# The Final Sacrifice

**by shiiki**

## Summary

The war on Olympus is heating up, and Annabeth Chase is right in the thick of it. Bad enough that she's gearing up for battle while wrestling with the emotional turmoil over two of her dearest friends that is turning her heart inside out. She doesn't need more mysterious glimpses about the Great Prophecy and how it connects to her own history. But in order to understand what lies in her future, Annabeth has to dig into the past. What she finds will shape her choices … and change the course of the final battle. An alternate PoV retelling of *The Last Olympian*. Part 5 of the *Daughter of Wisdom* series.

## Notes

This is the last fic in the DoW series. I almost can't believe it's come this far. Thank you to all the readers who have encouraged me to keeping going with my Annabeth stories. This one is for all of you.
I should have outrun the lions two townships ago.

The other monsters had given up once they realised that the giant wolf I was riding cross-country could outstrip them easily. Remy had outrun the *dracaenae* in Columbus and the *cynocephali* in Pittsburgh. The giant scorpions hadn't even noticed us speeding through Pennsylvania.

But these lions were persistent. And fast. There were two of them, a matched pair, female and male. They'd appeared just as we crossed the Delaware and chased us all the way across New Jersey. Either they had super stamina or super tracking abilities, because it was impossible to shake them off.

I guess being a demigod, I should be used to monsters that wouldn't quit. No half-blood (half-mortal, half-Greek god) lives to the age of sixteen (which I'd be next month) without running from a monster or ten. I'd dealt with monsters of all speeds and sizes since I was a kid. And ever since the Titan Kronos had taken over my friend Luke's body and established his home base on Mount Tamalpais (long story), San Francisco, where I went to school, had been crawling with monsters.

This spring, it had finally gotten to the stage where my mother, Athena, had personally told me I had to leave and make my way to Camp Half-Blood post-haste, before the situation got 'deadly'. My dad hadn't been too happy about that. He'd wanted to take me with him and my stepfamily to Europe this summer. At spring break, he'd packed up his precious biplanes and shipped them off to Belgium, where he'd secured a grant to stage a historical re-enactment of the Battle of Ypres at its original site.

'We'll make a real holiday of it,' he'd suggested. 'I could even take you to Greece while we're there. See the actual Parthenon.'

Tempting as the offer was, I'd told him I needed to stay. This summer might be the most important one of my life. Luke—Kronos—had promised to attack Camp Half-Blood this summer, once he rebuilt the monster army we'd decimated last year. And although I didn't tell my dad this, I still regarded Camp Half-Blood as a more permanent home than San Francisco. I could never abandon it.

For the past couple of weeks, I'd been travelling east with my friend Thalia and her band of immortal maidens. Thalia leads the Hunters of Artemis, a group of girls who run all over the country hunting monsters and never ageing (again, long story). Once upon a time, I'd considered joining them, but there was one snag to their lifestyle: no boys, ever.

It would have meant saying goodbye permanently to my best friend, Percy Jackson. Sure, he annoyed the Hades out of me half the time, and he could act like a real idiot, but somehow when we were apart, I always got this dull ache in my chest that refused to go away. I couldn't imagine never seeing him again.

So it wasn't that big a wrench to part ways with the Hunters in Indiana. Thalia wouldn't say what they were doing there—'Classified information, sorry!' I guessed it had something to do with the war.

Nevertheless, the Hunters had sent me off with plenty of supplies. Hunter Kowalski, their newest recruit, had made me a new sheath for my dagger. Phoebe, their best healer, had loaded me up on nectar and ambrosia. Their talent scout, Izzy, had loaned me the giant wolf I currently rode. Remy was the size of an SUV and ran twice as fast. But let me tell you, riding a giant wolf is nowhere as exciting or romantic as it sounds. I'd take a horse, or a pegasus, or even better, a Sopwith Camel, any day.
Remy's powerful haunches rose and fell unevenly, so I was constantly tossed about. The beads on my camp necklace bounced with every step—I bet I'd have a bad bruise on my collarbone by the time we arrived. Although he had a thick fur coat, it did little to soften the angular bones that jutted from his shoulder blades, which didn't exactly make a comfortable saddle.

It hadn't been so bad when we started out, loping along at a leisurely pace. But with a pair of snarling monsters on our tail, Remy was now going at top speed. It was all I could do to hang on. My fingers were already blistered from clinging to the coarse hairs of his coat.

The lions were closing in. They'd stayed close through Newark and Secaucus, and although I tried a detour up over the George Washington Bridge and through the confusing alleys of the Bronze, it hadn't succeeded in throwing them off. They reappeared when we hit the farm roads on Long Island, snapping and snarling at Remy's flanks as if they were the ones with canine ancestry.

Remy ploughed determinedly on, but I could tell he was tiring. He'd already carried me for hours. We were almost on the doorstep of Half-Blood Hill, where the magical barriers that protected camp would keep us safe, but it didn't look like we would make it. I needed a new plan.

'We're gonna have to split up,' I told Remy. 'Do you think you can shake them off on your own?'

Remy howled, which I hoped meant, *Sure, piece of cake!* I uncurled one hand from his coat hairs and dug in my backpack for my Yankees cap. This strategy I often used with Percy—my magic hat turned me invisible, allowing me to sneak up on monsters while he distracted them—though I wasn't sure if executing it with a giant wolf would work quite as well. Still, it was better than being hunted down like antelope on a savannah.

I jammed my cap on my head and eyed a nearby peach tree. It had a thin, low-hanging branch. Behind us, the snarling pants of the lions were getting louder. Any moment, they'd pounce, and invisible or not, if I were still on Remy's back, we'd both be cat chow. But if I timed it right ...

I let go of Remy's coat, relying on my knees to grip his back. The peach tree was just twenty yards away. Fifteen yards ... ten ... five ...

Two feet from the tree, I forced my complaining legs to launch me upwards.

There was a sharp *whoosh* of feline claws raking the air inches below me. My hands closed around the tree branch. I swung my legs upwards, curling away from the pouncing lioness.

Divested of his load, Remy put on a burst of speed. The lions charged after him. I clung to the branch, breathing hard. Hopefully, I'd bought myself some time before the lions realised Remy and I had separated. Once they did, they'd probably leave him alone and come in search of me. I was maybe five or six miles from the camp borders. All I had to do was—

**CRACK.**

The thin branch I was clutching snapped. With a yelp, I fell through the air ...

... and landed in an unexpectedly soft but unquestionably smelly pile of manure.

*Di immortales!* The heap of cow dung had materialised out of nowhere. Maybe I should have been grateful that it had broken my fall, but I knew where it had come from: her bovine majesty, Queen Hera and her invisible, heavenly cows. And she most certainly did not intend to be helpful. Ever since I'd rejected her interference in my quest last summer, Hera had sent me little 'gifts' all year. My first day of high school had been a riot when I'd shown up splattered with cow droppings. I'd since gotten better at watching where I stepped, but when you start the year as 'Dung Diva', that rep tends
to stick.

Now I was up to my waist in cow dung. My invisibility cap had survived the manure-landing, having flown off my head and landed five feet away, but my backpack was covered in the stuff. I grit my teeth and tried to breath shallowly.

Then I saw the lions.

The good news: Remy must have gotten away. The bad—the lions had circled back incredibly fast.

'Daughter of Athena.' The lioness's grin was predatory. 'I shall enjoy killing you.'

'You—you don't want to eat me,' I said quickly, gesturing to the manure. 'I'm slathered in cow poop. It's probably toxic to lions.'

'Bah,' said the lion, wrinkling his nose. 'She might be right ...'

The lioness cuffed him around the head. 'Don't be an idiot. It's nothing a bit of tabasco sauce won't mask. Tabasco sauce makes everything go down a treat. Besides, we are not just any lions. We are the leontes, the immortal children of Atalanta. Your death will be satisfying enough, half-blood, whether or not we feast on your flesh.'

'Atalanta?' I knew that name. Although men typically had a monopoly on the Greek hero trade, Atalanta was famed for being the one female who had kicked serious male butt. Our activities director, Chiron, even had a signed picture of her on his wall of fame. 'But she was a demigod. If you're her children, shouldn't you be on our side?'

'Pffft,' snarled the female leonte—or should she be a leontess? 'The gods dishonoured our parents. They turned them into lions for some insignificant transgression and parted them for eternity. We will avenge the insult to our parents on their children.'

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I remembered that part of the story now. The hero Hippomenes had won a death race version of The Bachelor by tossing three magical apples from Aphrodite onto the race track to slow Atalanta down. They'd gotten married after that, but he had forgotten to make the appropriate sacrifice of thanks to the goddess of love ... who really didn't like being ignored.

'Beside,' the leontess continued, 'the Titans will march on Olympus soon. We will tear down the gods and the demigods who side with them. The world will be ours—a better world, free of the tyranny of the gods.'

Her words sent a chill down my spine, and not just because she was about to kill me. She sounded a lot like Luke: so furious with the gods, especially his father, Hermes, for neglecting him. It was this anger that had led him to seek out Kronos and return the Titan to power.

But I couldn't worry about Luke now. The leontess was advancing slowly, as though considering which part of me to cut up first.

I scanned my surroundings desperately, looking for anything that might help. Only a couple of peaches rolled forlornly on the ground. I'd shaken them out of the tree when I'd fallen.

Peaches.

It was a crazy idea, but I picked up the nearest peach and flung it between the leontes. It hit the male in the nose. He went cross-eyed, batting at his whiskers as if waving off a pesky fly. Even the less distractible female seemed drawn against her will to inspect the deciduous fruit.
Encouraged, I flung the next peach further. Immediately, the leonte dove for it. The leontess's head swivelled around, although she quickly snapped back to me, looking annoyed at her inability to resist the diversion.

My next peach rolled down a grassy slope. The leonte charged after it. I inched towards my invisibility cap. If I could just grab it ...

'Fool!' the leontess roared. 'It is a trick! This is no enchanted apple of Aphrodite. It's not even an apple!' She tore her eyes away from the flying fruit. 'I will tear your head off!'

I abandoned stealth and made a leap for my cap. At the same time, the leontess pounced. I rolled away as she raked the air inches from my face. One razor-sharp claw snagged the leather cord of my camp necklace, scattering its beads across the ground. I bumped up against the trunk of the peach tree.

'No more tricks, daughter of Athena. You are mine!' I scrambled to my feet, heart hammering like a bass drum. There were no more peaches—if they would even work this time. I drew my dagger, steeling myself for her attack, but I knew I'd never fight her off one on one. Her powerful haunches tightened for another spring ...

Out of nowhere, a golden ball came flying between us. I had just enough time to register that this was a real golden apple before it glowed impossibly bright, like a goddess taking her true form. A hazy figure danced before my eyes—a lanky boy with dark hair, sea-green eyes, and a roguish smile.

'Percy?' My heart leapt at the sight of him.

But the image vanished. The glowing apple exploded in a shower of pink confetti.

'Leave my friend alone!' The voice was much too high-pitched to be Percy, and it came from high above.

'No apples!' wailed the leontess.

'That's right!' Silena Beauregard, head counsellor of the Aprodite cabin, swooped out of the air on a roan pegasus. 'Those are the real apples of Aphrodite.' In her left hand, she tossed another golden apple up and down.

'A daugther of Aphrodite!' The leontess sounded like she didn't know whether to attack or flee.

Silena flung the other apple. This one hit the leontess smack in the face. I had another glimpse of glowing Percy before it turned into a pink confetti bomb. The leontess howled and backed away.

'Annabeth, take cover!' Silena yelled. She urged her pegasus upwards.

Puzzled, I did as she said. For the second time that day, I immersed myself in cow poop—this time putting my head under. Gods of Olympus, I was going to need such a long shower after this. Maybe five.

'Charlie, go!'

Metal joints creaked, followed by a searing blast of heat from beyond my dung walls. I heard the leontess howl. There was a sizzling noise, like sausage frying on a pan.

When the heat faded, I climbed out of the dung heap. Charles Beckendorf, head counsellor for the
Hephaestus cabin, was riding atop a glowing bronze bull. His skin gleamed with a shining lather—Medea's SPF 50 sunscreen, no doubt. The bull was one of the fire-breathing automatons that had attacked camp a few years ago. Twenty feet away, a ring of charred grass encircled a pile of lion-shaped ashes.

'There's another leonte,' I said. 'A male. I distracted it with a peach, but—'

'On it.' Beckendorf urged his mechanical bull down the slope. We heard the panicked roar of the leonte as the flaming bull caught up to it.

Silena landed her pegasus a safe distance away from the cow dung. 'Are you okay?'

'Yeah, thanks.' I picked up my invisibility cap and my broken camp necklace. Silena helped me gather up the beads, along with the other two items I kept on the cord: a gold ring and a skeleton key. She looked like she was trying not to gag when she passed me the key, holding it between her fingers, reluctant to touch me.

'Sorry,' she said. 'It's just—'

I sighed. 'I know.' I tried to brush off the cow dung, but it was everywhere: my clothes, my hair ... even my backpack was coated in it. 'How did you find me?'

'We've been running patrols all day,' Silena explained. 'Helping campers get through. We already lost a bunch of satyrs trying to get their campers here. Grover's the only one who managed to make it in.'

'Is he okay?' I wasn't surprised that Grover was the only satyr to successfully shepherd his charge past the monsters. Eight years ago, he'd brought me in—along with Luke and Thalia—and five years after that, he'd found Percy. Last summer, he'd even scared off the entire Titan army when he released the power of the wild god Pan in one fearsome cry.

'He's fine,' Silena said. 'He brought in a new Apollo kid yesterday, but he had to head back out this morning. Said he was late for a protest rally.'

I smiled. That sounded just like Grover. He was nuts about conserving nature and protecting the wild.

'It's not just new campers, though. Even our regulars have been getting attacked. The monsters can't get past our boundaries, but they've worked out that if they attack any half-blood on their way to camp, they can catch us that way. Charlie's been working non-stop trying to build us a good automaton guard. He finally got one of the old bronze bulls working again.'

I raised an eyebrow. 'Charlie?' Nobody ever called Beckendorf by his given name, let alone a nickname.

Silena blushed and busied herself with her sling bag. She produced another apple from it. 'Apple?'

'Er, no thanks.'

'This one's just a normal golden delicious,' she promised. 'I used up both my magic ones.'

'I'll pass.'

She shrugged and took a bite, obviously trying to pretend her cheeks weren't bright pink.

'About those apples,' I said, 'I thought I saw something strange before they exploded.'
'Oh, that. They're enchanted to show you your heart's desire or something like that. It's Aphrodite, after all. Everything's about love with her.' Silena grinned. 'Why? What did you see?'

It was my turn to blush and look away. Fortunately, Remy chose that moment to return. At the sight of him, Silena yelped and forgot about teasing me.

'It's okay! He's friendly.' I reached out to hug Remy, but he took one sniff and reared back, like, *pee-you, you stink!* I sighed. 'Glad you lost the lions, boy. You going back to the Hunters now?'

Remy barked and wagged his tail.

'Okay. Thanks for the ride.'

He consented to a brief pat, then took off towards the west. He loped past Beckendorf, who was returning from torching the *leonte*. The bronze bull had reached its limit of docility. It bucked wildly under Beckendorf. Silena and I dove out of the way as they charged towards us, Beckendorf struggling to keep it under control. At last, he yanked a chip from the bull's neck. The robot screeched to a stop, tossing Beckendorf into the air ... and into the poop pile.

I winced in sympathy. Medea's sunscreen might be effective protection against Colchis bull fire, but it wouldn't ward off cow poop.

'Charlie!' Silena didn't seem to care about the smell when it was *him* covered in poop. She ran straight over.

Beckendorf grimaced and let Silena pull him out of the dung heap. 'I'm okay. Damn automatons.' He shook the control chip he'd pulled from the bull's head and slapped it against his thigh. 'I can't seem to get the programming right.'

'You did great!' Silena assured him. 'Didn't he?'

'Er, yeah,' I said. 'Thanks for jumping in.'

Beckendorf grunted and turned to inspect his now-stationary bull. 'We'll have to leave it here for now. I can't re-install the chip until I re-programme it.'

'We can come back for it,' Silena said. 'Come on. You two could definitely use a bath.'
I Get Some Unexpected Summer Reading

Chapter Summary

A long-forgotten book turns up in Annabeth's bag.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I didn't get my anticipated shower straight away. The water pipes at the shower block had been blown up.

It wasn't hard to figure out what had happened. The head counsellors for Ares and Apollo were having a shouting match right outside the toilets.

'It's my business when you terrorise one of my campers!' Michael Yew was two heads shorter than anyone else at camp, but the way he carried himself, you'd hardly notice. He got right up in Clarisse's face and jabbed his finger against her shoulder. This was a dangerous move, since Clarisse was known to pulverise people just for looking at her funny. Children of Ares were famous for their hair-trigger tempers.

Clarisse shoved him back. 'She's a newbie. It's a rite of passage, punk. If you hadn't interfered, it'd've been over in a flash, and the toilets would be fine!'

'Clarisse—' Chris Rodriguez tried to step in.

'Stay out of it!' Clarisse snarled. This was a bad sign, since she generally had a soft spot for Chris, having rescued him from the Labyrinth some time back. Chris grimaced and backed off. He knew better than to antagonise Clarisse further when she was in a mood.

Michael didn't seem to care. 'We're having enough trouble finding new recruits without you scaring them all away.'

Clarisse scoffed. 'Scaring them? If this makes them pee their pants, what are they gonna do when the Titan army comes marching in?'

I sighed. 'Clarisse did a swirlie again, didn't she?'

'Probably,' Silena said.

Beckendorf stuck his head into the nearest stall. 'It's not that bad. Surface pipe damage from a localised explosion. Should be a quick fix. Not like the time she tried to swirl Percy.'

The memory made me grin in spite of my annoyance. On Percy's first day at camp, Clarisse had attempted her hazing ritual ... only to have Percy turn the tables on her by exploding every pipe in the latrine and showering her (and me, incidentally) with dirty toilet water. Perks of being the son of Poseidon.

Beckendorf pulled a wrench from his pockets and started to fix the plumbing. 'Ten minutes,' he promised.
While he worked, Chris spotted us and came over. 'I don't know why she's in such a bad mood,' he said, shaking his head at Clarisse. She was now trying to grab Michael while he danced nimbly out of her reach.

'I'm gonna flush your head down the toilet next!' Clarisse screamed.

'Try it, and I'll curse your whole cabin! I've been practising some choice ones!' Chris shook his head. 'Since last night, she's been totally hacked off.'

'More hacked off than usual, you mean?' I said.

'And she just went after Kayla—that's the new kid—today. Michael stepped in. He's taking his head counsellor role really seriously, after—well.' Chris stared guiltily at his shoes.

I nodded. Michael had taken over as head of Apollo cabin after Lee Fletcher, their former counsellor, had died in battle last summer. Chris had been with the enemy before that battle, but he'd gone insane when they sent him into the Labyrinth to scout. It was only thanks to Clarisse that he'd recovered and returned to our side.

'He shot an explosive arrow and it must've hit a pipe, and ...' Chris jerked his head at the damage.

Although Beckendorf had the pipes working again within the promised ten minutes, it took several hours, three showers, and a soak in the bathtub in the Big House—camp headquarters—before I finally stopped smelling of cow poop. The worst was my hair. My ponytail had come undone during the fight and become so snarled, I thought I might have to cut it off. Luckily, Silena intervened.

'You can't cut your hair!' she exclaimed. 'It's gorgeous!'

We sat on the porch, Silena combing out my hair like I was five. I guess she must have had some Aphrodite magic, because she managed to detangle it. I thought 'gorgeous' was probably an overstatement (especially coming from someone whose luscious black hair never had a curl out of place) but I was glad I wouldn't need to go around with a shorn head. Troublesome as my hair could be, I kind of liked it when it behaved.

While Silena combed, I re-threaded my camp necklace onto a new leather cord. Along with the eight beads I had—one for each of my summers at camp—I also had my father's gold Harvard ring and a silver skeleton key that had been a birthday present from my mother, Athena. The key was really the size of my palm, but it shrank to the size of the other beads when I threaded it onto my necklace. Instead of a round disc, an owl's head stared at me from above the shaft, as if to remind me to use it wisely. Athena had said it would unlock anything I needed—doors, codes, secrets ... but it would only work once.

'When the right time comes, you will know,' she'd promised.

I still hadn't figured out what I should use it on. The admonition that I would only get one use out of it was kind of daunting. What if I used it, and then a worse puzzle came along and I no longer had it?

'I wish you'd let me give you a makeover.' Silena sighed, brushing out the last section of my hair. I couldn't help thinking of my last real makeover, two years ago on the sorceress Circe's island. But it wasn't my made-over mirror reflection that my mind's eye produced. It was Percy, staring at me as though I'd stepped off the cover of a fashion magazine.

These sudden fantasies about my best friend had become annoyingly frequent over the past year. They weren't precisely unwelcome—more frustrating, because I wasn't entirely certain what Percy
thought about me. There had been a moment last year, when I'd thought maybe we might have something between us ... but things had gotten way complicated after that.

