed a connecting pipe in place. It formed a U-shape at the top of the pump. 'Maybe it's more automatons. Hephaeston said there were others around.'

'He said everything here was a machine,' Grover corrected. He took my wrench and handed me a set of pliers. 'But we're here, and we aren't machines.' He cast a furtive look around and let out a little gasp. 'I saw something!'

'What?' I didn't dare look up from the bronze tube I was inserting into the U-pipe. It had to fit just right.

'It's … I don't know. It was really fast. But I definitely saw something with orange fur, and a tail.'

A shiver ran through me in spite of the desert heat. 'How many tails did you see?'

'Just one … why?'

'Are you sure?'

'Positive.'

'I think it's her.' I finished inserting the tube. The water pump was ready, but with Kitsune lurking nearby, I wasn't in the mood to celebrate. If she got to the Necklace of Harmonia before we could get Hephaestus to remove the curse …

'Who?' Grover looked really spooked now.

'The fox,' I whispered. 'The one who's been passing the curse on from person to person. But she has more than one tail. Unless …' My hand flew to my mouth. 'If she's down to a single tail, she'll be really desperate to get the necklace back!'

'I don't get it …'
Each one of her tails represents a life—she collected them from the people the necklace killed. But she's lost them and she's down to her last one.'

And if that was the case, maybe we could finally end this. The curse, and its bearer, too.

But we would have to be really careful. I knew how fast Kitsune could move. One miscalculation and all of this—our journey here, my painstaking effort over the water pump—it would all be for nothing.

I wrote out the plan for Grover. Sharp as Kitsune's hearing undoubtedly was, she couldn't eavesdrop on a non-existent conversation. Grover looked terrified with his role in my plan, but he nodded firmly and ate the evidence before heading off into the junk heaps.

I started drilling into the earth, sending the roots of my water pump underground.

It was several minutes before Grover returned, sprinting as fast as his goat legs would carry him. Kitsune bounded into view behind him, her single tail whipping back and forth. Grover let out a terrified whimper as Kitsune's teeth clamped down on his shirt. As soon as she jerked him back, he flung the necklace he was clutching against his chest towards me. I leapt up and caught it, holding it high so that the gold caught the sunlight.

'Mine!' Kitsune shifted into teacher-form without letting go of Grover. But she was no longer the neat, pencil-skirted Ms Seunis. Her flame-coloured hair, freed of its previous tight bun, was wild and frizzy. The long, manicured nails that replaced her claws shook as they clenched around the collar of Grover's shirt. Fire danced in her eyes, which darted between me and the necklace. Their crazed desperation told me I was right—she was down to her last tail, her final life. I could almost see the ghost of it still waving behind her human form.

This was her last chance.

'Curse you,' she snarled. 'I knew you were a troublemaker from day one!'

'So put me in detention,' I retorted. My eyes flickered to the pressure gauge on my water pump. There wasn't enough yet … I had to keep her talking while it built up.

'I have your friend the satyr.' Kitsune's nails dug sharply into Grover's neck, making him yelp. She shook him like an errant puppy. 'He doesn't need to die. You just need to hand over that necklace … and yourself along with it. You're already under its curse—your life is forfeit.'

'You're wrong. The curse doesn't bring death. It's about betrayal. It destroys families.'

Kitsune snorted. 'Who cares what the manner of death is? As long as I can strip the lives off you pathetic mortals. I've done plenty … Agave ... Jocasta ... Polyneices …'

There was a trend to the lives Kitsune had claimed. Agave had murdered her own son. Jocasta had committed incest. Polyneices had killed his brother. Their actions stood in contrast to the misfortunes that had befallen some of the other owners of the necklace. Harmonia had fallen afoul of her dad's temper. Izzy had lost her family. Zoë had died on her home ground.

And I'd been betrayed by someone I loved.

Kitsune was partly responsible for the way the curse had compounded over the years. But if I was right, she didn't have a lock on all the victims of the necklace.

'The necklace made their lives miserable, but you goaded them into betraying their families, didn't
you? That's how you had power over them. *That's* why you could take their lives. But only theirs. You weren't able to collect every life that the necklace ruined.' I thought of Zoë's spirit, breathed into the stars by Artemis herself. 'You didn't get Zoë Nightshade.'

'The cursed Hunter was under Artemis's protection! I was cheated!' Kitsune tossed her head. 'And so what if a few puny mortals escaped me? I got enough lives to keep me going for centuries!'

'But they're gone now. You're down to your last life. That's why you're here now. If you don't get this back——' I twirled the necklace on my index finger, 'the next person to kill you is going to send you back to Tartarus where you belong!'

The reddening of her face confirmed yet again that I was right.