I wondered briefly if Athena's key could unlock the mystery of what Percy really felt about me (though I had no idea how that could possibly work), but I had a feeling this wasn't what my mom had intended it for.

'Why?'

I started at the sound of Percy's voice. He stood at the bottom of the steps with his camp duffel slung over one shoulder, looking curiously at us.

Heat flooded my cheeks. I sprang to my feet, knocking the brush out of Silena's hand.

'Hi Percy. Why what?' Silena's eyes were dancing, as if she already knew the answer.

'Why would Annabeth need a makeover?' Percy dumped his duffel at his feet and raked his fingers through his hair, the way he did whenever he was self-conscious. A sheen of sweat glistened over his forehead, like he'd run up the hill into camp, but that just made him look better. Percy had always been good-looking (not that I'd ever tell him that), but he was starting to look like a Renaissance artist had carved him in resemblance to his handsome godly father. In the months since I'd last seen him, he'd grown a couple of inches and filled out in the chest. His face was slightly thinner, making his features stand out. Even the grey streak in his hair—that matched one in my own—gave him an air of distinction.

He frowned at me. Oh gods, I was staring. I looked away quickly.

'I mean,' he said, twisting his fingers together, 'if you want one, sure. But you, uh, look okay.'

Silena giggled behind her hands. 'You guys are so cute!'

Percy picked up his duffel, carefully not looking at either of us. The tips of his ears turned as red as my face felt. 'I should, uh, go see my cabin.'

We walked across the strawberry fields to the central green. It was the typical first day of summer. Satyrs tended the plants with their woodland magic, helped by Dionysus's son Pollux. A mixed group of Hermes and Apollo kids were having a volleyball match. Beckendorf had Percy's hellhound, Mrs O'Leary, out on a leash for her walk. (She was a gift from the late inventor, Daedalus. I got his laptop; Percy got the dog. I definitely felt I'd gotten the better deal.)

Chris had finally gotten Clarisse to calm down, or at least pried her away from her argument. He was talking to her—or maybe at her—as she hammered a punching bag that swung from one of the oak trees. Clarisse kept shooting malevolent glares at Michael and the new kid, Kayla, who were deep in conversation near the art and crafts cabin. I guess it was a good sign that Clarisse wasn't actively attempting to pulverise them for now.

Percy followed my gaze. 'What's that about?'

I explained about the toilet fight. Percy winced. 'Sounds just like Clarisse.'

'Michael's right, though. Camp recruitment is suffering.' I waved my hands at the summer scene. Kids ran around everywhere, but it struck me just how few of us there were. A couple years back, we'd had over a hundred campers. Now, there couldn't have been more than fifty. 'We shouldn't be attacking each other, even if it's just a hazing ritual.'
'I don't think that was the real reason Clarisse went after Kayla,' Silena said. 'She was flirting with Chris at the campfire last night, right before she got claimed.'

I glanced at the new girl. 'She can't be more than eleven!'

'An eleven-year-old can't have a crush?'

I winced and conceded the point. I'd had some pretty embarrassing crushes myself at that age—including a big one on Luke, before he'd turned traitor and joined the Titans. It was a while since I'd thought of Luke that way, but I remembered getting quite jealous when Silena had asked him to fireworks night at the time. Judging from the strangled noise Percy made, a cross between a laugh and a cough, he remembered my dumb old crush, too.

'No wonder Clarisse wanted to pound her,' I said. 'Did Chris ...?'

'I don't think he even noticed. Boys.' Silena gave me a knowing look.

'Hey! We're not all ... uh, whatever you're trying to say.'

Silena shook her head at him. ''You look okay?'' Seriously, you're all clueless.'

'Wait, what?' Percy looked confused.

'Never mind, Seaweed Brain.' I changed the subject quickly. 'So I take it they aren't actually together yet.'

'Not officially,' Silena said. 'I'm sure Clarisse wants Chris to ask her out, but she's too proud to admit it.'

We reached the cabins, which were arranged in the shape of a Greek Omega around the camp's central hearth. The hearth-tending goddess, Hestia, didn't seem to be in residence today. The flames flickered merrily on their own.

Silena left us at cabin ten. 'I'm doing inspection tomorrow morning,' she warned. 'Don't forget to get your bag cleaned, Annabeth.'

'What's wrong with your bag?' Percy asked.

I'd left it lying on the porch of my cabin. It shouldn't have been a big deal to tell Percy what had happened, but suddenly, I really didn't want him to imagine me covered in poop.

'Monsters,' I said, with a vague wave of my hand. 'You know, on the way in. Did you run into any?'

Percy shrugged. 'Nah, I got here okay. There were a couple hanging out on the main road, but Rachel spotted them before they could see us, so we just took a detour.'

'Rachel?' If I were a wolf, my hackles would have popped right up. Most mortals had no idea about the mythological stuff that went on under their noses, but Percy's schoolmate Rachel Dare was a special case. She could see through the magical Mist that concealed our world even better than most half-bloods. Last year, we'd had to recruit her to guide us through Daedalus's Labyrinth. I hated to admit it, but I wouldn't have been able to complete my quest without her help. I'd kind of hoped that would be the end of it, though.

Percy sensed the warning in my tone. 'It wasn't anything—I mean, she just came along for the ride.'

'She's a mortal. She can't come to camp.'
'I know. But she's really interested in camp and all. I didn't think it'd matter if she knew where it was. I mean, my mom knows. And she did help us avoid monsters on the way here.'

The warm summer day seemed to get ten degrees colder. I should have been glad Rachel had helped Percy skip the monster traps on his ride to camp, but I couldn't squash the resentment that swelled in my gut. Keeping Percy out of trouble was supposed to be my job.

'Whatever,' I said.

'Annabeth ...'

I stepped onto my cabin porch. 'I have to wash my bag.'

Percy made a frustrated noise in the back of his throat. I didn't look at him. Soon, I heard his footsteps disappear down the green.

My bag was still lying where I'd left it earlier. Leaving something out in the open when a cabin full of light-fingered Hermes kids were about wasn't the wisest idea, but either the cow poop stains were a big enough deterrent, or my last threat to castrate Travis Stoll with my dagger if he touched my stuff had been effective.

I emptied the bag of all its contents, starting with my most valuable possession: the silver laptop with Daedalus's blue Delta logo. It was designed like a MacBook Air, but this computer was way more advanced than anything Apple could ever come up with. The brilliant inventor had created it himself. Inside, it held two thousand years' worth of genius. He'd given it to me before he died, and I was still working my way through the sheer plethora of ideas within. He had design notes on just about every city in the country (maybe even in the world), from urban planning to architectural layouts to defence strategies—and he'd made them work for him, too. I'd last been perusing his plan of Philadelphia, where he'd literally created a personal home alarm system out of a national monument.

Fortunately, Daedalus's laptop was safe inside its protective cover. I set it aside and dug out the rest of my belongings: a few spare clothes, my invisibility hat, the emergency stash of golden drachmas, ambrosia, and nectar that the Hunters had given me, and a prism and flashlight for sending Iris messages. I'd learnt the hard way to carry only the basics when travelling long distances. Anything else I needed at camp was kept permanently in a trunk under my bunk.

Once my bag was empty, I gave it a shake to dislodge the poop, which was now caked into little clumps. The bag made a surprisingly solid thump against the porch rail. Puzzled, I ran my hand along its spine. There was something hard and flat wedged in the back panel.

Inside, a seam had opened up halfway down the bag. I used my knife to cut away the rest of the fabric panel. Lodged at the bottom was a green leather-bound diary.

It took me a while to remember how I'd acquired the book. Two years ago, when Thalia had joined the Hunters, she'd left the diary in my possession. Thalia had found it in a cave in Charleston—the place she'd first met Luke. She'd thought he'd left it to her as a message.

I'd never read it. Maybe I'd meant to, but shortly after receiving it, I'd gotten caught up in researching the Labyrinth and flying across the country to live with my dad. The diary must have gotten wedged in my bag's hidden panel and gone unnoticed all this time.

The book fell open to a page near the end. The paper was old and yellowed, and some of the pages were stuck together with ancient globs of candle wax. There were a few lines on the left page, scrawled in large messy letters that overlapped one another and ran haphazardly across the ruled
lines, as if they'd been written on an uneven surface. Between my dyslexia, the awful handwriting, and the misspelling of half the words, it took me a while to decipher what it said.

—like my dad. It's my job to take care of them. I'm gonna hunt down every monster I can find. That's what the gods should have done for us.

I tried to turn to the previous page, but the old wax had glued several of the preceding pages together. The right page was blank, but the reverse side bore the faint imprint of letters. Those pages were stuck together, too.

Had Luke written this? It was hard to imagine him keeping a diary. I'd certainly never seen him at it, whether during our travels together or here at camp. Like the rest of us demigods, with our brains hard-wired for reading ancient Greek, Luke was dyslexic. We didn't write anything if we could help it. What could have compelled him to write down his thoughts?

I flipped to the cover. On the inset, someone had written in all-caps, *PROPERTY OF HALCYON GREEN*. Under that, they'd underlined the words: *do not open, or I will bestow a deadly curse on you. I can do it, too. I'm a son of Apollo.*

I slammed the book shut, cursing my own stupidity. Why hadn't I considered that the book might be a trap?

The smart thing to do would be to get rid of it right away, before it could hurt me or anyone else.

But it had come from Thalia. From Luke.

Even after he had betrayed us and orchestrated the Titans' rise, even going so far as to host Kronos in his own body, I couldn't kill the seed of hope inside me: what if Luke could still be redeemed? For some reason, the diary felt like the key to finding the real Luke, buried under Kronos's manipulations. If I could only figure out the secrets it held.

Something our camp director, Mr D—otherwise known as the god Dionysus—had said to me last year stirred in my head: '*If I were you, I wouldn't go in without a string. Otherwise you could lose yourself in the process.*'

Did I dare to delve into Luke's past? Was this journal even *about* Luke's history?

Maybe I should start with this supposed curse. I'd dealt with cursed objects before. Last year, I'd been saddled with the Necklace of Harmonia, an enchanted wedding gift that had brought misfortune upon generations of owners. It had gotten a number of people killed, including Thalia's predecessor, Zoë Nightshade. But I'd eventually managed to track the curse to its source and break it.

This book didn't have the malicious aura that had surrounded the Necklace of Harmonia. I couldn't even be sure that this demigod had really cursed it, or if he was just bluffing, the way Michael had threatened Clarisse (at least, I *thought* Michael was bluffing). Something about 'Halcyon Green' was familiar as well, although I was pretty sure I didn't know anyone by that name.

The best place to start was probably Apollo cabin. Michael was still off with Kayla, but Will Solace, his second-in-command and our resident healer, was sitting in the middle of a stack of white cloths on his bunk, folding bandages for an emergency first-aid kit. He looked up when I stuck my head in.

'Hi Annabeth. What's up?'

'I was wondering if I could ask you about Apollo's powers.' I squinted around the golden interior (seriously, how did the Apollo kids get any sleep with these too-bright walls?) No one else was in
the cabin, which meant I couldn't just waltz in. There was a strict rule against non-sibling campers of
the opposite sex being in cabins alone.

Will scratched his head. 'Uh, sure,' he said. He glanced at this stack of unrolled bandages. 'I guess
this can wait.'

'I'll help you with them after,' I promised. 'Can we go somewhere and talk?'

Will glanced uneasily out of his window, towards the end of the row of male god cabins. 'This
doesn't have anything to do with a, um, fight with Percy, does it?'

'No! And what does Percy have to do with anything?'

Will held up his hands. 'Nothing. I just don't want him to think—you know what, never mind. Let's
go to the infirmary. Help me carry the bandages, will you?'

We carted the first-aid kits over to the Big House, where Will piled them on an empty bed.

'Okay,' he said, 'what did you want to know about Apollo?'

'Well, there's this book.' I held up the diary. 'It says a son of Apollo cursed it. Does that actually
work? Like, you guys can do some magic and stuff, right?'

Will considered the diary. 'It's possible. Apollo has such a diverse portfolio—almost as large as
Hermes—that none of us really have the exact same powers. Sure, we're usually above average in all
his basic domains ... archery, healing, music ... but we usually get one specialty.'

'Like you and healing.' Will had been the best healer at camp since he was ten. He tried to look
modest, but we both knew it was true.

'Yeah, and Austin's a prodigy with the sax, and Michael's a whiz at rapper rhymes.'

'He threatened to curse Clarisse just now.'

Will laughed. 'He probably could. But it wouldn't be that serious—maybe she'd be speaking in verse
for a couple of days or so. That's the extent of our magic. Little things that mostly wear off pretty
quick. If you got that book within the last week, I'd worry, but if you've had it for longer, it's
probably harmless by now. Magic takes energy to pull off. Like my healing—small cuts and scrapes
are easy to patch up, but the big stuff, like neutralising poison, say, that's going to really tire me out.
And if I tried to heal someone on the point of death, it could kill me.'

'So the book's probably safe?'

'Well, there are circumstances where it's dangerous to mess with children of Apollo,' Will said.
'Theoretically, if we had our dad's favour, we could get him to avenge our enemies. Legend has it
that Apollo orchestrated Achilles's death in the Trojan War because he killed his son, Troilus.'

He paused to let the enormity of this sink in. As far as Greek heroes went, Achilles was probably
second only to Heracles in terms of fame. Everyone knew the story: he'd been dipped in the River
Styx as a child, gaining him invincibility from harm except in the one weak spot where his mother
had anchored him during that poisonous bath. Plotting to do away with someone that protected
couldn't have been easy. For a god to go to that much effort, he must have been really pissed off.

'But that was two thousand years ago. These days, Apollo hardly even says hi to us, never mind
going to war over something as trivial as peeking in someone's diary.' Will held out his hand for the
book. 'I don't sense anything harmful. I can usually tell if something's dangerous, and this feels normal.'

I showed him the front cover, with Halcyon Green's warning. 'Do you know who he is?'

Will shook his head. 'Never heard of him.' He furrowed his eyebrows, possibly wondering why I wanted to peruse some unknown demigod's private diary, but he didn't pry. 'But to answer your question—I think the book's probably safe.'

'Thanks.' I helped Will outfit the rest of his first-aid kits before returning to my cabin to crack open the diary again.

The first entry was just as messy as the final page, but the handwriting seemed different:

This is hell. I can't believe he did this to me. My voice, my freedom ...

I'm going to die here. I can't see any other end. Then again, I've never been able to see my own future.

Oh Cath. If only you hadn't got on that plane.

There was a break in the writing, and then:

Oh gods, it happened again. The first time, I thought it was just bad luck, demigods running into crap like I have, but now ...

Something's drawing them here.

'Your voice will only lead people to their deaths,' Apollo said. What if that's part of this curse as well?

It went on like this for several pages, with disjointed paragraphs that bemoaned events I couldn't make sense of. None of this sounded like anything Luke had ever done.

I thumbed to a spot nearer to the end, hoping a different entry might shed more light. Here, the writing was again different. It was similar in style to the opening page, but small and cramped, which was murder on my dyslexic eyes. The letters were squeezed neatly into two rows per line, as though the writer had worried about running out of space.

... tried to help them, but it was the same. It's always the same. The bars rise at sunset, and the locusts always win.

Puzzled, I squinted at the unlikely word. At last, I decided that it read *leucrota*. That was still an unfamiliar term, but I had the vague idea that it was some sort of monster.

At least this kid had plenty of provisions. It will keep me going for longer, which means more time before I have to lure another kid to their death.

This was even more confusing. None of this tallied with what I knew of Luke and Thalia's life before I'd met them. Like me, they'd both run away, Luke when he was nine, Thalia at ten. They'd met in a dragon's cave in Charleston and teamed up for two years before they found me. Neither had ever talked about *leucrota* or luring other kids to their death.

Then I noticed the date printed at the top of the page: November 3, 1980. Years before any of us had even been born.
That settled it. This diary couldn't be Luke's after all. He must have inherited it, or stolen it. But why? And why had he passed it on?

Gritting my teeth, I went back to the beginning. This was worse than summer reading homework, where I could at least flip to the end of the book and work out the plot before working my way through the actual story—starting with an overall strategy in my head before checking out the tactics, in a way. This diary was impossible—the beginning and end didn't seem to connect at all. The only way I was going to work out how it had made its way to Luke, and then Thalia, was to slog through it from beginning to end.

The disconnected entries went on for at least ten pages before I finally arrived at the first dated entry: 

I think that's the date, anyway. Gods, it's been twenty years. I need to organise my thoughts. I'm going crazy stewing in them. And damn Apollo if I'm going to sit with those monsters just to talk it out to myself. Maybe if I write out the whole story, I can make sense of my whole miserable life.

I will do my best to record it as accurately as possible. Trapped here for two decades, stewing in my own thoughts, the memories are suddenly clearer than they've ever been.

I guess I should start with Cath.

Finally, I was getting somewhere. But at that moment, a loud gong rang out—the gong for dinner. Cursing, I folded down the top of my page to mark my spot. I guess it didn't matter. It probably wasn't urgent for me to get the bottom of the mysterious Halcyon Green's story. It was even possible that it wouldn't have anything to do with Luke in the end. I put the diary away and went to lead my siblings to the dining pavilion.

Chapter End Notes

The story about the Necklace of Harmonia references events from my previous fic, The Necklace of Harmonia, and the bits about it killing Zoë and others may not make sense if you haven't read it. The diary did indeed show up then, though I'm not sure if anyone remembers. (But if you didn't, don't worry—Annabeth forgot about it, too!)

I'd like to say a big thank you to all of you who have been following this series, and have turned out to finish it off with me. I'm very grateful for all the lovely comments you've been leaving me just on this opening chapter—I try to reply to everyone, even if it comes a little late; sorry about that. I just filed the paperwork to submit my thesis (which means I now have a hard deadline) so I'm really busy in the week!

But a general shout-out here, to start on the right note of gratitude, anyway: NowGodsStandUpForBastards, SpyderValkyrie, Emmli, teasockschocolate, thegoddessinzerogravity, Moviebookfan14, iliveinabookshelf, GreekGeek6, JackiSax, and Abxo—thank you guys. Every comment is a huge encouragement to keep going with this.
If I had a drachma for every nightmare I'd had as a demigod, I'd be richer than King Midas. Like monsters, the dreams were something I couldn't escape. Regular mortals have nightmares about turning up at school in their underwear. Demigods get those plus a bonus helping of death, doom, and evil Titans plotting to destroy the world.

As far as demigod dreams went, this one started off relatively tame. I found myself on a cliff overlooking the sea. The waters were glassy green, without a single ripple in sight. I could have been standing above an emerald mirror, stretching all the way out to the horizon. Docked at the harbour was a full fleet of Greek triremes, all outfitted for war. Each one could carry at least a hundred men, horses and weapons included.

In the valley below, an army gathered. Their shouts and catcalls echoed through the hills as they rough-housed. Minor scuffles broke out among different groups, from name-calling to little fights. It reminded me of an overcrowded school yard full of rowdy kids with too much pent-up energy.

Not far from me, two men stood at the edge of the cliff, one in Greek armour, the other in white priest's robes. The warrior had a bronze shield strapped to his broad, muscular back, and a ten-foot spear in one hand. Battle scars criss-crossed cruelly across his cheeks. Though he appeared to still be in his youth, he held himself with the bearing of a seasoned commander. He had handsome, chiselled features typical of ancient Greek kings. His eyes, slanted like a nymph's and pale as the quiet sea before us, held a touch of careless arrogance. They narrowed in consternation as he surveyed the army in the valley.

'The men are restless,' he said. 'Our ships have been held in port for weeks. All this effort, all the favours Agamemnon called in to recapture his brother's wife, and here we are at Aulis, waiting like fools.'

'It is uncommonly still,' agreed the priest. 'If the wind does not blow, your attack on Troy will never succeed. This gathering will have been for nought.'

'What is your prophecy, then, Calchas? You are the Oracle.'

Calchas lifted his eyes to the clear, cloudless skies. 'The gods withhold the wind. This can be the only explanation.'

'Are we cursed, then?'

'Perhaps. But there is always a way to lift the curse, to appease the gods and change our fate. It requires sacrifice.' He glanced behind him. There was a pure white altar at the top of the hill. In front of it lay a smooth slab of marble. Dark, reddish streaks ran down it. I tried not to think about what
had caused them.

'An animal, then,' said the warrior. 'A bull, perhaps, dedicated to the master of the seas. Or to my
great-grandsire, the lord of the gods himself.'

'No,' Calchas said grimly. 'If you wish this expedition to be a success, the sacrifice must be more
substantial.'

In the ensuing pause, the red streaks on the marble slab seemed to glow. 'You mean a mortal, don't
you?'

Calchas raised his eyebrows. 'Squeamish, Achilles?'

Achilles stabbed his spear into the earth, where it stood, quivering. 'I am a warrior. It is not
bloodshed I oppose, but the unnecessary letting of blood. The sacrifice of an innocent is abhorrent.'

'Great victory requires great sacrifice.' Calchas closed his eyes and raised his palms, face up, as
though receiving a divine message. 'The gods call for our great commander to sacrifice his most dear
—the fairest creature of his kingdom.'

The blood drained from Achilles's face. 'You are talking about Agamemnon's daughter. My
betrothed.'

'It is the only way.'

Achilles yanked his spear from the ground. 'You lie,' he said flatly.

Calchas didn't even blink. 'Am I the Oracle, or you?'

'Agamemnon will never agree to it.'

'We shall see.'

Achilles's grip tightened around his spear shaft. His expression was so dark, I thought he might run
the priest through with his weapon any moment now. 'Am I to sacrifice my betrothed in order to
reclaim another man's wife?'

'We did not start this war,' Calchas said. 'Remember, the Trojans stole Helen. Sometimes, to set
things right, a life is required.'

At these words, the softest hiss of wind blew over the cliff, just enough to stir the smallest tufts of
grass. It travelled through the valley, making the gathered army's heads lift in hope. But it was gone
almost as soon as it was raised. And the sea stayed quietly, eerily, calm.

The scene shifted. The glassy sea rippled, becoming a scrying pool. The cliff and valley vanished,
replaced by the softly glowing walls of a rock cave. The stone was embedded with gems, or maybe it
was made up of precious rock, crystal or quartz or something. I thought at first the light was
emanating from the rock, but then I realised the walls were only reflecting the glow that came from a
woman sitting in the middle of the cave, looking into the scrying pool.

She was dressed like a gypsy, with numerous scarves wrapped around her head and gauzy shawls
draped over her shoulders. A thin blanket covered her lap, embroidered with the moon and stars.
Large golden hoops dangled from her ears, shimmering in the light that radiated off her skin.

'Ah, brother ...' Her voice was hoarse and croaky. She addressed a tall, muscular figure in the
shadows. 'It has been a while.'

'Indeed, Phoebe.' The man stepped into the light, and I gasped. It was Luke, pale and sandy-haired, the old dragon-claw scar running down his right cheek. But his eyes ... before, they had been the clear blue of a sunny sky. Now, they were a molten gold that reflected the light from Phoebe's skin. And strapped to his back was a long shaft with a wicked, curved blade protruding from the business end—a reaper's scythe.

Phoebe stirred the waters of her scrying pool with one shining finger. 'I believe my husband Koios has already joined you,' she said. 'Surely you have no need of a retired psychic?'

'I could restore your Oracle to you.' His voice was like a blast of cold air. This wasn't the Luke I knew. It was Kronos, lord of the Titans and our most dangerous enemy, residing in the body of the boy who had been my oldest friend. 'We would wrest her from your insufferable grandson and return her power to you.'

Phoebe laughed. 'In her current state? I'd get better mileage with one of the other ancient Oracles.'

Kronos screwed up his face—Luke's face—in confusion. The look of it, the same expression I'd seen so many times on Luke himself, made me want to cry. 'What do you mean?'

'Oh, the Oracle of Delphi was cursed a long time ago,' Phoebe said, with an airy wave of her hand. 'Her spirit has been grounded for decades.'

'Then her prophecies ...' Kronos's voice dropped to a whisper. 'Do they not hold?'

'Of course they do. A prophecy is a prophecy. You should know that it is futile to run from one. As you found out yourself, when you tried to eat your children.' The hint of a smile played around Phoebe's mouth.

Kronos grimaced and put a hand to Luke's stomach. As the myth went, he'd swallowed his children, the original Olympians, while trying to escape a prophecy that indicated they'd overthrow him one day. It was so weird to see him making the same face Luke used to when he got indigestion.

'This is different,' Kronos said. 'The prophecy speaks of the destruction of Olympus. What have I got to lose?'

'Hmm.' Phoebe raised her hand over the scrying pool. The image of a girl rose above the surface. She was quite pretty, with short black hair cut in an old-fashioned bob. Green mist swirled around her as she spoke, reciting a set of lines I recognised immediately:

'A half-blood of the eldest gods ...'

I'd only ever heard the Great Prophecy—or any prophecy, really—spouted by the zombie Oracle who lived in the attic above the Big House. It was surreal, watching this lovely young maiden issue the familiar lines. I'd never thought much about it before, but I guess the mummified Oracle must have been a living person once. Was this her, as she'd been before her death?

The image of the live Oracle sank back into the depths of the pool. Phoebe repeated the final line of the prophecy: 'Olympus to preserve or raze.' Her eyebrows arched towards her scarf-bedecked forehead, punctuating the line with clear importance.

'I have learned from my previous mistakes,' Kronos said. 'I do not seek to thwart the prophecy, but to control its direction. My pieces are in place.' He reached for the scythe and ran his fingers over its black blade. 'My blade will reap Percy Jackson's soul and destroy Olympus.'

'If you are so sure, why have you come to me?'
Kronos's hands faltered. He crossed his arms over Luke's chest. 'Because I have been thwarted before. Two years ago, I thought it was the right time ...'

He closed his eyes. I knew which incident he was recalling. Two years ago, Kronos had orchestrated Thalia's return to life and tried to convert her to his cause. As a daughter of Zeus on the verge of her sixteenth birthday, she could have fulfilled the prophecy. But she had chosen to join the Hunters of Artemis, forever immortalised at the age of fifteen, and taken herself handily out of Kronos's reach.

'I wish to be sure,' Kronos continued. 'You owned the Oracle before. If anyone could interpret this prophecy, it would be you.'

Phoebe sighed and twirled the end of her scarf around her fingers. 'This prophecy is like a curse. It gathers power over time. To understand it, you need to understand its history.'


'I sense ...' Phoebe leaned forward, as though catching a scent. 'The body you possess knows something.'

Kronos drew back. 'This body? It is but a host. A stepping stone to my ultimate goal.'

'Then you know all its secrets?'

Kronos's expression darkened. Luke's eyes turned inwards. My breath caught as I watched them flicker. Was it just a trick of the light, or did they actually shift from gold to blue for a moment?

'There was ... something. But I can't retrieve the memory. It was ... the girl. It has to do with the girl.' His face settled back into Kronos's dark, angry expression.

Phoebe squinted into the pool. A new face appeared in it. At first I thought it was Kronos's reflection, but Luke's face in the pool was unscarred, full of the innocence of youth. I swallowed painfully.

Then two more figures appeared—Thalia and me. She knelt behind me, trying clumsily to braid my hair while I gave the Luke in the pool a gap-toothed grin. It was a scene from our time on the run, before we'd come to camp. The memory made my chest constrict.

Kronos slashed his scythe across the surface of the pool, scattering the images into disjointed ripples. 'The girl,' he hissed. 'He must have told the girl. Curse him and his wretched Achilles heel!'

'It was inevitable,' Phoebe said. 'A price must be paid to bridge the mortal soul.'

'Not for much longer. I am close to my goal.'

'Ah yes. The last mortal coil.' Phoebe cocked her head. 'Tread carefully, Lord Kronos. Some things, once done, are irreversible.'

Kronos grunted, but made no other acknowledgement of this mysterious advice. He turned on his heel and left the cave.

He emerged onto a thin ridge overlooking a mountain valley. In it, a massive army gathered, just like the Greek forces at Aulis. Only, this wasn't an army of men. They were monsters of all sorts and strengths: Scythian *dracaenae* with scaly trunk legs, slavering hellhounds with razor-sharp teeth and claws, giants that towered over the heads of their monster comrades. Last summer, we'd taken out most of the monsters Luke had recruited to fight for Kronos, but monsters never really died. They
eventually regenerated from Tartarus. It looked like Kronos had managed to recoup his losses at last.

A demigod waited for Kronos outside the cave, dressed in army fatigues with a bronze sword strapped to his belt. An eye patch ran diagonally across his face. I knew this kid—Ethan Nakamura, a demigod we’d met last year, who had joined Kronos's army even after we'd rescued him from a gladiator death match. He greeted Kronos with a salute.

'Tell the army to move out,' Kronos said without preamble.

'North, sir?'

'No. We're going to Charleston. Make sure Torrington brings the new ... recruits.' His lip curled. 'We want to keep them in sight. I don't trust our hypnotic friend's work.'

'Yes—'

A blast of static cut off Nakamura's answer. My dream shifted again, but this transition was choppy, like when the Internet connection suddenly cuts out on a Netflix movie. Luke and Nakamura's images froze, then winked out of sight. I found myself in a narrow passage lined with steel bars, like a jail cell.

Nakamura appeared again, walking down the passage with another kid I recognised: Alabaster Torrington, a stringy, brown-haired demigod whom I'd met several times in the past year. He didn't look like much, but he was a formidable enemy. As a son of Hecate, he had the power to bend the Mist and magically teleport people and monsters across space.

'The magic is working,' Nakamura said. 'Maybe a little too well. It attracts even the children too young for the monsters to sense.'

Torrington stared at the bars to his right. With a jolt, I realised that they lined two massive cages. Nakamura and Torrington were walking between them. Inside were more demigods, all fast asleep. They appeared to be grouped by age. On the right, the cage held children who couldn't have been older than eight. There were maybe ten of them, curled up on the cage floor. One of them had her arm around a one-eyed teddy bear. Another was sucking his thumb as he slept. The cage on the left had one satyr and five demigods. They looked to be between the ages of twelve and sixteen—the age where most either got scouted for camp or devoured by monsters.

'They are too young to join the army.' Torrington waved his hand at the little children. 'We have no use for them.'

'They'll make snacks for the monsters,' Nakamura said grimly.

Torrington stopped walking. 'Don't you feel uncomfortable about this sometimes? Like we're luring kids to their deaths? It's one thing for the ones we'll draft into the army, but the younger ones ...'

Nakamura touched his eye patch. 'Victory requires sacrifice,' he said, sounding very much like the old priest, Calchas. 'I learned that from my mother, Nemesis. Besides, we lost a valuable meat source when Percy Jackson took out that rancher in Texas.'

'Still ...'

'Would you rather Camp Half-Blood took them in and brainwashed them into siding with Olympus?'

The two demigods walked on. I gripped the bars of the cage, staring at the pitiful children inside. So Kronos had been gathering demigods to his cause not just by temptation, but trickery. A wave of
nausea hit my stomach. Wasn't it enough that he had a battalion of monsters?

Inside the left-side cage, one of the demigods stirred. He had a round, droopy sort of face, with sleepy eyes that made me think of cows (and thanks to her bovine majesty's little gifts, I'd had plenty of experience with cows over the past year). His heavy-lidded eyes creaked open and stared straight at me. Although he shouldn't have been able to see me in a dream, I got the distinct impression that he knew I was there.

'Help,' he mouthed.

I woke up shivering. The cabin was dark, but in the bunks around me, my siblings were tossing and turning in their sleep as though they were having bad dreams of their own. On my nightstand, my bronze dagger sat on top of the green diary I'd found yesterday. Its soft, comforting light made me think of the glow of Phoebe's skin in her dark cave.

I stared at the dagger for a while, tracing the shadow it cast on the worn cover of the book. Something Torrington had said replayed in my head, trying to strike a chord: *Like we're luring kids to their deaths.*

I set the dagger aside and picked up Halcyon Green's diary. There was a flashlight in my drawer. I flicked it on and started to read.

> I guess I should start with Cath.

> As far as I can remember, she was always different. Both of us were—we never really fit in at school, but that's the best thing about having a twin. Even if the other kids ostracised us, or called us names, we always had each other to rely on.

> Mother said we were strange because of our father. We'd never met him as kids; Mother said he'd left before we were even born.

This wasn't an unusual story for a half-blood. We all grew up that way, never knowing our godly parents, seeing the strange things that the Mist obscured from mortals. But it seemed Halcyon's sister Cath was even more different than usual.

> Cath didn't just see the weird things that were in front of us. She'd tell me about things that were going to happen, too, things that no one could possibly have known.

He went on to describe her predictions, ranging from the mundane (she guessed he'd fail his math test) to the terrifying (she'd apparently seen the bombing of Pearl Harbour ... which meant the Green siblings had to be really old). When they were twelve, the twins had a falling out when Cath saw their mother would die from cancer and refused to tell Halcyon in advance.

It took me a while to struggle through these paragraphs, all written in Halcyon's cramped, tiny handwriting. It was a sad story, with the twins losing their mom and having to move from their family house in Richmond to stay in a tiny apartment with their grandmother in D.C. But like the weird entries at the start of his diary, I had no idea how this stuff was relevant.

I would have skimmed Halcyon's description of his house, packed up for their move, except it kind of reminded me of the time my family had moved from Richmond to San Francisco. It seemed a painful coincidence that he'd gone through the same curse of temporariness on his life.

I could relate to the way Halcyon started at his closet, bare except for a metal safe he didn't know how to open. It had been there as far as he could recall. His sister came in and asked if he was still angry. He shook his head and asked if she could tell their future. She was unsure, because she'd
never seen her own future, but he asked her to try anyway.

*She closed her eyes and clasped her hands together as though in prayer.*

*Then the strangest thing happened. A green mist swirled around Cath. She stood and her eyes flew open. She had pale green eyes like mine, but now they were glowing like a cat's. Green smoke billowed from her mouth.*

*A half-blood of the eldest gods,* she said, *shall reach sixteen against all odds.*

I nearly dropped the diary. Those were the beginning lines of the Great Prophecy. I thought of the young girl I'd seen in Phoebe's scrying pool, the one who had been the Oracle. Although I still didn't know how this connected to Luke, the diary no longer seemed irrelevant.

Intrigued now, I tried to read faster.

*Cath's voice came out in a rasp, strong and harsh. She sounded even more ancient than Gran. I didn't understand what she was saying at all. Half-blood? Gods? What did this have to do with either of us?*

*But Cath—or whatever was speaking through her—wasn't done.*

'And see the world in endless sleep
The hero's soul, cursed blade shall reap
A single choice shall end his days
Olympus to preserve or raze.'

*Lightning arched outside the window, illuminating the statue of Robert E Lee that stood opposite our house. Thunder clapped overhead, so loud that I thought the window panes might shatter. The mist rushed out of Cath all at once and flooded the room with an eerie, mystical light. She collapsed to the ground.*

*Cath!* Stunned, I was too late to catch her. I lifted her gently by the shoulders. She lay limply in my arms, but she was still breathing.

*Wow,* said a voice. *That was some prophecy.*

I guessed before twelve-year-old Halcyon that the new stranger was his father, Apollo (but then, I had the benefit of years of experience with the gods). This part of the story wasn't all that unfamiliar; Apollo explained Halcyon's heritage, but also what was happening to his sister.

*You were born special, yourself and Catharine,* Apollo said. *I warned your mother before you were born. I told her provisions needed to be made. I left her this house,* he waved his hands at the walls around us, *so that you would have a safe place to grow up. A treasure lies within these walls, one that scares away the monsters of the outside world.*

I hoped Apollo might explain the prophecy as well, but he was either unwilling, or it was as much a mystery to him as it was to the rest of us.

*It is not always wise to peer purposefully into the looking glass of Fate, and even less so to speak of it freely,* Apollo warned.

*Why not? Why not, if I can tell what's going to happen? Wouldn't it be good to know?*
Apollo laughed, but it was a harsh, humourless sound. 'Because the future isn't a Roman road from A to Z. Do you know how many decisions, how many choices people make that go into producing a single outcome? What you see, what a prophecy says—that's just the end point. Even the choice to change the future may be the exact thing that causes that end to occur.'

He looked at me expectantly, as if waiting for me to nod in understanding. When I didn't, he sighed. 'I can see you're going to need help. Your sister—the Oracle will give her a modicum of protection now; the spirit will speak through her when approached, but otherwise, she will be relieved of the burden of Sight. But you, Hal—you will come into your own powers soon enough. You must learn to control them. To look only when it is unavoidable. And never to speak of what you see.'

'I don't have any powers.'

'You will,' Apollo promised. 'You were born with them. A gift and a curse. But listen. There's a place for kids like you and Cath.'

At this point, the story took a familiar pattern. A satyr arrived for the twins and brought them to Camp Half-Blood. I wanted to keep reading, curious about what happened next. Obviously something had happened such that the Oracle ... Cath—it was weird to think of her having a name, and a brother ... or just a life—had ended up the way she was now. But it had taken me several hours just to read this far, and my eyes were complaining from the effort. The sun was up, and most of my siblings were already moving around the cabin.

I marked my place carefully, put the diary away, and got ready for breakfast.

Chapter End Notes

Annabeth's dream comes indeed from one of the earlier stories of the Trojan War, the second gathering at Aulis, though of course the scene I presented here is entirely fictionalised. Those of you who know your Greek mythology may know what's coming in that particular tale.

Phoebe is one of the original Titans, and the origin of the name 'Phoebus Apollo', as she once owned the Oracles that Apollo took over. You can read more about her (or the canon version, anyway) in Percy Jackson's Greek Gods.

The references to Annabeth's previous meetings with Alabaster Torrington come from my previous story in this series, The Necklace of Harmonia.
Beckendorf Hits The Prophecy Payload

Chapter Summary

It's Beckendorf's turn for a quest ... but the circumstances are not exactly normal.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chiron called a counsellors' meeting right after breakfast. He normally had them before arrivals day, but I guess he was too swamped with work this year. When we trooped into the rec room in the Big House, we found him sorting through a stack of loose-leaf papers—literally large leaves—and muttering to himself under his breath.

'What are those?' I asked.

Chiron sighed and rubbed his eyes. 'Reports. I've been going over them half the night.'

I pulled one over. Scribbled on a large oak leaf was a message from a satyr in Louisiana: Lost my kid, think they ran away from home, no word from G.U., please advise best course of action. –J.W.

'Maybe we could help you,' I suggested. 'We could add it to the list of counsellor duties.'

I expected someone to protest (probably Clarisse, who detested all the administrative duties that came with being a senior counsellor) but the room was quiet. Beckendorf grunted, which might have indicated assent. Percy stifled a yawn. Everyone else stared at me with glazed eyes.

I frowned. Why was everyone so inordinately tired? Sure, I was dragging a little, too, having been up half the night, but ... all of us?

Travis and Connor Stoll were uncharacteristically still. Katie Gardner kept rubbing her eyes. Pollux had his arms on the table, trying to catch a few surreptitious winks. Even Silena, who usually looked fresh as a daisy, had deep bags under her eyes.

'What's going on?' I asked.

'Didn't sleep too well,' Beckendorf said gruffly. 'Nightmares.'

'Same,' Michael agreed.

'Think our whole cabin dreamed badly,' Travis said. 'There was a lot of talking in their sleep.'

'Even when I wasn't dreaming, someone would scream and wake up half the cabin,' Connor complained.

'Wusses.' Clarisse crossed her arms and tried to look like she wasn't fazed by anything as trivial as nightmares, but I didn't think anyone bought it. She looked every bit as worn out as the rest of us.

'I was up all night comforting Lacy,' Silena said. 'She dreamed that she was in a cage, and was about to be fed to a monster.'
Pollux’s head jerked up. ‘Wait—she dreamed about kids in cages?’

‘I dreamed I was in a cage, too,’ Katie said. Several of the others nodded.

‘I was trying to pick the lock on a cage, but it kept changing so I couldn’t get a grip on it,’ Travis said.

I looked around the table. ‘We all had the same dream?’ Or variants of it, anyway.

‘There were a bunch of kids trapped and pleading for help.’ Percy’s expression was pained, like he couldn’t stand to think about it.

Clarisse slammed her right hand on the table, making us all jump. ’Kronos must be behind this, then! He’s got all these prisoners, and he’s gonna—’

Everyone started talking at once.

‘Feed them to monsters!’

‘Brainwash them into fighting for him!’

‘Build his army again!’

Chiron raised his hands for silence. ‘This explains much. I have been getting reports from the satyrs on scouting duty that recruitment is drying up.’ He held up a few of his messages. ‘Some described it as a "mysterious disappearance of half-bloods." If Kronos has indeed been capturing demigods all over the country, it would explain why our satyrs are having a hard time finding them.’

‘We should get a message to Grover,’ I said. ‘He’d want to help.’ Especially if they were caging satyrs along with the half-bloods.

Chiron nodded, and made a note on one of his leaves.

‘But why does Kronos need to cage the half-bloods up, if they’re on his side?’ asked Connor.

Katie snorted. ‘Isn’t it obvious? They aren’t there of their own free will.’

‘I don’t know,’ Michael said. ‘In my dream, a lot of the demigods were muttering about serving the Titans.’

‘Mine were crying for help,’ Percy said.

Chiron shuffled his reports. ‘It seems you have all received different versions of the same dream. It may be that some of the half-bloods are for Kronos, and some are against. And perhaps some simply do not know anything about the Titans or their war against the gods. In this case, Kronos could easily sway their allegiances. But I worry about the ones who resist him …’

There was an uncomfortable silence. Several people looked at their feet. I thought of Ethan Nakamura’s grim pronouncement that the ‘useless’ half-bloods would make snacks for the monsters. My blood boiled.