'What does that matter, when you shall contribute my next life? I know that cursed half-blood pet of the Titan lord was protecting you. But he won't be paying attention now, not with Lord Kronos's plans for him. I'll just unravel that protection and your life will be mine—as it should have been from the start!'

I was so stunned, I nearly forgot about the plan. 'What—are you talking about *Luke*?'

She smirked. 'Wouldn't you like to know?'

'What do you mean, Luke was protecting me? He never knew about the necklace … did he?'

Her lips curled wickedly. 'Bring me the necklace and I'll tell you.'

'Annabeth!' Grover's eyes were fixed on the flashing pressure gauge on the water pump. My pipes were full. I forced myself to return to the plan.

'If you want it so much, take it!'

And I flung the necklace towards the acacia tree.

Kitsune dropped Grover and dove towards the flying necklace. Immediately, I twisted the knob at the base of my pump and aimed its nozzle at her. At the same time, Grover brought his reed pipes to his lips.

In the shade of the acacia, Kitsune took a moment to examine the necklace. Her head snapped up in outrage when she realised it was *not*, in fact, the Necklace of Harmonia, but the fake I'd picked up earlier, which I'd sent Grover to retrieve.

Then my water pump, filled and pressurised while I'd kept her talking, blasted its contents straight at her. The jet slammed her into the tree trunk. Roots emerged from the ground, growing in time to Grover's melody, and ensnared Kitsune. She tried to shift her shape, but the acacia roots held fast. She screamed, shaking her head wildly against the onslaught of water.

'How do you like being the one caught in a trap?' I advanced on her with my dagger. Her eyes narrowed when she saw it.

'Cursed blade,' she spat, but her eyes were wide and fearful at the sight of the celestial bronze.

I wanted to make her explain everything she had said about Luke. But Grover was almost going blue with the effort of playing continuously on his pipes.

We had one chance to kill the fox. It would be folly to waste it.
'It's going to stop you from cursing anyone else,' I agreed. And I plunged my dagger between the roots, into Kitsune's heart.

Kitsune gave a final scream of despair. She seemed to burn up from the top down, the flames of her hair consuming the rest of her body until all that was left was a pile of glowing ash and a single orange tail that crumbled into fine hairs.

Grover put down his pipes. The acacia roots retreated into the ground.

I stared into the ashes, wondering what Kitsune had meant about Luke's protection. Had he made some bargain with Kronos? Did Kronos even have the power to overturn a curse like this? Or had Luke somehow split its tragic bad luck between us? His fall from Atlas's mountain should have been fatal, just as the sky should have crushed me to death. Although I hadn't seen or even dreamt of Luke in months, the threads of Fate seemed to pull tight around us again. My dagger tingled in my fingers, as if it were trying to warn me that important had just transpired … but I had no clue what it was.

Grover touched my arm lightly. He had a funny expression on his face, as though he knew exactly what I was thinking about.

'Well,' said a deep voice, 'I guess that pump'll do.'

Hephaeston's head appeared over the crest of the nearest junk pile. He surveyed my water pump with appreciation. It had now drained to a light trickle.

'You'll break the curse, then? I mean, Hephaestus will?'

Hephaeston held his hand out in reply. I brought out the real Necklace of Harmonia and handed it over. The screen on his smock crackled to life.

'I'll take care of the necklace.' Hephaestus's voice was tired. 'But remember this: the curse of Harmonia wasn't laid down out of nowhere. It was seeded by choices and enabled by the actions of men. Our choices can hurt one another just as badly as a curse.'

It didn't seem fair to name the curse after Harmonia, who hadn't been the one to hurt Hephaestus with her actions. But I guess that was sort of the point. Innocent people got hurt by selfish, irresponsible decisions.

'What goes out into the world can never be taken back,' Hephaestus warned. 'Think about that the next time you have a choice to make.'

I was about to ask if Hephaestus knew anything about Luke. But the smock-screen image was already fading. The entire junkyard spun, like we'd been shoved into one of the broken washing machines. When it stopped, Grover and I were in the middle of the open desert. The only thing in sight was my Sopwith Camel.

'I guess that's it,' I said.

'Thank Pan,' Grover sighed.

'Thank you. Grover, you were amazing. I couldn't have done this without you.'

Grover blushed and patted his pipes. 'I've been practising.'

'Well, I'm really glad you were with me. And …' I touched the first bead on my camp necklace, the one from our first summer together. Our choices can hurt one another. 'You're still the bravest satyr I
know. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise, okay?’

We hugged each other tight. Then I climbed into the Camel and turned my plane towards home.