‘We need to do something,’ Beckendorf said. ‘A quest to rescue these kids.’

‘Hang on.’ Michael held up his hands. ‘What if it’s a trap? What if we’re the next captives they target?’

Clarisse sneered at him. ‘You chicken?’
'No, but I'm not stupid.'

'Michael's right,' I said, before this could escalate into another argument between them. 'We need to plan this carefully.'

'We could do it like a stealth raid.' Beckendorf screwed up his face, like he was visualising a tricky puzzle in the air. 'Like, send in a few people as spies, or decoys, so they can get in close and figure out what's going on. But leave an extraction team so that if things go bad, someone can jump in to rescue them.'

We all stared at him. Not that it wasn't a good strategy. It was like something my mom's favourite hero, Odysseus, might have come up with. I just hadn't expected it to come from Beckendorf.

He ducked his head and twiddled his thumbs. 'I've been reading up on strategic warfare. It just seemed like something I oughta know, to programme the automatons to defend camp.'

'It sounds amazing, Charlie,' Silena said, which made his thumbs twitch even faster.

'Very well,' Chiron said. 'We need a quest. And it sounds like Beckendorf has it figured out. Will you lead it?'

Beckendorf ran his hand over his short, crew-cut hair. 'I could—I mean, I've never led one before ...'

'I think you'd do a fantastic job,' Silena assured him. 'You're brave, and strong, and you fixed up all those automatons just to defend camp. No one else has done as much as you this year!'

'Shucks, Silena, they don't all work right yet.'

'But you're good at stuff like that—mechanics, and tools, and—well, if anyone can break a bunch of cages, I bet it'd be you.' She looked at the rest of us as if to say, back me up, guys!

'I think you'd be great,' Percy said quickly.

'Yeah,' Clarisse put in grudgingly. 'Those bronze bulls were pretty awesome.'

I gave him a thumbs-up. Silena was right. Beckendorf was a great guy, and he'd done loads for camp this year. There wasn't a single camper who didn't look up to him.

Chiron nodded. 'All in favour of Beckendorf leading the quest ...?'

A chorus of 'ayes' rang out around the table.

'Then it is time for you to seek your prophecy.'

+++ 

It had been a while since I'd waited for a quest leader to get their prophecy. Last summer, I'd been the one to go see the Oracle, while my friends waited to hear what I was told. I'd forgotten how much nervous energy could fill the room in anticipation of the Oracle's words.

The issue of a quest seemed to overcome the earlier stupor in the room. Now we were all keyed up, knowing that Beckendorf would soon return with his prophecy and select the other members of his quest team. Silena unbraided her long black hair and redid the braid again. Travis and Connor started up an impromptu doubles game against Katie and Pollux, filling the room with the rhythmic bouncing of ping-pong balls. Clarisse poked her spear at the legs of the ping-pong table. Occasionally, she'd send a jolt of electricity through it, making the entire room crackle and spark.
Michael glared at her. 'You want a taste of Maimer?'

She brandished her spear at him. 'You want a taste of Maimer?'

He shook his head and looked away, though I could swear I heard him muttered, 'Lamer,' under his breath. Fortunately, Clarisse didn't.

Only Chiron remained unperturbed. He returned to sorting his reports. More flew in through the window as he worked through them, a flurry of leaves and paper aeroplanes to increase his pile.

Percy approached me with a guarded expression. Dimly, I remembered I was supposed to be mad at him. After the nightmares and the diary, I'd forgotten what our argument yesterday had been about. When I didn't snap at him, he seemed to relax. He fell into the seat next to me.

'Think Beckendorf'll pick us to go with him?' he said.

I shrugged. 'Could be anyone.'

'I want to go, though.'

'Why?' Beckendorf was probably one of Percy's better friends at camp, but I sensed there was more to it than that.

Percy hunched his shoulders. 'It's gonna sound really stupid. It's just—those cages and everything ... it made me think of the zoo animals. You know, on that illegal transport—'

'To Vegas, yeah.' It seemed so long ago now, that ride out of Denver on our first quest. Yet I still remembered it vividly. Although what stuck in my mind wasn't really the caged animals, or the bumpy ride. That trip to Vegas had been the first time Percy and I had really talked. The first and only time I'd told anyone about my family since Luke and Thalia. It had hit me then how many times he'd saved me on that quest—a quest where I'd thought I'd have to save this annoying little kid's butt.

And I'd realised that maybe I did like him a little after all.

But I wasn't about to share that with him now.

'Yeah,' Percy said. 'Luke—I mean, Kronos—can't get away with this. You can't just treat people like that.'

I thought about Luke's eyes flickering as Kronos searched his memories. He would never have done something like this of his own free will. I couldn't believe it of him, even while he was serving Kronos. Not Luke, who'd found me as a little girl hiding in an old iron works scrapyard and taken me under his wing without hesitation. He was trapped as badly as the kids in the cages. Only no one else seemed to realise that.

How well did you really know him? whispered a voice in my head. It was something that had bothered me since Kronos had taken over Luke's body last year. It should have been impossible for Kronos to inhabit a mortal body without burning it to ashes, yet Luke's was obviously still fine. How much of Kronos's soul did Luke have to share to be able to host the evil Titan?

But I couldn't say any of this to Percy either. I hated talking to him about Luke. He was always so insistent that there was nothing of him worth saving, as if he knew anything about Luke at all.

I pursed my lips. 'We'll fix it. Free the kids, I mean.'

I might have said more, but just then, the door to the rec room opened. Beckendorf was back.
Silena sprang to her feet. 'Charlie! What did the Oracle say?'

The ping-pong ball bounced off the table and rolled to a stop at Beckendorf's feet. He picked it up and turned it over in his hands.

'It was ... really weird.'

I nodded in sympathy. Getting a prophecy from the Oracle was always rough. After I'd gotten mine last year, I'd been convinced I would die on my quest. Had Beckendorf received something similar?

'Let's hear it, then,' Chiron said.

Beckendorf studied the ping-pong ball in his hand for a long moment, then said, 'It's—it's really long.'

'What do you mean, long?'

'Like ...' He shook his head. 'I'll tell you, but you guys had better write this down.'

Chiron's brow furrowed. He passed me one of his leafy reports and a pencil. I turned it over and got ready to record the prophecy.

Beckendorf screwed up his face and recited:

'Six commanders on airborne steeds make haste
To a place near where once, flames did lay waste
Wisdom chooses; water remains steadfast
To the warrior and archer, spoils of war amass
Beware, beauty, traps from the land of liberty
By summer's end, a hero's fate shall claim three.
This is the summer that legends are made
A sacrifice to set things right by the blade
The spirit of Delphi shall rest now until
The first prophecy at last the Fates do fulfil.'

There was silence when he finished. Everyone seemed stunned by the length of the prophecy. Chiron's face went stark white, as though this doubly long prophecy meant twice the danger.

'Are you sure this is what you heard?' he said, his voice grave.

Beckendorf scowled. 'Would I make it up?'

'But it's—it's so long,' Michael said. 'Are you remembering it right?'

'Positive. She even repeated it three times, like she wanted to be sure I got it all.'

I smoothed out the oak leaf with the recorded lines on the table. Everyone leaned closer to see.

'Has this ever happened before?' I asked Chiron. 'A prophecy this long, I mean.'

'Not in my memory.' His hind legs scuffed at the linoleum in agitation. There are other Oracles, certainly—the Erythaean, for instance, or even Dodona—who present prophecies in other forms ... and Apollo himself is certainly fond of alternative poetry, but the Oracle of Delphi has always been very consistent with her verses.'

Michael scratched his head. 'Is it just me, or does there seem to be two parts to this one? Like, the
second bit, about making legends and the spirit of Delphi resting ... I don't see what it's got to do with
the quest.'

'It's possible it is a warning for the future,' Chiron said. He seemed deep in thought. 'Perhaps we
should start at the beginning.'

'Six commanders,' Percy said. 'So Beckendorf has to pick five people?'

'And it's obvious who they are,' Katie said. 'Annabeth is wisdom, of course.'

I nodded. 'Sure, I'll go. As for water—that's got to be Percy.'

'And it says I'm fast.' He grinned. 'I like that.'

'Steadfast, Seaweed Brain. It means "loyal."'

'Oh.' For some reason, this made his brow furrow, like loyalty wasn't a good thing. I couldn't
imagine why. That line made me feel the most secure out of all the others. If I had to make a choice, I
was relieved to know Percy would stand by me whatever it was.

'The warrior and archer must be Clarisse and Michael,' Beckendorf said. 'Ares and Apollo.'

Clarisse raised her spear. 'As long as I get to pulverise some monsters, I'm in.' She glared at Michael,
as though daring him to back out.

He crossed his arms. 'Fine. But I told you there'll be traps involved. It's already in the next line
—"beware beauty traps in the land of liberty." Man, that could be anywhere in America!'

'What are beauty traps anyway?' asked Travis. 'Are they like that permanent make-up stuff you guys
cursed us with last year?'

Silena glared at him. 'You totally deserved that.'

Beckendorf looked around the room. 'I guess that's the team, then.'

'Hang on.' Silena waved her hand at us. 'You've still only got five people.'

'That's because you're the sixth,' Beckendorf said.

Silena looked taken aback. 'Me? I—but I'm from Aphrodite. We never go on quests.'

'That line—I don't think it means "beauty traps" as in traps that are beautiful. The way the Oracle
said it, it sounded like a warning for beauty to beware the traps. I mean, beauty as in someone
beautiful, who's on the quest. Like, uh—' Beckendorf looked ready to bite his tongue off. His fingers
crushed the ping-pong ball flat. The rest of us tried to hide our snickers. It was so obvious that he had
a massive crush on Silena.

Silena's left hand touched her cheek, which had gone pink. 'But I'm no good at fighting, not like
Annabeth, or Clarisse. And if it's something I'm supposed to be avoiding ... what if I get you guys in
trouble?'

'You're the best in your cabin!' Beckendorf protested. 'You are good in a fight. I mean, you were the
one who helped Annabeth yesterday.'

'No, that was you.'
Entertaining as it was to watch, this exchange could probably go on for a while. I raised my voice over their compliment war. 'You were both great against the leontes.'

They jumped, as though they'd completely forgotten the rest of us were here. Most of the other counsellors could no longer hide their laughter. Even Chiron looked amused.

'You'll do fine,' Clarisse said. 'You're a better fighter than you think.'

Silena pressed her hands to her flushed cheeks. That was as near a compliment as Clarisse ever gave. And being complimented on your fighting skills by a daughter of the war god was no small matter.

'And,' I added, 'if the prophecy says you should beware the trap, maybe you're the one who will get us out of a trap.'

'Well ...' Silena traced a finger around her wrist, like she was playing with an invisible bracelet. 'I guess I could ... okay. I'll go.'

Chiron clapped his hands together. 'In that case, I believe you must depart soon. As the prophecy says, the six of you must make haste.'

'But we don't even know where to look!' Michael pointed out. 'I mean, "the land of liberty?" Isn't that basically all of America? None of you happened to dream about where these cages were, did you?'

The other counsellors shook their heads.

'I was too bothered by the cages, I didn't look around,' Silena admitted.

'It was really dark,' Percy said. 'I couldn't see any good landmarks.'

'I think I know,' I said. 'I had another dream. I saw L— I mean, Kronos, on this mountain. I'm not sure where it is, but that's not important. He said they were heading to Charleston. That's probably the best place for us to intercept them.'

I didn't mention that Kronos had been looking for something— someone in particular. The girl, he'd said. I thought uneasily of the image of myself and Thalia that he'd slashed through. Was he looking for me? That didn't make sense, though. I'd never been to Charleston.

'Charleston ...' Silena said thoughtfully. 'Didn't half the city get burned down in the Civil War?'

I wouldn't have figured her for a Civil War buff, but I guess she had her hobbies. I nodded. 'That would fit with "where once flames lay waste."'

'That makes sense,' Beckendorf said. 'So ... the question now is how we're going to get there.'

'The prophecy said "airborne,"' Michael said. 'We fly, obviously. Anyone know how much a direct flight to Charleston costs?'

Percy raised his hands. 'Whoa, uh-uh. No planes. Been there, done that, not doing it again.'

'We don't need a plane, morons,' Clarisse said. 'It said airborne steeds. I'm guessing it's, what, a three-hour trip by pegasi?'

'Well then,' I said, 'if we want to get there by tonight, we'd better get packing.'

We adjourned the meeting so the quest team could get our supplies and saddle the pegasi, but I
stayed back after the others had left. Chiron was pacing back and forth along the ping-pong table, the scribbled prophecy in his hands.

'Chiron?'

'You want to know what I think of the last few lines of the prophecy.'

'Well ... yes.'

Chiron sighed. 'I don't know, child. It seems to refer to something that I heard many years ago. The line about the spirit of Delphi resting ...' He shook his head, looking weary. 'I need to think about it more.'

'The last line, about the "first prophecy" ... do you think that means the Great Prophecy? You know, the one about—Percy?'

'The one that might be about Percy,' Chiron corrected. 'It is unwise to interpret a prophecy ahead of time. We may prepare for the eventuality that it does refer to him, but to claim it as fact ... Remember, we were mistaken before.'

His words sounded eerily like Kronos's from my dream.

'But you think it is about that prophecy. That it's going to happen this summer.'

'Annabeth, I really don't know. The first Titan war lasted ten years. So did the Trojan war. It is impossible for me to determine if this conflict will last as long.'

I tried to imagine myself still fighting against the Titans in ten years. The idea was depressing.

Chiron put his hands on my shoulders. 'We will talk about this again after you return. For now, you should hurry. Your friends will want to leave soon.'

I thought about what Phoebe had told Kronos: to understand this prophecy, you have to understand its history. Reading in Halcyon Green's diary about how the prophecy had first been delivered still gave me no clues about how it would play out.

But I resolved to pack the green diary. It was a long ride to South Carolina. Surely I'd be able to snatch some time to read further.

Chapter End Notes

The permanent make-up reference Travis makes is a nod to the interview in The Demigod Files, where the Stoll brothers mention Aphrodite cabin cursing them that way after a prank involving a golden mango. (A short story I'd love to write if I could find the time and inspiration.)
Chapter Summary

The quest team runs into Stymphalian-sized trouble while flying south.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The acid rain hit when we were flying over Philadelphia.

At first, it was just tiny drops, little pinpricks that I might have chalked off as pins and needles from flying Strawberry, my pegasus, for half an hour. Then Michael cursed loudly. A blob the size of a hubcap had landed on his backpack and was eating through the leather. Michael tried to shake it off, but yelped when packs of ambrosia squares and nectar vials tumbled out of the sizzling hole.

'After them, Champ!' He urged his pegasus into a dive to retrieve them.

I realised the little white droplets that had landed on my bronze armour were smoking. The bronze protected me, but when the drops rolled into the gaps in my armour, they pricked painfully at my skin.

Strawberry whinnied nervously. Tiny drops of acid dotted her auburn coat. Each one was too small to do significant damage, but annoying enough to make her shiver in irritation. I patted her mane, trying to calm her down.

'Uh, guys?' Beckendorf pointed over our heads.

The cloud hovering above glittered with motion, like a churning frenzy of airborne piranhas.

Silena pulled Cupcake, her roan pegasus, to a hover. 'Acid rain?'

Percy's pure black pegasus whinnied. 'Blackjack says that's no cloud.'

'No shit, Sophocles,' Clarisse snapped.

That was when the cloud exploded.

There had to be at least a hundred of them, all flashing bronze claws and shiny beaks. Each was only the size of a pigeon, but imagine a hundred pigeons diving on you all at once. Then imagine that those pigeons have razor-sharp mouths and feet. I think you get the picture.

Our pegasi needed no encouragement to speed up. They flew south at breakneck pace. The birds pursued us in a gnashing cloud.

Michael swore as he held tight to a panicking Champ while trying to keep our emergency supplies from falling out of his smoking backpack. 'What are they, demon pigeons?'

'Symphalian birds!' I shouted. 'Like the ones that attacked camp two years ago!'

As if in reply, the demon pigeons let loose a barrage of steaming white acid poop.
Silena squealed. 'That's disgusting!'

Percy narrowly avoided a bad spray. It splattered over the spire of a tall church. 'Remind me again, did Stymphalian birds have acid poop?'

'Maybe these are a poisonous strain,' I said. 'A cross-breed, or something.'

'Or maybe they've been eating some really crappy worms,' Percy muttered.

The flock descended, cutting us off. They were so numerous, they covered us easily from above and all sides. Their beady black eyes gleamed with malevolence.

'We have to land!' Michael said.

Philadelphia stretched out beneath us, a splendour of rich history and glorious architecture. 'They'll destroy the city if we do!'

'I say we fight,' Clarisse said. She drew her spear and brandished it at the birds on her right side. They scattered at the sight of its sharp point, but regrouped behind her.

Beckendorf glanced between the sprawling city and the demon birds. 'Clarisse is right. We are not letting them trash the City of Freedom.'

Silena looked ready to cry, but she drew herself up straighter on Cupcake. 'Aerial combat formation then. Like we practised in training.'

We urged our pegasi into a V-shape, fanning out so that we formed a layered triangle. The birds would focus on Beckendorf first, while the rest of us provided cover from a distance. When he got overwhelmed, he could peel off and the next layer would fly in. I'd designed the formation after discussing aerial battle tactics with my dad—one of the few areas where our interests intersected perfectly. Before he'd shipped his Sopwith Camels off to Europe, he'd even let me join in the battle re-enactments he and his colleagues organised over San Francisco Bay.

Of course, flying pegasi into battle wasn't the same as flying a Camel. For one, I had to wield my weapons myself, rather than having them built into the body of my plane. Still, our attack formation worked well. Beckendorf took out at least twenty birds on his own with a bronze cast net. He peeled off after them as they fell, tangled in the netting, to blast them to monster dust.

Silena and I moved in to take his place. On our flanks, Percy and Clarisse waved their sword and spear respectively, distracting the birds and drawing them into our main attack. Michael was our rear guard, picking off birds from the edges with his bow and arrows.

The plan would have worked if the Stymphalian birds hadn't been so diarrhoea-happy. Silena and I slashed away at our incoming attackers, sending another dozen to Tartarus. Then the birds really let loose.

If we'd thought the poop parade from before had been gross, well, we hadn't seen just how unruly their stomachs could be. It was a literal shitstorm. Strawberry and Cupcake bore the brunt of it. A wave of acid poop cascaded over their hides. Our pegasi writhed in pain. Silena managed to keep her seating on a bucking Cupcake, but she got a face-full of bird poop. She screamed and clutched at her helmet.

'Silena!' Clarisse and Beckendorf both flew straight for her, dodging poop missiles. I would have as well, but Strawberry reared so badly, I lost my grip on her mane and slipped off her back.
'Annabeth!' Percy spiralled out of formation. A moment later, he caught me by my armour straps and
heaved me onto Blackjack.

'Thanks,' I gasped. 'Look out!'

With our battle formation broken, the birds descended once again in a swarming free-for-all.
Blackjack swerved, but it was too late. Five Stymphalian birds dove at us, cawing in triumph.

Percy pushed me down. I heard the scrape of bronze against bronze, and then he cried out in pain.
His sword, Riptide, fell from his hands and tumbled through the air.

'Percy!'

One of the birds had struck him in the shoulder, in the gap between his armour plates. It looked like it
might have cut all the way to the bone.

'Oh gods, Percy—'

'I'm fine,' he said, but his face had gone terrifyingly white. He looked like he was trying not to pass
out. 'Behind you!'

I turned and slashed with my dagger. Two more birds exploded in a shower of feathers and poop.
But they were overrunning us. There were just too many. Michael tried desperately to shoot them
down, but he was one archer against fifty relentless monster birds. Strawberry and Cupcake spiralled
down to earth, their wings pierced by sharp beaks. Silena had torn off her helmet; the ends of her hair
were smoking. She hung on to Clarisse's back as they flew down to help the injured pegasi, while
Beckendorf tried to fend off the thirty or so birds diving after them.

'Extend your wings!' Silena yelled at Strawberry and Cupcake. 'Glide it out!'

The pegasi tried to follow her instructions, but I could see them trembling with the effort of
straightening their broken wings.

We descended towards the Philadelphia skyline. Already the birds had closed in on the highest
buildings, smearing the rooftops with sizzling poop and clawing at the walls. A bunch of them
smashed the stained glass windows of the Cathedral Basilica with their beaks. Another group honed
in on the Philadelphia Museum of Art—a white stone building built in the image of my mother's
Parthenon. I felt a sharp pang in my chest as they zoomed in for the attack.

'Charlie!' Silena screamed, drawing my attention back to my friends.

Beckendorf's pegasus, Guido, had been forced into the Independence Hall. They hit its walls with a
loud thud. The noise momentarily scattered the birds into a swarm around Silena and Clarisse. I
heard them screaming and cursing. Clarisse produced a string of Stymphalian kebabs on her spear,
but then she fell back with a groan.

'Blackjack, go!' I cried.

We flew for the Independence Hall. Beckendorf was clinging to the ceiling rail with one hand and
fighting off birds with the other. Guido had collapsed on the roof, his leg bent at an awkward angle.
We got there just as the birds pierced Beckendorf's sword arm.

'We got you!' Blackjack clamped his jaw around Beckendorf's armour and dragged him onto the
roof. Michael landed next to us and fired a round of exploding arrows into the air. The birds
squawked and retreated with another wave of acid poop. It splattered the roof with a hiss. Blackjack
extended his wings like a shield, but couldn't manage to cover us all. Beckendorf cried out in pain as poison dripped into his open wound.

Silena and Clarisse landed. 'Oh gods,' Silena sobbed, running to Beckendorf with her hands over her mouth.

'You couldn't have fired those arrows earlier?' Clarisse snapped at Michael. She was limping badly. It looked like the birds had gotten her in the back of her knee.

'I only had one round!' Michael said. 'And they won't last. Look—they're already regrouping.' He pointed to the sky, where the birds were swarming again. How was it that they seemed to have multiplied? 'We need a better plan.'

Percy winced and tried to staunch his bleeding wound with his shirt. 'Can't we do that thing with the music?'

I knew what he meant. When the flock of Stymphalian birds had attacked camp last time, we'd scared them off with Chiron's worst Dean Martin collection. But where were we supposed to find 50's music here? Sure, there was probably an antique record shop somewhere in the city, but even if we had time to search, would it be enough to scare all these birds away for good?

'Land,' Beckendorf groaned. Sweat beaded on his brow. He was shaking all over. I didn't know how poisonous Stymphalian bird poop was, but getting it in an open wound couldn't be good.

'Shh,' Silena said. 'We've landed. You're going to be fine. Michael, we need nectar!'

Michael wrung his hands. 'I lost it. I lost my whole pack.'

Clarisse rounded on him. 'You what?'

'The poop destroyed my bag! How did you expect me to hold everything inside and keep the birds off you?'

'Land,' Beckendorf insisted. 'Of—of liberty.'

Silena buried her face in her hands. 'The prophecy ... beware, beauty, traps—I told you guys it was a bad idea for me to come. This must be what it meant by the land of liberty.'

'It's not your fault,' I said. 'Those birds came after all of us.'

'Wait, guys.' Percy's complexion was as grey as the streak in his hair, but his eyes lit up. 'Land of liberty.' He pointed with his good arm across the national park. Strawberry and Cupcake had crash-landed on the grass next to a glass chamber. Inside, I could see the gleam of a dome-shaped copper monument. 'Does that thing still work?'

I gasped. 'Of course—Percy, that's brilliant!'

'What?' Clarisse demanded.

I jumped to my feet. 'I know what to do.'

'Whatever it is, do it fast,' Michael grumbled. 'I've only got one quiver left.'

'Okay, Michael, you stay here and guard everyone. Silena, you come with me.'

'But—Charlie—'
I made an impatient noise. 'We can't help him until we get rid of the birds, and I'll need back-up.'

Percy nodded, and pointed to Clarisse's pegasus. 'Take Pork Pie. He's in the best shape.'

Silena and I climbed onto Pork Pie's back and we glided down to the park. It was full of tourists, but they didn't give us a second glance. Maybe we just looked like stray balloons or something. There were loads of those drifting around, let loose by crying kids who hadn't tied them tightly enough around their wrists.

Nonetheless, I was pretty sure it wouldn't be as easy to sneak past security at the Liberty Bell Center. The tourists waited impatiently in line for their turn to see the city's biggest attraction. They formed such a dense cluster around the screening area that even if I were to use my invisibility hat, there was no clear space for me to squeeze through without bumping into someone.

Silena fiddled with the charred end of her plait. 'It just had to be tourist season.'

'That's where you come in,' I reminded her. I'd outlined the plan during our descent.

She sighed and moved in. Once she was in sight of all the tourists, she raised her voice. 'Oh my gods! There's, like, this amazing deal at the gift shop. See, they made these bell replicas in 1862, but they were only found this year, and they're giving them out to the first hundred visitors today!'

Every one of the tourists turned to her.

'For free?' one of them said sceptically.

'Oh yeah,' Silena said. 'Look, I already got mine!' She held up a palm-sized 'bell', which was really just a magic mirror she had in her backpack. I hoped the combination of the Mist and her Aphrodite-given ability to Charmspeak—put a touch of persuasive magic in her words—would convince the mortals.

'Daddy, I want one!'

'Yeah, that sounds cool.'

The crowds surged towards Silena. She gave me a discreet thumbs-up as she led them away.

I jammed on my hat and slipped past the bewildered security officer.

To the average mortal, the Liberty Bell was just a three-foot structure with an iconic crack running down the centreline. The actual structure, obscured by the Mist, was one of Daedalus's inventions: a formidable thirty-foot dome of copper and tin that hung from a raised pedestal in the centre of the park. I had the notes in his laptop; when he'd first come to America after the Revolutionary War, he'd built the first secret entrance to his workshop in Philadelphia. The real bell had guarded it with an ear-splitting ring that warded off any intruders.

I hoped it still worked.

There was no more time to waste. The sky was darkening again with the approach of the Stymphalian birds. At the top of the Independence Hall, Michael was emptying his last quiver of arrows into the sky. Some of the birds had spotted Silena and the three pegasi on the green and were already coming in for an attack.

I ducked under the massive dome of the bell and found the gong. It dangled off a rope running down the centre of the dome. Bracing myself for the noise, I jumped on and swung hard.
The bell rang out in a rich baritone that must have travelled for miles. The world narrowed to that one sound, echoing in my ears in a constant *bong—bong—bong*. The reverberation shuddered through my whole body. It was like my heart was beating in time with it, sending blood pulsating through my arteries in a rhythmic two-count.

Since I was inside the bell, I couldn't tell if the sound was indeed scaring the birds away, but I kept swinging on the gong rope. I didn't stop until Silena's face popped up under the edge of the swinging bell. She shouted something that I couldn't make out, but I guessed it was 'stop!' Dizzy, I dropped off the rope and crawled out. The world tilted and spun. It took me two tries just to pull my hat off my head and stuff it in my pocket. Dimly, I noticed that the glass chamber that housed the bell had shattered. Oops.

Silena caught me as I staggered onto the green. Her mouth was moving, but it was almost a full minute before I could make out what she was actually saying.

'... insides couldn't take the sound—just combusted in the air.'

'So they're all gone?' The skies gave me my answer, though. They were completely clear. Not a bird was in sight.

'Exploded, every single one. Guess we gave the mortals an early fireworks show.' Silena tugged me across the green to a park shelter. Our friends had gathered there with the pegasi, in the shade of the chestnut trees. Silena dropped to her knees next to Beckendorf, who looked really bad now. His eyes were glazed and unfocused. Green smoke curled from his wound. The skin around it was inflamed, with little red streaks clawing outwards like a demon's fingers.

Michael winced. 'I tried to do some healing on it, but I'm not great at this. Will's the one we need.'

'And *someone* lost the nectar and ambrosia,' Clarisse muttered.

'Watch it, or you can fix that leg yourself.' Michael yanked on the stabilising splint he was strapping around her knee with more force than necessary.

Percy looked up from his task of pouring water over Blackjack's injured wings. He'd stripped off his shirt to bandage his left arm. Awful as I felt about his injury, I couldn't help but notice that he looked really good without a shirt.

I cleared my throat and turned to Michael. 'Is there anything else we can try? Like—I don't know, the satyrs do things with herbs and stuff, don't they?'

Michael rubbed his forehead. 'I think I know something we can try. Something I heard before from the older counsellors in my cabin. Supposedly there's this place in Philadelphia—the Mütter museum.'

Percy wrinkled his nose. 'Sorry, but why do we want mutton?'

'Mütter,' Michael corrected. 'It's a medical museum, but there's this special section run by servants of Apollo. It's like a pharmacy or something. Children of Apollo can go there when they need healing supplies.'

Beckendorf grunted and closed his eyes. Silena put her hand over his. 'No, Charlie, you stay with us, okay? Michael's going to go to this mutton museum and get everything you need, but you need to *stay with us*!'
Her voice rang out with ten times the conviction that she'd used on the tourists in the park. Beckendorf's eyes fluttered open. Silena squeezed his hands. 'That's it. Hang in there, Charlie.'

'Whatever it is, we'd better hurry,' Percy said.

I glanced at him. 'Yeah, good abs. I mean, idea! Good idea!' Gods, Percy was really too distracting without a shirt. I looked away quickly. 'I'll go with Michael.'

It was a mark of how dire our situation was that no one even noticed my slip of the tongue. I undid my armour, carefully not looking at Percy. If we were going to go strolling through the city, it probably wasn't the best idea to look like gladiators.

'Come on,' I said to Michael. 'Let's go shopping.'

Chapter End Notes

Disclaimer: I've never been to Philadelphia (except maybe on transit inside the airport) so I cannot verify the accuracy of what I learned from Google maps. But I hope I'm not too far off! Likewise for the Liberty Bell Center (of which I'll admit half my research was from Wikipedia). Daedalus's enhancements to it are, of course, pure fabrication on my part. The Mütter Museum is a real place, though.
Michael Auditions For Ad Sales

Chapter Summary

Annabeth and Michael visit an unusual pharmacy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Under different circumstances, I would have been thrilled to wander the city of liberty. It had been a site of the architectural revival in the 1900s, with historic buildings like the Penn Museum, or the Independence Hall that we'd landed on, which dated back centuries. The Museum of Art was even hailed as the Parthenon of Philadelphia.

Michael and I took the streetcar across town. It took the scenic route to Twenty-second Street, passing the door to the Museum of Art. It was indeed a work of beauty, with four Doric columns facing out so that the entrance resembled an ancient Greek temple. I'd only ever been to the Parthenon replica in Tennessee, so I couldn't tell how closely the museum matched the ancient original. Although my dad had wanted to take me this summer, that would probably never happen now. Would he visit it anyway? Maybe he'd send me a postcard.

From the outside, the Mütter Museum could have been any ordinary building, with red brick walls and double-glazed windows. Inside, though, it was possibly the weirdest place I'd ever seen. And after eight years of demigod training, I'd definitely seen weird.

The entrance hall was decorated with skeletons—actual skeletons leering from glass cases and hanging from the ceiling. There was even one on a stand by the door, rigged up so that its arm waved up and down in welcome. At the front desk, a receptionist sat under shelves of even more bones. She wore a skull-shaped badge that said, \textit{ASK ME ABOUT MY BODIES!}

The weirdest thing was how none of the mortals seemed to find any of this odd. The visitors wandered among the exhibits, grinning at the skeletons and posing with them for pictures.

'Are you sure this isn't some monster trap?' I couldn't help thinking of the zombie tourists Luke had once kept aboard his monster cruise ship—mortals who had been there just to keep up appearances. Though to be fair, these tourists approached the ghoulish exhibitions with an enthusiasm that had been completely lacking among the dazed passengers on the \textit{Princess Andromeda}.

'It's just anatomy,' Michael said with a shrug. He examined a glass case of different-sized femurs. 'Will would have a field day. He loves this stuff.'

The entrance hall split off in three directions. One door led out to a courtyard garden brimming with strange plants. On our right, the corridor was marked \textit{EXHIBITS}. On our left, an arrow pointed to \textit{SOUVENIRS}.

'Gift shop?' I asked.

Michael shook his head. 'I think it's somewhere among the exhibits.'

We ducked under a banner that screamed, \textit{BE DISTURBINGLY INFORMED!} The exhibits corridor
curved off into a series of rooms. More signs pointed out the special exhibitions: *GRIMM'S ANATOMY*, and *BLOOD WORK*, and *THROUGH THE WEEPING GLASS*. I almost thought my dyslexia was acting up, but it seemed like these *were* the titles, and not just the letters twisting into strange words.

At the end of the corridor, a wall placard gave a list of the permanent exhibits: stuff like *WET COLLECTION*, and *MEDICINAL PLANT GARDEN*. Michael considered it for a while, then put his finger on the words *ANCIENT MEDICINE*. 'I think that's it.'

The permanent exhibitions were in a long series of connected rooms. To get to the Ancient Medicine collection, we had to pass through what could have passed for a mad scientist's lab. There was a hallway of pickled brains, a room filled with surgical instruments, and a collection of jars stuffed with slimy innards—tendons and sinews and other labelled body parts that Michael read out loud until I told him to shut up before I hurled. This part of the museum didn't seem to be on the tourist highlights (no surprises there). We were the only ones here.

'I don't like this,' I said.

'Well, it probably just means we're in the right place.' He reached for the door to *ANCIENT MEDICINE*. 'The Mist probably keeps the mortals away. Let's just—aaaah!'

On the door, a hundred eyes sprung open. Michael and I leapt back, startled. The blinking eyes reminded me of Argus, our security chief at camp, who had peepers all over his body. But this was a serpent—a giant, multi-ocular red snake that blended in so seamlessly with the wood that I'd never have guessed it was there. It uncurled from the door, hissing furiously.

'G-good snake,' Michael stammered. 'N-nice snake. We're just gonna—'

The serpent, clearly not impressed, lunged at us.

I dragged Michael backwards. As soon as we backed away from the door, the serpent disappeared back into its panels. Like a chameleon, its scales faded into the wood. Every so often, one of its eyes would crack open at different points on the door, like a roving security peephole. Or a security peeper, I guess.

'Figures,' Michael groaned. 'There's a guard.'

'Could we sneak past it? Like, with a distraction?' I pulled out my invisibility cap. 'You get its attention and I'll sneak in.'

Michael pursed his lips, then shook his head. 'I don't think that'll work. See, only children of Apollo are supposed to be able to get in. I think that means there's a way in that only Apollo kids would know.'

'Like a password?'

'Yeah. I'd guess it has something to do with Apollo's domain.'

'Healing? Archery? The Oracle?' Apollo had fingers in practically every pie. How would we figure out which one was relevant? 'We don't have time to work it out!'

'We'll just have to try them all,' Michael said. 'Look—do the thing with your hat. Give me a couple of tries to get the password, and if it really doesn't work, we'll do it your way, with the distraction.'

'Fine.' I donned my invisibility hat. Michael winced.
'That's way too much like the chameleon snake.' He stepped forward and took a deep breath. 'Hey, uh, serpent of Apollo!'

Five eyes blinked on the door. The serpent gave a low, warning hiss.

'Er, you know, Apollo, god of light ... can you let us in without a fight?' Michael threw out a few more phrases. I didn't know if he'd intentionally made them rhyme, or if he just figured that was how a god of poetry might set up a password.

Nothing happened, unless you counted the serpent uncurling its head from the door to prop itself on the doorknob. It nodded at Michael as if to say, *Nope, not it, but do continue, this is amusing.*

'Man, give me a clue, won't you? Sun dude, godly twins, crap, what else did he do?'

Then I noticed something. The serpent wasn't just nodding. It was bobbing its head in time to the rhythm of Michael's words.

'Michael!' I hissed. 'Look at it.'

His brow furrowed. Then his face brightened. 'Apollo did, like, everything, and if he had a skill missing, he left it to his kids to sing it; we try to bring it, but we're probably failing, cos the dude's like a king.'

The serpent swayed, bobbing its head faster with the beat. Michael got into the rhythm, moving his hands in time to his rap. I had no idea where he was getting his inspiration from, but he produced a string of fast-paced lines that would have made the heaviest street rapper proud.

At last, the serpent uncurled from the door and opened its jaws wide—but only to yawn. A moment later, all billion of its eyes fluttered shut. It stretched out along the base of the *WET COLLECTION* shelves, snoozing.

I pulled off my hat. 'Well, that was ... interesting. Will did say you do a mean rap.'

Michael gave me a sheepish grin. 'Sort of a side hobby.' He frowned at the serpent. 'Not really the reaction I typically want from an audience, but let's go before it wakes up.'

The Ancient Medicine room would have looked like an ordinary pharmacy, only instead of medicine cabinets, it had shelves filled with ancient Greek jugs: *amphoras, pithes, stenii.* A full-length window looked out onto a bed of flowering plants in the museum garden. Although I wasn't an expert on flowers, I was pretty sure most of them made some dangerous poisons.

The walls were plastered with cheerful posters that said things like, *Have you asked your doctor about Moly?* and *Eternity got you down? Try Hermultivites—guaranteed to put the godliness back in your step!*

A service counter cut the room in half. On one end, a couple of prescription pads lay next to a cash register. Underneath were trays with eight-packs of *Ambrosia Cough Drops (demigod-friendly)* and *Max Strength Nectar Suspension (godly use only).* A sign over them advertised *TWO FOR 4.99D (limited 6 packs per customer).*

The pharmacist looked like she could have walked off one of those old pin-up posters from the 1950s. Her round, freckled cheeks were dabbed with rouge. A nurse's cap perched jauntily over her curly red hair. The name tag pinned to her starched white apron read *PAMELA.* The only thing missing was a bright smile. She scowled so fiercely when she saw us, she nearly went cross-eyed.
'Don't tell me Delphyne's sleeping on the job again!'

Michael and I looked at each other. 'Delphyne?'

'You couldn't have missed her. Big red serpent, a billion eyes?'

'Er, yeah, we met her.'

Pamela groaned. 'It's so hard to get good security these days. Unless ... either of you a relative of mine?'

'If by relative you mean a son of Apollo, then yeah.' Michael raised his hand. 'Me.'

'Well, that's all right, then.' Pamela's scowl relaxed. 'All these security checks. I swear, it's easier to get guns than meds these days. I told Apollo exclusivity kills sales, but he still insists ...' She sighed and clicked her fingers. 'Delphyne! Delphyne!'

The disembodied eyes of the chameleon serpent materialised along the wall, nearly giving me a heart attack. She slithered onto the counter and snaked her tongue out at Michael as though in greeting, before wandering up the shelves to curl around an old amphora.

'Hm.' Pamela raised an eyebrow. 'What did you do?'

Michael explained about his rap and she nodded. 'Well, that would do it. Delphyne's a sucker for anything with a good beat. She used to work for Typhon, you know, and that giant was like an all-in-one boombox.'

'Typhon?' I shuddered. Once upon a time, the storm giant had nearly caused the destruction of Olympus. Zeus had managed to trap him under a mountain, but not without some pretty serious mishaps during their battle.

'You mean the Delphyne,' Michael said. 'The one that guarded Zeus's tendons when Typhon stole them?'

Delphyne chittered as if to say, That's right, suckers!

Pamela nodded. 'Of course, Typhon's been out of action for millennia. Delphyne's kind of an odd serpent for hire now. But she likes this place.'

'I wonder why,' Michael murmured.

I shifted uncomfortably. Talking about Typhon reminded me of the volcanic explosion Percy and I had accidentally set off last year in the Pacific Northwest. And there was something else that had happened in the heart of Mount St Helens, something we'd never talked about ...

'So,' Pamela said, 'what can I do for you? Mud of Lemnos? Unicorn draught? Or ...' She rattled off a list of what I assumed were medications. 'Mind you, I'll need a prescription for anything stronger.'

'Er, actually, we just need some nectar and ambrosia,' Michael said. 'You can sell those over the counter, right? And something for pegasi, if you've got that.'

'Pegasi.' Pamela sniffed. 'Do I look like a vet?' But she slammed an amphora on the countertop and plucked a couple of the demigod-friendly ambrosia eight-packs from the trays. 'Well, fine. Here's your nectar and ambrosia. Though why anyone would want this stuff, with all the side effects ... especially when there's a better alternative.'
'A better alternative?' I asked.

Pamela's eyes gleamed. She clicked her fingers again. Delphyne materialised from her resting place on the shelves. Gods, that thing with the eyes was unnerving.

'Bring me a cutting, Delphyne,' she said.

The serpent slithered to the window. A moment later, we saw her weaving among the rows of medicinal plants. I guess she didn't just blend in with the walls; she actually moved through them.

Delphyne returned with a simple blue leaf, which she dropped into Pamela's outstretched hand. Pamela held it between two fingers like a precious stone. 'Behold. The cure-all. The prize of the pharmacy. You might call it ...' She paused for dramatic effect. 'A panacea.'

Mystified, I looked at Michael. He shrugged.

Pamela looked insulted. 'Oh, come on. Surely you've heard of it?'

'It's, uh ...' It sounded like one of those SAT prep words, the kind you memorise the meaning of but never actually use in everyday life. Except I could swear its etymology was Greek. 'Wait.' I squinted at her nametag. It did not, in fact, say PAMELA. 'You're Panacea.'

'Well, of course I am.' Pamela/Panacea looked even more disgruntled now. 'Who did you think I was?'

'Uh—we thought this place was run by a descendant of Apollo,' Michael said.

Panacea sniffed. 'Figures. Everyone knows the famous descendants. It's all about Asclepius, and Orpheus, and even Troilus. But when it comes to the goddess of medicines? Oh, no one cares about the pharmacist.' She slammed a new jug on the countertop. 'Even my sister gets more fame. Hygieia—oh, everyone knows about the Clean Hands Count campaign.'