Chapter End Notes

I hope it’s become clear by now why I chose the title of this fic! The challenge with writing Annabeth’s story in this book was finding something to tie it all together—her family struggles, the Hunters’ offer, her increasing dilemma as she’s caught between Percy and Luke, her ‘kidnapping’ at winter break, her involvement with the Labyrinth … And the Necklace of Harmonia fit so well thematically, with its association with broken families, trials and misfortune, and tainted love. Not to mention a convenient 14-year-old character who could step in as the Hunter scout I needed.

By now the myth should be clear enough—this enchanted necklace was wrought by Hephaestus and gifted to his ‘daughter’ Harmonia, but cursed to bring misfortune to its owners. It conveniently follows the House of Thebes and a bunch of intriguing (and tragic) stories that come from there. Kitsune is entirely fictional, but her provenance was thanks to the realisation that the Teumessian Fox was a terror of Thebes as well. Initially I was going to draw upon that fox as a villain, but I struggled to make it fit. And then The Dark Prophecy came out and it seems RR has some other ideas for the Teumessian, so I decided to take a different route. And Kitty stepped up beautifully.
I Get A Surprise Visitor

Chapter Summary

Annabeth makes some decisions about her future … and receives a surprise guest at her house.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After spring break, the school year crawled towards its close. I was approaching the end of eighth grade and my last summer before high school. Janet stayed true to her promise to get me the best education possible. On top of the portfolio she’d made me submit to art school, she also insisted that I apply to seven of the best high schools in the area.

My first acceptance letter arrived a week before the start of summer vacation. I'd just gotten home from school and was taking in the mail. Among the assorted flyers and a stack of mail addressed to my dad was a large envelope with my name on it. Curious, I put down the rest of the letters and perched on the edge of the couch to tear it open.

Dear Miss Chase,

We are pleased to welcome you to the Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts …

I laboured through the typeset letter, which was accompanied by a welcome pack. The colourful brochures reminded me of the Hunters’ publicity materials, which I’d tossed out by now. There was more detailed information about the school curriculum … and its compulsory pre-sessional induction programme.

Which would take place over the summer.

The sky rumbled. Outside, dark clouds were gathering again in the north, threatening another stormy evening. The intermittent squalls had carried on all spring, a constant reminder of the war coming our way.

I ran a finger along the edge of my letter. The room seemed to tilt like I was staring down a precipice.

Two futures stretched out before me, a pair of tunnels in a maze. In one, I walked a straight path to the gates of a grand city I had designed—the product of my intensive education at a prestigious, specialised high school and college. In the other, I was dressed in full Greek battle armour, facing an army of monsters.

My mother was the goddess of war and wisdom. Why couldn't I have both? Why did there have to be a choice?

'This isn't the first difficult choice you'll encounter in your life, Annabeth.'

I jumped, spilling the brochures out of my lap. The fireplace crackled to life. Sitting cross-legged among the flames, her chin resting on her hands, was the eight-year-old goddess Hestia. She regarded me with dancing eyes, a faint smile beneath her rosy cheeks.
'I know,' I said, tucking my hair behind my ear. 'I have to go to camp.'

How could it even feel like a sacrifice? I loved camp. I could never choose anything over it. I'd told Janet as much when she'd suggested I try summer design school. I shouldn't even have applied for Ruth Asawa. It hadn't occurred to me that they'd have a summer programme. Obviously, I should have read the fine print.

But my eyes lingered on the glossy pictures of their state-of-the-art design labs. They had ten times the software St Catherine's or even my extracurricular evening classes provided.

Hestia pointed out the window. 'Look carefully.'

Fog was descending over the neighbourhood. In the swirling mist, I glimpsed the old visions that had once tempted me: my personal utopia, a city built to perfection, every flaw eliminated—by me.

You could do all of that, a little voice whispered. You could be the best architect in the world … if you don't fall in battle.

I saw the army of monsters gathered at the base of Mount Tam: legions of hellhounds, armoured giants, scaly dracaenae … and even more ancient and deadly beasts rising from Tartarus to join them. I saw them marching into camp, trampling over the grounds and razing the cabins to the ground.

It was only ever your temporary home anyway …

I would build it again, greater and more permanent. Perfect, this time.

A loud pop in the fireplace brought me out of my trance. Guilt washed over me when I realised what I had been contemplating. It wasn't the first time this vision had tugged at me. I should have been ready for it. I should have found it easier to resist its pull.

'Not so easy to walk away from,' Hestia commented. 'You've wanted to be an architect for a long time.'

'All my life,' I agreed.

'Why?' Hestia asked, but she didn't seem to be looking for an answer. She reached her hand out from the fire.

I took it. The moment our palms touched, the living room dissolved around me. I was standing behind a door, listening to my dad tell Janet, 'I tried to send her back, but Athena wouldn't take her.'

I was shivering inside a corrugated iron box, clutching a hammer for dear life as I waited for the monsters to find me.