'So, this, uh, panacea,' I said quickly, before she could go off on a rant. 'You were saying ... it cures everything?'

'Oh, it's strong enough to raise a slumbering coma patient,' Panacea said proudly. 'Though beyond that ...' She laughed. 'My father, Asclepius, once had a concoction that could revive the dead, but Great-Uncle Hades got pissed off about that and blasted him dead. Now that was one big Thanksgiving blowout. "You live by my rules, or you die under my roof," and all that.' She frowned. 'Hm. That's the wrong saying, isn't it?'

I pointed to the cutting. 'And that's—this plant?'

Panacea fingered the blue leaf. 'The mixture is distilled from the herb of invulnerability. It's so difficult to get right. But for the right price ...' Her smile was hungry. She closed her fist over the herb. 'Takes twenty-four hours to brew, but I might just have some already in stock ...' She stood on tiptoe and extracted a tiny vial from a shelf.

Michael took it carefully. 'Wow, thanks.'

'So the panacea, and I assume you still want the nectar and ambrosia? And powdered unicorn horn should work for your pegasi.' Panacea rang up the till. 'Can I get your OlympAid card?'

'What?'
'Or just the number if you don't have it on you. I assume you're insured under an AsclepiusCare health plan? No?' She made a tsking noise at our blank faces. 'Okay, that's five thousand drachma, then.'

'What?' I nearly dropped our purchases. 'We can't pay that!'

Panacea's nostrils flared. 'Excuse me? You don't want to pay for your medication?'

'No, that's not—it's just ... five thousand drachmas—that's—that's daylight robbery!'

'If you can't afford it—well, you should've gotten insured, shouldn't you?'

'But—I thought this place existed to help demigods!' Michael protested.

Panacea plucked the medicines out of our hands. Delphyne popped up on the counter, forming a threatening barrier.

'Forget it,' Panacea said. 'I have enough problems meeting my sales quotas without giving away stuff for free.'

Michael and I looked desperately at each other. We couldn't go back to our friends without supplies.

'Wait!' I said. 'Panacea. You—you say you're having a hard time meeting your sales quota?'

Panacea glowered at me over the top of Delphyne's billion blinking eyes.

'So—so—' I struggled for an idea. 'So maybe that's because you don't get enough foot traffic. I mean, with Apollo's restrictions on visitors to your pharmacy ... and I totally get that. You wouldn't want unscrupulous people stealing your formula.'

Delphyne gave a low hiss of agreement. Panacea stroked his scales thoughtfully. Emboldened, I went on.

'Sure, all the best pharmas guard their patents. But they also have a marketing strategy. Look at nectar and ambrosia: there's a huge market for it. Even you stock it.'

Panacea shook the kiddy-pack of ambrosia squares. 'Even though it's got awful side effects. But everyone wants it!'

'Exactly. It's all about demand. If you want to compete, you need a better strategy. See, the big pharmas, they start with free samples. That's how they break into the market. Add a good ad campaign ...' I snapped my fingers. 'Bam. Gold.'

Michael finally caught on. 'Yeah, even the best brands need a good ad to get their product out there. Like, uh, that Detrol ad.' He hummed a few bars of an old overactive bladder drug commercial.

Panacea continued to frown. I wasn't sure if she was buying it.

'Look.' I dug Daedalus's laptop out of my backpack. Thank the gods he'd programmed it to hook up to any available wifi signal, secured or not. I did a quick Google search for the Detrol jingle and found it on YouTube.

'Gotta go, gotta go, gotta go right now,' sang the ad.

'You could do that?' Panacea said dubiously.
'Sure! Of course, an ad campaign is just one part of it. You need the right distribution channels, too. And we can help with that. I mean, we go to a demigod camp. There's your niche market. You wouldn't have to wait for us to come to you—you could just sit and wait for the, uh, royalties to roll in from the sales!'

'Well ...'

'Look, how about we do a mock-up of the advertising?' Michael suggested. He rolled up his sleeves and gave me a significant look.

If I'd thought Michael's impromptu rap for Delphyne impressive, I hadn't heard anything yet. He broke into a dance/rap routine that extolled the virtues of panacea, the mighty cure-all, in rapid-fire ghetto rhyme. I don't know how he managed to come up with lines so quickly, but boy, the kid could rap.

Panacea's interest was definitely piqued. 'You think that would sell?'

'Absolutely,' I said. I typed a command into Daedalus's laptop. It ejected a recording of Michael's spontaneous ad routine on a USB stick. 'All we need is a couple of free samples—oh, and the formula. We'll be your licensed distributors. And we'll even forgo a commission.'

I held the stick between my fingers and tried to look confident and persuasive. Michael mopped his brow, breathing hard from his impassioned performance.

All of Delphyne's eyes flickered to Panacea, like, your call, though I thought—or hoped—maybe the serpent also had a hint of, can't beat that for a deal, in her gaze. Panacea nodded. Delphyne slid off the counter and back out to the garden. Panacea reached over her head for two things: a shallow bowl and a translucent vial. She set them down on the counter, then set a pen hovering over a prescription pad.

'There's a catch to this brew,' she said, letting the herb of invulnerability flutter into the bowl. 'The distillation creates a poison so strong, its fumes can knock out an immortal for days. Why, the first time I experimented with it ...' She shook her head sagely. 'The trick is gold.'

'Gold?' I asked. 'Like—drachmas?'

Panacea sniffed. 'That's tainted. Money and medicine should never mix.'

I thought it was probably best not to mention the exorbitant charge she'd just levied on us for her medicines. 'So you have to use—'

She unscrewed the lid of the vial. Inside, glittering flakes sparkled as bright as the Apollo cabin. 'Pure gold,' she said, dipping her fingers in the jug. Her voice turned slightly sing-song. 'A pinch for safety, two flicks to cure. Add a third when it settles, and a last drop to be sure.'

As she recited, her pen scribbled on the prescription pad, noting down her instructions. She added the gold flakes to the bowl, then poured in a glass of water. 'That should do it. Let it steep for twenty-four hours, no more, no less.'

Delphyne returned with more blue leaf cuttings. Panacea wrapped them in a filmy layer of animal skin (or possibly human, given the exhibits in this museum. I decided I didn't want to know.) She handed this over, along with the vial of gold flakes and three doses of ready-made panacea, the instruction sheet, and the rest of our meds.

I pressed the USB stick into her palm. Panacea took it with a gleeful expression. 'Watch out,
Olympus. Million-drachma idea, right here!'  

I imagined her going out to conquer OlympusTV with her new ad. Gods forbid I'd just created an immortal drug tycoon.

Michael and I packed the medicines carefully into my backpack.

'Nice rapping,' I told him.

He rubbed the back of his neck. 'Yeah, well, I seriously never thought that would ever come in handy.'

The sun was hanging low in the sky by the time we made it back to the National Historic Park. Beckendorf had drifted into unconsciousness by then, despite Silena's coaxing. His breathing was strained and shallow. Michael tipped a vial of panacea into his lips. Within seconds, his colour improved. The ugly red streaks spreading from his wound faded.

'It's working!' Silena looked like she could kiss Michael. 'What is this stuff?'

We explained about Panacea.

'Guess she wasn't kidding about the cure-all part,' Michael said. 'Here—' He passed a vial each to Percy and Clarisse. They popped the corks and drank. Clarisse bent her knee back and forth.

'That's good stuff, Yew,' she admitted.

'Yeah.' Percy unwrapped his arm and moved it in a circle, flexing his muscles as he did so. My throat went suddenly dry. I swallowed hard.

'Ungh.' Beckendorf's eyes fluttered open. Grateful for the distraction, I turned to him. So did Silena.

'Charlie! How are you feeling?'

Beckendorf sat up and put a hand to his forehead. 'Like I got sat on by Mrs O'Leary.'

Silena flung her arms around him. Beckendorf looked stunned, but pleased.

I looked out into the dusky twilight. 'I guess we should probably rest here for the night. Take care of the pegasi and start off tomorrow morning.'

No one argued. Clarisse passed around packs of fun-size chips from her supplies. Percy found a spare shirt somewhere and put it on (I was simultaneously relieved and disappointed). We rubbed powdered unicorn horn on the pegasi's hides while Michael and Silena set their broken wings and legs. Finally, I told the others to get some sleep.

'I'll take first watch.'

Chapter End Notes

I made up none of the Mütter Museum exhibits. Real life can truly be stranger than fiction sometimes! But I did fudge the exhibit list a bit. Ancient medicine is listed as a special exhibition on the web page. But ... teensy detail that I'll claim artistic license for.
Panacea, from which the modern word derives, was indeed a daughter of Asclepius (granddaughter of Apollo).

Delphyne is referenced in Typhon’s battle with Zeus as the guardian of Zeus's sinews, though some sources trace her/him to the serpent that Apollo slew for control of the Delphic Oracle—though in PJO universe this has been attributed to Python. She appears in Percy Jackson's Greek Gods as female, which is why that's the gender I've assigned her.

The Clean Hands Count campaign is a reference to the CDC movement (years too late for this timeline, but all times are one time to gods, right?). You can see the original Detrol ad, from the early 2000’s, on YouTube.

Apologies to those of you across the pond for the tongue-in-cheek references to your healthcare access. The cost of medical care is indeed a problem, though I should state up front that I have plenty of issues with the NHS on this side as well, so healthcare that’s free at point-of-delivery isn’t the panacea one might believe it to be.

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I Do Some Disturbing Bedtime Reading

Chapter Summary

Annabeth digs deeper into the mysterious diary.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I'd lost track of the number of times in my life I'd stood guard while my friends slept. In the days I travelled with Luke and Thalia from one safe house to another, I'd insisted on helping with night watches. One of them always stayed up with me. Thalia would tell me about the gods and the signs they sent us to help us stay alive. Luke had preferred to talk about fighting monsters. I'd wanted to learn how to use a sword like him, but he'd said I should start with a dagger.

'Knives are only for the bravest and quickest of fighters,' he'd insisted. 'They don't have the reach or power of a sword, but they're easy to conceal and they can find weak spots in your enemy's armour. It takes a clever warrior to use a knife. I have a feeling you're pretty clever.'

I'd eaten it all up. Even at seven, I'd known my heritage, and the legacy I had to live up to. The dagger Luke had handed me on our first meeting became my permanent talisman. The dagger said I was clever. The dagger meant I was a true daughter of Athena.

Of course, I knew now that Luke hadn't been entirely truthful. The sword was a more powerful and direct weapon, but that didn't mean you couldn't be crafty with it. Eventually, Luke did teach me sword-fighting at camp, along with a number of handy tricks. Knives were just a different weapon, with a different strategy.

But I got why he'd sweet-talked me into taking the dagger. At the time, I wouldn't have handled a sword proficiently. Better to give me something I could use. Easier to make me want it for myself.

'Cheeseburgers,' Percy muttered in his sleep. A thin line of drool trickled from the corner of his mouth. I grinned and suppressed the urge to help him wipe it away. It sounded like he was having a normal dream for once, though with demigods, you never know when a normal dream will morph into a nightmare. In his sleep, he looked twelve years old again, like the baffled kid who'd passed out on the porch of the Big House when we first met.

Gods, how many times had I watched him sleep? We'd been on quests together every summer since we were twelve. There'd been that crazy mission to the Underworld, then our voyage through the Sea of Monsters, and then our trek through the Labyrinth last summer. And now, here we were again.

Percy definitely wasn't the clueless twelve-year-old who'd stumbled into camp clutching a Minotaur horn any more. Oh sure, he still made those stupid jokes, and played dumb half the time, and cracked that roguish smile with the lopsided dimple that made my pulse quicken ...

Okay, I might as well admit (if only to myself) that I'd probably had a teensy crush on him for a while. Just a bit.
But he was still my best friend. Stupid, loyal, dependable Percy. My heart skipped when I remembered how he'd taken that hit from the demon pigeons for me earlier. I guess it didn't really mean anything. If I'd been in his position, I'd have done the same thing. We'd been saving each other for ages now. And last year, in the Labyrinth ...

My fingers found the key on my camp necklace and twisted it round the cord. Last summer had been the most confusing one in my life, and it wasn't just because we'd been lost in an impossible maze. First, Luke had come to San Francisco and begged me to run away with him—something that would have been a dream come true in the pre-Percy days when my grand plan was to Get A Quest and Make Luke Notice Me.

(Yeah, that was embarrassing to think about now.)

Then I'd lost my head in the depths of a pressurised volcano and gone and kissed Percy. I'd thought maybe, just maybe, he'd kissed me back, only Mount St Helens had erupted, taking Percy with it. By the time he returned to camp, he had a new girl (or possibly two—I was never entirely certain what had happened between him and the immortal goddess who'd nursed him back to health) and he acted like our kiss had never happened.

And to top the summer off, Luke had gotten himself possessed by an evil Titan. If there was a self-help book on How To Exorcise An Evil Time Lord From Your Ex-Crush's Body, I certainly hadn't found it yet.

I'd vowed at the end of summer to save both my friends—Luke and Percy. I'd already failed Luke once. My old crush on him had kept him from realising what was really going on with him until it was too late. I couldn't afford to let some stupid feelings for Percy muddle my brain, not with a war brewing this summer and the Great Prophecy looming over our heads, the one that promised to reap his soul. I needed to keep a clear head.

Except my brain didn't want to co-operate. It kept replaying the way Percy had protected me from the Stymphalian birds ... and then how good he'd looked after without his shirt on ...

'Get a grip, Annabeth,' I muttered.

Fortunately, I'd brought along a distraction. I found my flashlight and the green diary in my backpack, and picked up where I'd left off.

Halcyon Green and his sister had gotten to camp and settled into the Apollo cabin. He talked about their cabin mates' powers—archery, music, healing ... not so different from the present-day cabin seven kids. But no one else had the gift of prophecy. Cath gained popularity as the Oracle, since every camper wanted to go on a quest (I could relate). Halcyon started to get glimpses of the future, too, but his friends wouldn't believe him. He foretold one of them would get stuck in the Lotus Casino, but though she never turned up again, no one could be certain it had come true. Other predictions they wrote off as lucky guesses. And some were flat-out wrong, like when he prophesied that their head counsellor would get a windfall, but he lost big in the camp betting pool. The kids started to call him Hoaxer Hal after that.

Hal stopped reading futures. They went home to D.C. at the end of summer, and there, he had a dream. It read like many demigod dreams, starting on an unknown battlefield, though from the description, it might well have been a vision of the actual World War II frontlines. Except the field commander wielded a bronze bayonet and his aide played a golden pipe to marshal their men forward into battle. And when their soldiers routed the Nazis, the commander's weapon became a massive, jagged stick that crackled with electricity.
Zeus and Apollo stood on the bloody battlefield, discussing an all-too-familiar prophecy.

'The sons of Hades are out of hand. We cannot let this happen again. And with the Great Prophecy your Oracle pronounced at the solstice—'

'Yeah, about that ...' Apollo twirled his pipe. 'I was thinking about the best way to tell ...'

Zeus made a scoffing noise, like he couldn't believe how dim-witted Apollo was. 'It rang through Olympus the moment it was made. You'd know that, if you hadn't been so pre-occupied with coddling your children.'

'It is just another prophecy, my lord. It may not come true for years and years.'

'No?'

'None of you have children under the age of sixteen. And if you guys really stop having, uh, you know, dalliances ...'

'Oh?' Zeus's voice grew low and dangerous. 'Our pact was a sham! We vowed on the Styx that we would have no more mortal children, but Hades deceived us.'

Apollo scratched his head. 'How? If you invoked Styx—' he shuddered, 'Hades is subject to her T&C's as much as the rest of us.'

'He already has more children. Two with the same mortal woman, in fact. A detail that he so conveniently hid when we made this pact.'

I had a pretty good idea where this was going. Until two years ago, two children of Hades had been hidden away in the Lotus Casino, frozen in time since the 1940s. Grover had found the di Angelo siblings at a school in Maine and called on Percy, Thalia, and me to help extract them. (Tl;dr: it turned into a huge fiasco, during which Bianca di Angelo and Thalia's predecessor, Zoë Nightshade, had perished, and Percy and I had taken it in turn to carry the sky. Yes, the actual sky. Our hair still had grey streaks from taking its weight.)

These days, Nico di Angelo was wandering around the country. Chiron said he occasionally popped up at camp, though he never stayed long. I didn't really know where he hung out most of the time. As the only son of the final brother in the Big Trio, Nico could potentially fulfil the Great Prophecy as well as Percy. Though since he was only about twelve, that would mean we'd be fighting this war for years.

Did Hal Green know something about the di Angelos, maybe a hint about whether Nico was fated to take on the role of the half-blood of the prophecy? Could this have been what Phoebe had meant by knowing understanding its history?

I read on. In Hal's dream, Zeus announced his intention to prevent the prophecy from centring on a child of Hades. Hal woke up retching (having had my share of stomach-turning dreams, I could relate to this, too). But his dream galvanised him to try and look into the future again. With Cath's help, he induced a vision: Hades checking Nico, Bianca, and their mother into a nearby hotel.

The Green siblings decided that they had to warn the di Angelos that Zeus had it in for them. They started to stake out the hotel after school every day, hoping to run into them. It was on Hal's watch that their surveillance paid off. He spotted Hades coming through the doors. In an act of bravery or stupidity—I wasn't sure which—he approached the Lord of the Dead.
That didn't go so well. The moment Hal mentioned Bianca and Nico, Hades nearly crushed his windpipe. If Cath hadn't run in, the diary would probably never have existed.

'Stop!' Cath yelled. She must have been watching from outside, because she appeared out of nowhere and tackled Hades. I wanted to scream, NO! but it was hard to convey the warning through my eyes when they were watering from the lack of air.

Hades turned. He raised his hand, possibly to smite her, but the wave of energy that filled the room washed over her with no effect that I could see.

'Leave him alone,' Cath insisted. 'He's not threatening you. He's trying to help.'

'Who are you?' Hades demanded. 'Why does my power not affect you?'

Cath straightened. When she replied, her voice took on a resounding quality—not the raspy cackle of the Delphic spirit, but not her usual soft lilt either.

'I am the Oracle of Delphi,' she said. 'Speaker of the prophecies of Phoebus Apollo.' Green mist swirled around her. It settled like a cloak on her shoulders, then subsided.

Hades looked taken aback. He stumbled away from us. The invisible hand released me. I clutched my throat, gasping and coughing.

'You are the Oracle,' Hades said. He stared at Cath as though he meant to bore holes in her with his blazing eyes.

Only the briefest flicker of her eyes towards me betrayed Cath's nervousness. 'Yes.'

'Speaker of this ... prophecy.'

'Yes.'

'And it speak of—my children?'

Cath shook her head. 'Not specifically, sir. It mentions a half-blood of the three eldest gods. But Zeus thinks it means your kids. Your younger kids, that is.'

Cath convinced Hades to take her words seriously, but a week later, things went wrong. The twins were walking home from school when there was an explosion at the site of the hotel. Zeus had struck.

After Hades's attack on Hal, Cath insisted he couldn't go check the hotel. 'He can't hurt me,' she pointed out. 'Protection of Delphi and all.' I read this with a grimace. I wouldn't have let my best friend in the world run off to face the Lord of the Dead on their own. And Hal shouldn't have either.

And then I heard the scream. It was terrible, a long, drawn-out cry that was Cath's and at the same time not. It didn't belong to this world. It ripped through my ears and sent me falling into a whirlpool of images ...

I saw Hades bent over the limp body of his girlfriend, cursing at the skies. I saw a plane tumbling from the air in a fiery blaze. I saw a pair of demigods sprinting from a burning mansion. I saw a pine tree on a windy hill, and a golden coffin in a black mausoleum. A giant throne room. Blood. So much blood, spreading across the ground in an ocean of red.
The screams stopped, and I was running so fast, I thought my lungs would burst.

I found her alone in the rubble, looking completely shell-shocked.

'Cath!' I grabbed her shoulders. 'What happened?'

Cath blinked at me slowly, coming out of a trance. At first I thought it'd be like her prophecies, where she wouldn't remember a word she'd uttered. Then she said, 'He—he cursed me.'

'What? I thought you said he couldn't—'

'Well, not me exactly. I don't think I'm cursed. I don't think he gives two hoot about me. It's more like ... the Oracle. He said—he swore that I'd never—well, the Oracle would never have another host. That as long as his children were cursed by my prophecy, she would languish inside me even after I withered and died.'

'What does that mean?'

Cath's voice sounded too tired, as though she'd already withered under Hades's curse. 'I don't know. He can't kill me. He said so himself. I guess I just have to be the Oracle forever.'

'Maybe we can fix this. You said it lasts as long as his children are cursed, right? If we work out the Great Prophecy, maybe we can un-curse them, and then you'll be free, too!'

'No!' Cath said sharply. 'We've done enough working things out. Don't you see, Hal? That's what started this whole thing. You asked me to look, and the Oracle and her prophecy found me.'