I was clinging to Luke as the skies wept and an ancient pine sprouted from the spot where Thalia lay dying.

I was gripping the side of an empty lifeboat, blinking back tears as I searched for Percy amidst the wreckage of a sunken warship.

I was teetering at the edge of a cliff, watching Luke fall, and fall, and fall …

Hestia jerked me back to the present. My free hand was balled around the acceptance letter, crushing it in my fist. I remembered the moment when my ambition to design great buildings had crystallised.
—just after I'd taken on my first project, to reconstruct a burnt-down cabin at camp. Seeing my own design come to life, becoming a sturdy, enduring structure … that was when the dream had truly solidified. But it had grown from a spark in the heart of a girl who had only known temporary things. A girl who longed for something permanent in her life.

'Architecture isn't just about building things, you know,' Hestia said. She raised her other hand out of the fire.

My letter fluttered from my fingers as I took her hand, completing the circle between us. The other half of what Hestia had to show me swam before my eyes.

I watched my dad fly into battle above Mount Tam, shouting, 'Get away from my daughter!' Luke handed me a dagger and a promise: 'We're your family now.'

Percy wrapped me in his arms and an underwater bubble while I mourned the loss of my perfect, Siren-created world.

The letter Alpha fell from the Orobas's mouth, curled around the letters Pi and Lambda …

Hestia released me. 'Architecture is more than just temples and monuments. No architect can create something truly great without understanding what lies at the heart.'

I picked up the crumpled letter and smoothed it out. 'You think architectural school won't help me learn that?'

Hestia laughed. 'I'm sure it would. But there's always more than one way to design a structure.'

She waved her hands towards the window. The fog dissipated, withdrawing its temptations. There was only the tiniest, lingering hiss: You could do everything so much better, Annabeth … do you really want to die defending a lost cause?

'Power and grandeur are seductive,' Hestia said. 'You could be a fine architect in the mortal world. It might even be a straightforward path. The other road … well, it is twisted and full of potholes and blind corners. I don't know. The Fates are still knitting it into existence. But remember what I showed you, Annabeth. You've already built more than just monuments.'

Actions that go out into the world can't be taken back, Hephaestus had said. Ruth Asawa had an incredibly selective programme. If I declined them now, I wouldn't get another chance. Hestia was handing me a challenge. To take the uncertain path instead of one someone else had already laid down, and mould it into something even greater.

Something that would be mine.

It was then that I remembered: before my mother had come along, Hestia had been the goddess of architecture.

No architect can create something truly great without understanding what lies at the heart.

It was easy to tear something down and build a soul-less replica in its place. But the things that truly lasted, they carried with them the hopes, the hurts, the stories of humanity. If I wasn't ready to defend all of that, I would never be the architect I dreamed of being, even if I graduated from a dozen Ivy League programmes.

Hestia smiled, seeing my jaw tighten in acceptance of her challenge.
The doorbell rang, sounding a thousand miles away.

'You'd better answer that,' Hestia said lightly. Her hearth flickered. I guessed she would be gone by the time I came back.

I went to the front door. When I opened it, my school letter fell from my fingers once again. I stared at the person across the threshold, wondering if I'd stepped into another of Hestia's visions.

It didn't seem possible that he was here—tall and scarred, a streak of grey running through his sandy hair, the same look of wild-eyed desperation he'd had when I'd last seen him on Mount Tam.

But of course, I had always believed he was alive. I'd told Percy we would meet again. I just hadn't expected it to happen like this. Not here, at my own front door.

Later, I would remember this as a turning point, a crossroads, the moment when the Titan war had landed on my doorstep. But right now, my mind was blank. My stomach was a churn of emotions I couldn't even begin to identify.

The sky rumbled again. My heart pounded. My mouth, drier than the deserts of Arizona, struggled to find words.

Standing in front of me … was Luke.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts is in fact a prestigious art school with an architecture + design track.

Aaaaand that's a wrap! Yes, I know it's a cliffhanger ending. I've said before that I like to have stories within a series self-contained, but … I ended up taking a leaf out of RR's book after all with this one, because this story arc has closed and it's time to move into the next one. On the bright side, there won't be a long wait between this story and the next one. I intend to start posting in a fortnight (coincidentally on Percy's birthday, since that's two Saturdays from now!!) It will be called The Impossible Maze, so if you've enjoyed this story, do look out for that!

Thank you to all the lovely readers who have followed along with your generous comments and feedback on the chapters. Writing's a very solitary process, but sharing is kind of the social extension on it, and I do appreciate very much when readers take the time to drop a note, no matter how short. It's a joy to hear from you, even if it's just a 'hello, I'm reading!' So huge thanks to those of you who have done so!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!