Guilt settled lumpily in my throat. 'But that wasn't our fault. You can't control the Oracle. Maybe she was already going to find you.'

'Exactly. We can't control the Fates. This is it, Hal. No more reading the future.'

'You're the Oracle. How are you going to get away from it?'

Cath's shoulders slumped. 'I've got no choice. But you do. Promise me you won't speak of the future to me again.'

'Summer reading homework?'

I slammed the book shut. Percy was lying on his side, propped up on his good arm. He looked like he'd been awake for a while. The idea that he might have been watching me for some time with that goofy smile on his face made my heart do the jitterbug.

'Er, no.' I wasn't really sure how to explain the diary. The stuff I'd just read about the Great Prophecy ... Percy didn't even know the full thing. Chiron had always been adamant that we keep it from him. And after reading about Hades's curse on the Oracle ... well, that seemed like a good reason not to talk about it.

'Just a book,' I said.

Percy didn't pursue the matter. He stretched and rolled into a sitting position. 'You must be tired.
Why don't you get some rest? I'll take the next watch.'

I saw no reason to argue. I slipped the diary into my backpack, pulled the bag under my head, and closed my eyes.

Of course, I dreamed.

I was back on the windless cliff with the marble altar and stained rock. The moon was a large, cold eye in the quiet night, overlooking the valley where the Greek army slept, waiting to set sail for Troy.

One person wasn't asleep. A girl of maybe sixteen slipped out from one of the tents and made her way up the winding path to the clifftop. In her simple white chiton with her long brown hair loose around her shoulders, she looked like a ghost in the moonlight. In her arms, she carried a basket of fruit. She brought this to the marble altar, where she started a fire. Just as she was about to make her offering, a figure emerged from the shadows with a heavy sack over one shoulder.

'You should not have come.'

The girl jumped, dropping her basket. Fruit spilled everywhere. An apple rolled towards the warrior who had emerged. He stopped it with his foot.

'Oh, Achilles.' The girl put a hand over her heart. 'You scared me!'

Achilles picked up the apple and held it out to her. 'You are not safe here, Iphigenia.'

'I only came to make an offering to the goddess,' Iphigenia said. She took the apple and averted her eyes shyly. 'In—in view of our impending marriage.'

For a groom-to-be, Achilles showed no sign of anticipatory bliss. 'I do not just mean here. You should not have come to Aulis at all.'

'But—my father summoned me. He said we were to be married at once, before you set sail for Troy. He said our wedding would bring great fortune on the expedition.'

'It was a trap. You have not been summoned here to be married.' Achilles pointed to the slab of rock in front of the marble altar. The rust-red stain on its surface shone ominously in the moonlight.

Iphigenia took a step back. Her eyes opened in horror. 'My father—he wouldn't—'

'He had no choice. His men threatened to desert if the winds refuse to blow.'

'But then ...' Iphigenia rubbed at her bare arms. 'Surely you are worried about the winds, too?'

Achilles laid his sack on the marble slab and untied it. Inside was a fawn, bound by the legs. He pulled a dagger from his scabbard. Iphigenia gasped and covered her eyes with her hands, not daring to watch as Achilles stabbed the fawn in the heart. Blood poured from the wound, adding fresh rivulets to the rust patterns already etched in the rock's surface.

'A sacrifice,' Achilles cried to the sky. 'To honour the gods and raise the winds. I respect the gods, but I keep my promises, too.'

He turned to Iphigenia. 'When I agreed to our betrothal, I vowed to protect you. That vow precedes any promise I made to defend the virtue of another man's wife.' He held out the dagger to her, handle first. 'This dagger was given to me by Athena herself. Take it with you when you flee. It will protect you in my stead.'
Iphigenia was still as the marble. 'But—but where will I go?'

'It matters not, as long as you leave this place.' Achilles reached for her hand and placed the dagger securely in her palm. He closed her fingers around it, then brought her knuckles to his lips. 'Perhaps I will not have the honour of marrying you tomorrow. But my heart will be lighter knowing that you were not brought here in my name to die.'

Tears shone in Iphigenia's eyes. She stared at the dagger in her hands. Its blade glowed bronze in the moonlight, curved like my own. 'Thank you.'

She stood on her toes and kissed Achilles on the lips. Then she ran off into the woods.

'You will pay for that.'

Achilles turned. The priest, Calchas, was standing just below the rise of the hill. Backlit by the moonlight, he looked like an avenging angel. But Achilles seemed unperturbed. 'I did what needed to be done.'

'If you had done what was needed, you would have seen the girl to the altar at daybreak.'

'I sacrificed a fawn to the gods in her stead,' Achilles said. 'I will not have the blood of an innocent—an innocent I swore to protect—on my hands.'

'The Fates demand a life to set things right.' Calchas's voice resonated with power. 'If not hers, someone's. What I prophesied will be claimed. Be warned, Achilles. This decision will return to haunt you.'

Achilles laughed harshly. 'I am invincible, Calchas. The goddess Styx protects me. The gods themselves cannot touch me. Take your predictions of doom elsewhere.' He raised his hand. 'Do you feel that? It is the breeze. The winds are already changing. Your prophecy is wrong.'

The wind ruffled through my hair. Achilles was right: the air was moving, accelerating.

And then the dream shifted abruptly, just like it had before, as if someone had changed the channel.

I saw the cages of demigods again, only this time, I was inside the bars with the group of younger children. These were the ones too young to fight, whom Ethan Nakamura had condemned as monster chow. The older demigods were caged across a courtyard. This place was different from the previous dream, a loading dock between rows of abandoned warehouses with rusting iron roofs and walls with peeling paint.

There was something familiar about the place.

Everyone was asleep. The kids in my cage murmured, some crying out in their dreams. One of the girls hugged a teddy bear in her arms. Traces of tears shone on her cheeks. My throat constricted. She couldn't have been more than seven. For a second, her image blurred, and it was myself I saw, crouched under a sheet of corrugated tin, trembling as footsteps drew closer.

Wait.

This place.

I knew this place. It wasn't in Charleston. The warehouses, the loading dock—once upon a time, there'd been a stack of corrugated metal sheets propped up against the one of the walls, thick and heavy enough to hide a scared young demigod whose only weapon was a rusty hammer.
This was where I'd met Luke and Thalia, all those years ago.

But ... why were they here? Kronos has said they were going to Charleston. Unless they'd already been there and moved back up north ...

'Interesting.' Kronos's high, cold voice drifted across the courtyard. He was near the other cage, the one with the older demigods. It seemed more crowded in there tonight. He must have captured several others. 'I sent a surprise to Philadelphia earlier. My spy did not mention any friends already in Charleston.'

'I don't know, my lord.' The stringy form of Alabaster Torrington emerged from behind the other cage. 'Perhaps I should interrogate her, find out the connection—'

'No.' Luke appeared by Torrington's side. 'As long as they are all responding to the bait, it matters not. My brothers will take care of the others. If they will not join us, we will crush them.'

'Yes, sir. Can I ask ... why didn't we stay longer in Charleston? We could have—'

'It is not for you to understand. All you need to know is that there is something I seek. Something important to the war on Olympus. Charleston was a dead end. There are two possibilities left. One I will investigate tomorrow. The other ...' His voice trailed off. I imagined his lip curling in Luke's most scathing expression. 'If he did give it to the girl, then I must find her. Send someone in search of Thalia Grace.'

Chapter End Notes

The line about knives being for the bravest and quickest of fighters comes from TLO and The Diary of Luke Castellan.

Trojan War mythology differs on the fate of Iphigenia, the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. The version I'm using is from Euripides's Iphigenia in Aulis: she was sent there under the pretence of wedding Achilles, only to be sacrificed to raise the winds for the ships to set sail for Troy. Variants suggest she was saved by Artemis at the last moment, replaced by a deer, or replaced by a princess, daughter of Helen by Theseus, who was the true Iphigenia called to be sacrificed. My version here draws from these, but is my fictional variant.
We Meet The Dragon With Too Many Heads

Chapter Summary

The quest team come up against a polycephalous monster.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I tried to Iris-message Thalia as soon as I woke up. Unfortunately, all I got was a recording of *I Can Sing A Rainbow*, with a pleasant female voice-over telling me that the person I'd just requested was not available. The rainbow spit my drachma back into my lap.

Maybe all messages to the Hunters had to go through their central line. Fortunately, I knew who handled that.

'Ismene, Hunters of Artemis!'

An old Rolling Stones tune came on this time. The rainbow fizzled and a girl with a nebula of white hair popped up in it. I didn't know if it was just a bad Iris-connection, but her eyes wouldn't stay the same colour. They cycled through shades of grey, like a darkening thundercloud. If she was a Hunter, I hadn't met her yet. All I knew was that she certainly wasn't Thalia or my friend Izzy.

'Hunters are a no-go, hun,' she said. 'They got put on the DNC registry a couple of weeks ago.'

'The what?'

'You know, the Do Not Call list—when you don't want IMs coming in.'

'Isn't that, like, for telemarketers?'

Nebula-Hair shrugged. 'Well, the gods like to go incognito sometimes. Like when Hermes's mailbox gets too full, or Zeus is avoiding Hera's calls ... Anyway, I'm afraid your Hunter friends must have gone stealth mode.' She frowned. 'Either that or they're out of commission. That happens sometimes. I remember that time Persephone got kidnapped. Iris had to deal with so many panicked calls from Demeter that couldn't get through. Bad reception in the Underworld, you know.'

I didn't like the sound of that. 'Don't you know which it is? I mean, wouldn't they have told you if they were going, uh, incognito?'

'I'm afraid not, hun. I just route the messages.' She gave me a sympathetic look. 'Here, keep your drachma. Technically I'm supposed to take it if I handle a call personally, but I'll make an exception.' She tossed the golden coin out of the rainbow, winked, and disappeared.

'The Hunters?' Silena had drawn the last watch. She was sitting up with the pegasi, rubbing down Cupcake's mane. 'What are you calling them for?'

'I need to talk to Thalia. She—'

Before I could finish my sentence, Percy's arms flailed in his sleep and jabbed Clarisse in the ribs.
She jerked awake and drew her knife immediately, almost putting Michael's eye out.

'Whoa, what the hell?' Michael, waking to the flash of sharp bronze in his face, scooted back onto Clarisse's backpack. There was a loud crackle as he crushed Clarisse's junk food stash.

'You idiot!' Clarisse yelled.

'Dude, you're trying to kill me in my sleep!'

'Er, sorry.' Percy rubbed his eyes. 'I think I—'

Beckendorf sat up. 'What's going on?'

'Okay, enough!' I waved my arms for attention. 'Nobody's trying to kill anybody.'

'Yet,' Clarisse grumbled. She opened her bag and passed the smashed chips around for breakfast.

'What were you saying before, about the Hunters?' Silena asked. 'Why were you calling them?

'You called the Hunters?' Percy said sharply.

'Yes, but listen, there's something more important. I don't know if any of you dreamed about the cages again last night—'

Everyone nodded and looked at me expectantly.

'Luke—Kronos, I mean—has moved. They're in Richmond now.' I didn't explain how I'd recognised the scene.

'Well, that's good news,' Clarisse said. 'That's only an hour or so away from here. We'll be there in no time if we set off now.'

'Why Richmond, though?' Beckendorf asked. 'I mean, I guess it makes sense that they're moving north. But if there's a pattern to Kronos's movements ...'

I twisted the key dangling from my camp necklace. None of my friends knew the significance of Luke's new location. I'd never spoken of how I met Luke and Thalia, not even to Percy.

But the place should be meaningless to Kronos. Only Luke would have placed any importance on Richmond—and only if our meeting mattered to him. I thought of his eyes, flickering between gold and blue. Had Luke been trying to shine through?

'We have another problem.' Michael was examining the pegasi. 'I don't think the pegasi are going to manage the journey just yet.'

Cupcake's crooked wing twitched. Guido tried to get up, but his bad leg shook under his weight. Strawberry hung her head and folded her broken wing as though ashamed of it.

'It's okay, girl,' I told her. 'It's not your fault. You were amazing yesterday.'

Blackjack whinnied and tested his wings. He'd been one of the least affected. The unicorn horn powder had done its job well on him.

'He says he's fine,' Percy translated. 'And Pork Pie and Champ are good to go, too.'

'That's three pegasi for six of us,' Beckendorf said, scratching his head. Unlike the pegasi, his injuries
had healed overnight. The panacea had worked a miracle. I couldn't even see the gash the Stymphalian birds had torn in his arm any more. And far from being deathly weak, he looked fresher and more rested than the rest of us.

Silena stroked Cupcake's mane sadly. 'We can't leave them alone here in this state.'

'We can't wait around for them to get better either,' Clarisse said. 'We know where Kronos is now, but he could be anywhere by tomorrow. We've got to get to those cages today. Unless any of you knows where he intends to head next.'

She glared at me, but I had no answers. Whatever Kronos was looking for in Richmond, I had no idea what it was, nor what connection it had with Charleston.

'Clarisse is right,' I said. 'This is our best shot.'

Silena stood with her hand still on Cupcake. 'You guys go, then. I'll stay behind and take care of the pegasi.'

'We're not leaving you behind either!' Beckendorf said immediately.

'I'm no good in a fight. And,' Silena pressed her cheek to Cupcake's face, 'I'm good with pegasi.'

Her roan pegasus nuzzled her. Beckendorf opened his mouth to argue, but Michael spoke up first.

'I'll stay with her. I can help look after them.'

Clarisse looked like she was about to make a scathing comment, probably something along the lines of, you chicken! Only she couldn't really taunt Michael without insulting Silena as well.

'You guys sure about this?' Percy asked.

Silena nodded. 'Michael and I will stay with the pegasi until they're healed, and we'll fly them back to camp.'

None of us were thrilled about splitting up, but it was the best option. We divvied up our supplies, leaving the panacea ingredients for Silena and Michael to take straight back to camp.

We saddled up the remaining pegasi. With only three left, I had to team up with Percy on Blackjack. I tried to stay nonchalant as he got on behind me and put his arms around my waist.

Beckendorf hesitated before mounting Champ. He looked directly at Silena. 'Maybe I should stay, too.'

'It's your quest,' Clarisse said impatiently. 'You can't stay behind. Besides, we need more people to raid a Titan camp than to babysit a pair of pegasi.'

Silena nodded. 'Go, Charlie. We'll be fine.'

Beckendorf didn't look happy about it, but he climbed onto Champ's back. A moment later, we were airborne.

'Have you been back?' Percy asked as we soared over Wilmington. 'You know, since you, uh ...'

I wondered how he knew about Richmond Iron Works, then I realised he probably meant since my dad moved.
'No since we moved to San Francisco.' That had been almost two years ago. The last time I'd been in Richmond, my dad and I had had a falling out over the big move. We'd made up, of course, but it wasn't exactly a great memory.

Could Kronos be looking for something in my old house? But Luke knew I'd moved to San Francisco. He'd shown up at my doorstep last summer, after all ...

I still hadn't told anybody about that.

I thought of the way Kronos had searched Luke's memory in Phoebe's cave. *The girl*, he'd said. And he'd sent scouts to find Thalia.

Suddenly, I remembered something Thalia had told me. We'd argued that fall, because I thought she'd gone off to find Luke without telling me. *'I went to Charleston, to the cave where I first met him,'* she'd admitted.

And after she'd done that, she'd shown up at my window, dragging me out of bed at 3am to rescue a motherload of celestial bronze weapons from an army of giant ants. Could that be what Kronos was looking for?

But none of those weapons remained in my old house. My dad had carted them off and melted down the bronze to make bullets for his Camels. Luke might not know about that, though. Kronos might well believe that Thalia had absconded with them.

I must have looked pretty troubled, because Percy squeezed my shoulder. *'You okay?'*

*'It's Thalia.'* I explained about the weapons stash we'd relieved from the Myrmekes two years ago, and how Kronos had ordered Torrington to find her. *'I need to warn her that he's looking for her.'*

*'*That's why you were calling them.'* He sounded relieved, even though this was all bad news.

*'*Yes. But I couldn't get through at all. Iris's messenger, or whoever she was, said they'd been off the grid for a week.'*

Percy frowned. *'Like Grover.'*

*'*What?*

*'*Chiron said something to me before we left. He hasn't been answering any of his messages.'*

This was sounding worse and worse. *'I don't like the sound of that ... do you think he could be with them?''*

Percy shrugged. *'Could be. He's always on some sort of environmental crusade now. I'm sure he'd contact me though, if anything was up. Empathy link, remember?''*

I'd forgotten they shared a bond. *'Yeah, I guess ...'*

*'*They'll be fine,'* Percy assured me. *'Maybe the Hunters did it so they'd be harder for the Titans to find. If Grover's with them, that could be why he can't give away his location. Anyway, Thalia's tough. They can deal with whatever Kronos sends after them.'*

*'*I hope so.'* I frowned at the glimmer of the Delaware River snaking its way south below us. *'Kronos said he had two options. One of it was in Richmond. I don't like that they're there. I'm worried it's a trap, though I can't figure out how.'*
'Even if it is, what choice do we have?' Percy shifted his weight behind me. 'It'll be okay. Remember Mount Tam, and Polyphemus's island? All of it was a trap, and we still made it out okay.'

I turned to look at him. 'Do you have a plan?'

'No, but I know you always do.'

I was touched by his faith in me. I didn't want to admit that I didn't really have a plan this time. There was just too much uncertainty about what we might face.

After an hour's flight, the Richmond skyline came into view. It was weird trying to navigate it from the air. All the years I'd lived there, I'd never had a bird's-eye view of the city. But I could see the James River slicing the city in half before it curved southwards on its path to the sea. That helped me to get my bearings. I took the lead, directing our pegasi to land a block away from Richmond Iron Works.

Memories assaulted me as we crept towards the loading dock. Eight years ago, I'd fled here, pursued by terrifying monsters in the dark.

I'd been on the streets for maybe two weeks, scavenging food from trash cans and shivering under abandoned tarps at night. The only weapon I'd been able to scrounge had been a rusty old hammer, which I'd clutched like a life preserver, praying it would be enough to fight off the monsters that prowled around my hideouts.

I'd almost been tempted to go home, but I knew I couldn't. The night before I ran off, the spiders in my room had promised me they would come for me. If I returned, they'd kill me. My dad and stepmom hadn't believed me when I told them.

Besides, neither of them had come looking for me.

The only thing that kept me going had been the voice of my mother in my head. Soon, Athena had promised. A real family will find you soon.

The night I met Luke and Thalia, I'd run into a pack of monster bats. They'd chased me away from the river, through the park and into the industrial estates. I'd prayed, sobbing, to my mother for help. The next moment, an owl had appeared, beckoning for me to follow. I'd sprinted down the alley and dove behind the piles of corrugated metal sheets ...

'Annabeth?'

I blinked. Percy, Beckendorf, and Clarisse were all staring at me.

'You okay?' Percy said.

'I'm fine,' I said quickly, trying to recall what they'd just said. Beckendorf had suggested a quick recon, in two groups, to find the cages and ascertain what guarded them. 'Yeah, that'll work,' I agreed. 'Two teams. We'll——'

Percy yanked me back. 'No need,' he hissed, point around the corner.

It was exactly like in our dreams: two metal cages lying about ten feet apart. They were low-ceilinged, probably no more than six feet high. Both were full of sleeping demigods, the younger ones on the left and the older ones on the right. I was startled to see how many the Titans had captured. There were about a dozen older kids, including one satyr. The younger ones were even more numerous, nearly twenty of of them squeezed into the ten-foot-square cage. Lying forlornly in
the space between the cages was a ragged teddy bear. It must have fallen from its young owner's arms.

Ethan Nakamura and Alabaster Torrington were nowhere in sight. Neither was Luke. Instead, pacing back and forth between the cages was one of the most bizarre creatures I'd ever seen.

I guess the best word for it would be 'dragon', but it wasn't really like any other dragon I'd encountered before. It reminded me of Delphyne, the billion-eyed serpent, except this scaly reptile had as many heads. There were so many of them, if you started counting from one side, you'd lose track (and probably be eaten) before you even made it to the middle. Some of the heads arched above its stumpy body; others jutted out on elongated necks over its front claws. Still other heads connected straight to its scales like a kid's glue-on craft project. No two heads appeared to be identical: there were big ones, small ones, red ones, green ones, heads with flaring nostrils, heads with large boar snouts. The only common theme among them was that each head had only one eye.

'It's like a hydra and a Cyclops had a kid,' Percy said.

Clarisse rolled her eyes. 'That's the Ismenian dragon.'

'The what?'

'It used to guard Ares's sacred spring.'

'Explains why it's so ugly,' Percy muttered.

I elbowed him in the ribs. 'I remember the story. Cadmus slew the dragon, didn't he? And built a city near the spring. Which he rededicated to Athena.'

Clarisse nodded. 'He raised an army from the dragon's teeth, too.'

'Like the ones that used to guard the Golden Fleece?' Beckendorf asked.

'Yeah. Skeleton warriors.' Clarisse looked like she wouldn't mind planting some spartoi for her own use. Personally, I preferred my allies not be dead.

'Oh man,' Percy groaned. 'I hate those things.'

'Well, let's just worry about how to get past the dragon first.' If only I could remember how Cadmus had slain it. Why did Greek myths have to be annoyingly vague on details like that?

'Duh,' Clarisse said, reaching for her spear. 'We pulverise it.' She probably would've gone one-on-one with the polycephalous beast if Percy and I hadn't held her back.

'Hello, did you see how many heads it's got?' Percy said. 'We're like four against four billion!'

'So?'

I exchanged a look of exasperation with him. 'So we need a plan!'

'Guys.' Beckendorf fiddled nervously with some loose scrap metal he'd found on the ground. 'We don't need to kill the dragon.'

'You're kidding, right?' Clarisse said. 'Exactly how do you expect to get past that thing if it's not dead?'

Beckendorf rolled the scrap metal into the shape of a ball. I had no idea how he managed to mould
the iron with his bare hands, but it gave me an idea. 'Beckendorf's right. We just need to get past the
dragon. We need a distraction.' I turned to him. 'Remember what you said at the war council? We use a decoy.'

Beckendorf examined his metal ball. 'Those myths about dragon men—they said Jason and the
Argonauts distracted them by throwing rocks into their midst. Maybe the dragon's heads will be the
same.

I nodded. 'Cadmus did the same thing with his spartoi. It's worth a shot. But we can't just set the
dragon heads fighting right there—too risky. We need to lure it away and then keep it distracted
elsewhere.'

Beckendorf slipped the metal ball into his pocket and scooped up another handful of scrap metal.
'Leave it to me.' He turned, then seemed to remember he was supposed to be the quest leader. 'Er,
Clarisse, you come with me. Percy and Annabeth, can you guys get the kids out of there?'

'As soon as you give the signal,' I said.

They disappeared into the late morning shadows behind the dilapidated warehouses.

Chapter End Notes

The Hunters' 'central line', Ismene/Izzy, is another reference to the third story in this
series, *Necklace of Harmonia*, as is the brief reminiscence about Thalia and the
adventure with the Myrmekes.

If you're curious about the music references, the Rolling Stones tune I had in mind was
*Blinded by Rainbows*. The cameo rainbow girl is, of course, Fleecy from *Son of
Neptune*.

The many-headed dragon is a reference to Percy's narration in *The Bronze Dragon* from
*The Demigod Files*: 'I've fought single-headed dragons, double-headed, eight-headed,
nine-headed and the kind with so many heads that if you stopped to count them you’d
be pretty much dead.' I figured he must have met the latter at some point unmentioned in
the actual series!
It wasn’t long before Beckendorf and Clarisse started their distraction. The ball of scrap metal rolled off the roof of one of the warehouses, landing with a thump at the many-headed Ismenian dragon's feet. Five heads peered over curiously, then snapped at it. As soon as any head came close, the ball rolled away, positioning itself nearer to a different group of heads. Slowly, it got the attention of all the dragon's numerous heads, always taking care to stay just out of reach. For the five minutes or so that Beckendorf had had to put this together, it was remarkable workmanship.

Then the ball grew legs. Eight spindly attachments sprouted from its sides, lifting it an inch off the ground. The ball skittered across the concrete on its new limbs, moving terrifyingly like a—like a—

I cringed and backed up against the alley wall, clenching my teeth together. I did not want to think about spiders, especially not while in Richmond.

Percy’s hand found mine. ‘Hey,’ he whispered, ‘it's not really a spider. He probably made an automaton, like that disc of Hephaestus's.’

I knew Percy meant well, but this wasn’t exactly comforting. Last year, Hephaestus’s bronze spider—or an eight-legged disc, at any rate—had led us into the heart of Mount St Helens, where we’d gotten surrounded by telkhines. And in the heat of the moment, I'd gone and ...

I pulled my hand away. The dragon was waddling off after the eight-legged ball, which danced back and forth in front of it. The ball stayed just close enough to keep all the dragon heads interested, but far enough to get the beast moving.

‘Here's our chance,’ I said as soon as the dragon disappeared into the warehouses. Beckendorf and Clarisse were no doubt lying in wait for it, but there was no telling how long they could keep the dragon busy. We wouldn't have long.

I noticed two things when we ran into the loading dock. First, each cage was positioned under a black poplar tree, which was really weird. How were there two random trees in the middle of an industrial park? Second, both cages had a wooden bowl balanced on top. Milky white liquid dripped from a branch of each black poplar into the bowls.

Something about that constant drip, drip, drip held my attention. Without really thinking about it, I advanced, holding out my hand to touch the water.

‘Don't!’ Percy grabbed my arm. I blinked and shook my head. My limbs were heavy, like I’d been sleepwalking and had suddenly woken up.

‘Do you know what it is?’
'I'm not sure,' Percy said. 'But it looks familiar ... and not in a good way.' He pulled his pen from his pocket and uncapped it. A second later, his bronze sword, Riptide, was in his hand. He raised it to the flow of water. As soon as the blade touched it, the water changed course and spurted off the edge of Percy's sword. He lowered Riptide and pulled me back. The water turned black as it splashed to the ground.

'That's Lethe water,' Percy said.

'Like ... the river Lethe?' I shuddered, thankful that Percy had had the presence of mind to keep me from touching it. 'But that's an Underworld river. How ...?'

'I don't know,' Percy said. 'But I'm pretty sure. Thalia, Nico, and I were down there last Christmas. Er, long story. But we ran into Ethan Nakamura and a Titan. Eye-patcher or something.'

'Iapetus?'

'Yeah, that's the one. He tried to kill us—the usual drill—but I chucked him in the Lethe. And ... well, it wiped his memory completely. Now he thinks his name is Bob, and he's a janitor for Hades.'

I shivered. If this stuff was strong enough to destroy the memory of a Titan, what could it do to us?

'Yes,' a voice chuckled, making us jump. 'Lethe tends to do that.'

The speaker appeared out of nowhere, hovering in the air next to the dripping poplar branch. At first, I thought he was a ghost—a very familiar-looking ghost, with flaxen hair teased into an Elvis Presley pompadour that went badly with his round, puffy cheeks. Then I realised he didn't even have that much substance. He was only visible from the shoulders up, and was no more than a hazy, disembodied image that flickered worse than a bad Iris-message connection.

Percy seemed to be thinking along the same lines. 'You're not a ghost, are you?'

Bad Hair-Do considered this. 'You could call it astral projection. My body, alas, is in Tartarus, curse the gods.'

'You're a Titan, then.' Percy raised his sword, though I had no idea if it would even have an effect on something without form.

'Oh no, I'm a god.' His face contorted into a sneer. 'A minor god, as the Olympians so generously designate. I presided over the domain of sleep for thousands of years, which you'd think would make me pretty damn important. I mean, you mortals spend a third of your lives sleeping! But no, I still get no respect. And then when I tried to branch out into concert music—'

It suddenly clicked where I'd met this god before. 'I know you! You're Hypnos! I was at one of your concerts on Olympus. You ...' I stopped. Hypnos had put us all to sleep during our field trip to Olympus three years ago. That was the same time Luke had stolen Zeus's master bolt and Hades's helm of darkness, and tried to frame Percy for the theft.

Hypnos's nostrils flared. 'No appreciation for my music. Euterpe complained so much, they threatened to break my lyres if I kept playing. Talk about favouritism. The last straw was when I did Hera a favour and put Zeus to sleep so she could go interfering with some quest behind his back last June—'

'That was you?'

'And what thanks did I get? Hera didn't even lift a finger to help when Zeus came after me. I had to
flee all the way to Tartarus to escape his wrath! But Kronos offered me freedom. I don't dare do more than project my consciousness into the upper world now, but once the Titans rule and we imprison the Olympians in Tartarus instead, I will get out and play all the concerts I want!'

I clenched my fists. On one hand, I could sympathise with Hypnos for getting shafted by Hera the Hypocrite. On the other, his interference had allowed her to mess up my quest last year—and my life.

'Well, you can go back to sleep, snooze-boy,' Percy said. 'We're not letting Kronos win.'

Hypnos sneered. 'You're fighting a losing battle, son of Poseidon. Kronos's army outnumbers yours by far. My sons are all in his service: running test strikes on mortals in Manhattan, enticing demigods to his side ... Their spells will intercept the dreams of all demigods and persuade them to join the Titan army!'

'You're doing this. That's why the satyrs lost track of their half-bloods!'

'Yes.' Hypnos's wavering image was smug. 'Even you were drawn here. But clearly, there are some glitches with the hypnosis. No matter. There are uses for those who won't fight for us.' He jerked his chin towards the cage of younger children. 'The monsters are always hungry.'

My eyes fell again on the teddy bear lying between the cages. I couldn't tell if its owner was still inside the cage, or if she'd already been ... My stomach turned over.

Percy's face was dark and stormy. He lifted Riptide and swiped at the bowl on top of the older children's cage. It smashed to the ground next to the abandoned teddy bear. The sleeping demigods stirred.

'You will pay for that!' Hypnos growled.

'Oh yeah? What you gonna do about it?' Percy challenged. 'News flash, you're a disembodied spirit.'

'I may not be able to fight you, but I'll find a champion who can!' Hypnos let out a wail like an air raid siren. Percy slashed through him with Riptide and the astral projection vanished, but it was too late. Hypnos's brief alarm had already brought someone running.

Expecting the Ismenian dragon, Percy and I both raised our weapons and spun round in a defensive stance. But it was only Alabaster Torrington, the stringy demigod servant whom I'd seen in my dreams. He was dressed in black from head to toe, which might have been good camouflage if it hadn't been mid-morning. I'd have found it odd that he carried no weapon, had I not known this kid was a son of Hecate. He didn't fight by the normal rules.

'So you're the son of Poseidon.' Torrington looked him up and down, unimpressed. 'Lackey of the gods.'

Percy's nostrils flared. I could tell he didn't like being called a lackey, but he kept his temper in check. 'And I suppose you're just another of Kronos's flunkeys.'

'I'm nobody's flunkey,' Torrington spat.

'Then snap out of it, dude.' Percy waved his hand towards the cage. 'Help us get these kids out of here. You can come back to Camp Half-Blood with us. We can protect you.'

Torrington's face contorted. His voice dripped with contempt. 'You favourites of Olympus. Always so condescending. What makes you think I want to return to your pathetic little camp?'
'Fight him!' Hypnos's astral projection winked back into sight over the other cage.

Torrington produced a sickly green notecard with a picture of a golden sword. He clapped his hands together and chanted something in Latin. A second later, he held a heavy gold sword in his hands.

Percy gave me a pointed look and jerked his head towards the cage door. I'd been on enough missions with him to read his expression easily: *I'll take this jerk, you free the demigods.*

The next moment, he engaged Torrington in battle, bronze meeting gold as their swords clashed. Hypnos's projection streamed overhead, screeching for Torrington to 'Kill him, you fool!'

I hurried to the cage and smashed the hilt of my dagger into the lock. Ironically, I would probably do better with the hammer I'd had as a frightened kid. The cage door shook with a loud clang, but the padlock held firm. It was made of a stronger, heavier metal than bronze, dark as liberated Lethe and unyielding as steel.

The kids inside were rousing from their Hypnos-induced slumber. The ones nearest to me curled back in fright, possibly alarmed by the sight of the crazy girl attacking their cage. Only one kid didn't react. I recognised him from my earliest dream: the pudgy, heavy-eyed boy with fair hair in a cowlick over his forehead. He still seemed half-asleep.

One of the girls at the back shuffled forward with a sigh of relief. 'Oh, thank the gods you found m —' She stopped, rubbed her eyes, and stared. Her head whipped from me to Percy and Torrington. 'Wait. You're not Jason and Reyna.'

'Jason and Reyna?'

Quick as a manitcore's strike, the girl pulled a hand trowel out of her pocket, the kind gardeners use for potting plants. I had just enough time to wonder if she meant to dig her way out of the cage before she flipped it upside down. Suddenly, there was a blade in her hand, a curved golden sword unlike any Greek weapon I'd ever seen.

'Who are you, and why have you captured us?' Her sword shot out between the cage bars.

'Whoa!' I leapt back to avoid being stabbed. 'Hey, I'm on your side. I'm trying to get you out of the cage.'

'You're lying.' The girl's eyes were narrow and suspicious. There was a hostile vibe wafting from her —and not just because she was waving a hand-trowel-turned sword in my face. Everything from her purple shirt to the shape of her weapon screamed ENEMY! I had the strangest compulsion to stab her with my dagger.

It was probably Hypnos working his manipulative magic, the same way he'd lured all these demigods here to be brainwashed or killed.

I forced myself to speak as soothingly as I could. 'We're here to rescue you. I'm Annabeth Chase. I'm a demigod, like you. Just let me get this cage open.'

The girl frowned and lowered her weapon. 'I'm Leila, daughter of Ceres,' she said. 'What is your lineage?'

Her words were as strange as her weapon. Ceres was what the Romans had called Demeter, when the Greek pantheon had migrated there, but I'd never heard any of the cabin four kids refer to their mom that way before.
But we had more pressing problems than Leila's vocabulary. Like the padlock on the cage that stubbornly refused to yield to my dagger.

'I tried that,' Leila said. 'It wouldn't budge under my sword either.'

'Mine's Celestial bronze. It's stronger than most metals.'

'Well, mine's Imperial gold.' Leila frowned. 'I thought Celestial bronze was just a myth.'

'I've never heard of Imperial gold.' I tried to wedge the point of my dagger into the lock. That didn't work either.

'Are you a legacy, of first-generation?'

I wished she'd stop interrupting with strange questions when I was trying to figure out how to free her. What did she even mean, legacy? Probably she meant to ask who my godly parent was. 'A daughter of Athena,' I said.

Leila and I both froze.

Athena. My hand went to my camp necklace, where my mother's birthday present hung among the beads. A key that could unlock anything.

*I am afraid that this one will only work once.*

My eyes darted to the other cage. The children inside were still asleep, their faces sweet and innocent in slumber. They were all marked for death. I could choose to save them—but that would leave Leila and the demigods in her cave to Kronos's mercy. And unless we rescued them, they would be pressed into battle against us one day.

'Annabeth!' Percy had knocked Alabaster Torrington out, but while I'd been struggling with the padlock, the Ilsenian dragon had returned. Percy was contending with its myriad of heads, all snapping at him. His message couldn't be clearer: *hurry!*

I bent down and fit my key to the lock. It clicked and sprung free. I threw the door open and the demigods flooded out, most of them looking dazed and unfocused. One guy stumbled at the threshold. I caught him and set him upright, then dashed to the other cage, hoping that maybe, just maybe, the key would work one more time.

No such luck. I couldn't even jam it inside the lock.

Someone grabbed me from behind. Instinct took over: I jabbed my elbow into their gut and stomped on their foot.

Leila drew a sharp intake of breath. *Graecus—Octavian was right.* She came at me with her gold sword. I brought my dagger up to catch her blade as it thrust towards my midriff in a violent stab.

'I'm on your side!' I yelled as I parried with her, but something about this fight felt right, as if I should have been battling her from the start. 'We need to get out of here!'

I couldn't understand it. Leila seemed relieved to be liberated, yet she was attacking me with determined jabs. Her fighting style confused me. Her stabs came straight at me, jerky and restricted in motion. It was like she'd never been taught to use a sword; she wielded it like a knife. This shouldn't have been surprising, since she'd never been to camp, but she was about my age and she'd survived this long. Surely she had to have some skill in defending herself.
The rest of the compound was pandemonium. Percy swirled his way around the billion dragon heads, leaping around like a Tasmanian devil. The dragon's eyes twitched in irritation as they tried to follow his movements. Holographic Hypnos went crazy, shrieking and shuddering. The kids I'd released darted around the compound, screaming. Some ran for it, others huddled uncertainly in the shadow of the cage. Others—my heart sank to see it—dashed to Alabaster Torrington as though drawn to his aid. I had assumed that with the Lethe bowl smashed, Hypnos's spell over them would have broken. Clearly that wasn't the case—unless those demigods were choosing to join Torrington of their own free will.

A familiar war cry rang out from above. I ducked and rolled away from Leila's gold blade, and caught sight of Clarisse and Beckendorf standing on the warehouse roof. Clarisse's electric spear glinted in the sunlight. Beckendorf had one hand raised over his head, clutching a small but deadly-looking metal sphere.

Across the loading dock, Percy yelled and slashed a dragon head from its neck. Five more came at him, nearly taking his foot off. The dragon's jaws scraped his shoe and sliced it open at the toe. Percy tripped and face-planted against the concrete. The dragon roared in triumph.

'Percy!' Beckendorf and I yelled at the same time.

Percy looked up. He understood immediately. He swung Riptide like a discus and let it fly at the dragon, an unorthodox move I wouldn't recommend unless you're confident that your sword will reappear in your pocket later. Alarmed, half the dragon heads jerked back to avoid being decapitated by the flying sword. It lurched towards the warehouse wall.

And Beckendorf released his grenade.

The bomb hit the Ismenian dragon and blasted half its heads to Tartarus dust. Scrap metal flew everywhere, forcing Leila and me to halt our fight and cover our heads. I spluttered and choked as a cloud of ash enveloped us.

In the middle of all this, Clarisse leapt from the warehouse roof. She landed on Leila and knocked her flat onto her back. Percy clambered away from the dragon and ran towards us.

'Get the kids!' I told him, jerking my head towards the group of frightened demigods I'd just freed. Then I turned back to Clarisse. 'Let's get her—Clarisse, stop!'

I pulled her arm back just in time. Her electric spear glanced off Leila's shoulder, instead of piercing her through the heart. The charge shook Leila's body. She crumpled to the ground.

'Are you insane?' Clarisse demanded. 'She was trying to kill you!'

'She's not one of Luke's,' I said. 'Hypnos brainwashed her.'

'You're turning into Prissy,' Clarisse grumbled, but she helped me hoist Leila up.

A second grenade sailed over our heads, slamming into the dragon again. More heads exploded.

Percy ran to the unopened cage. 'How'd you get the other one open?'

'No time to explain, Percy, we have to go!'

He gave me an incredulous look. 'We're just gonna leave them?'

'We can't open it! My key only works once!' The sickening truth curdled in my gut like spoilt milk. I
couldn't think about the choice I'd made, not if I wanted to keep my breakfast inside my stomach.

'Get out of there!' Beckendorf yelled. He'd jumped into the loading dock and was herding four of the freed demigods into an alley.

I tugged at Percy's shoulder. The look he gave me broke my heart, but he moved away from the cage of sleeping children. As we ran, hoisting Leila between us, I turned back for one last look. Alabaster Torrington lay unconscious next to the lonely teddy bear. One of the liberated kids dragged Torrington to his feet. It was the same boy who'd stumbled into me coming out of the cage. In his hands was a green, leather-bound diary.

My heart plummeted to the bottom of my stomach. Without stopping to think, I ran for Torrington, leaving Percy and Clarisse to struggle with Leila's dead weight. I tackled the thief to the ground and tugged the diary from his hands. He yanked it back and aimed a kick at my ribs.

'Annabeth, no!'

Percy's shout came just as something soared over my head. Beckendorf's third grenade smashed into the bowl on top of the unlocked cage. Its contents splattered, sending inky drops of Lethe flying like tiny, memory-wiping missiles.

I caught a glimpse of Percy sprinting across the loading dock. Then the world exploded into whiteness.

Chapter End Notes

A nod here to Percy's Christmas adventure from *The Sword of Hades* in *The Demigod Files*—I try to use the short stories while I can! And this is also an attempt to explain the time when Percy told Annabeth about Bob/Iapetus, since she obviously has heard about it by HoO, but it never is actually shown in canon.

Annabeth's previous meeting with Hypnos is a throwback to the first fic in this series, *Daughter of Wisdom*. Euterpe is the Muse of lyric poetry—i.e., music, so concerts would certainly be her domain! The bit about Hypnos putting Zeus to sleep has basis in the mythology, where twice Hera persuaded Hypnos to exert this power, leading to Zeus being furious with Hypnos, who then hid from his wrath by hiding with Nyx.

I found Alabaster Torrington's story in *Son of Magic* (from *The Demigod Diaries*) interesting on two levels. First, he had a very specific and intense hatred towards the gods and Camp Half-Blood, and even specifically Percy, which lends credibility to the idea that he's encountered him beyond just the warrior who won the Battle of Manhattan. ('I'd never set foot in their camp, and if I did, it would only be to give that son of Poseidon what he deserves. ') Second, he was clearly high enough in Kronos's army that the gods refused to give him amnesty after the war—to the point that Hecate ransomed him for the sake of her other children. I have therefore tried to give him a bigger role and a more clear reason to hate Percy, while working within the constraints of what Percy seems to know in the series.

A third point about Alabaster made me decide to give a peek into what was going on with our friends on the West Coast: despite his history being traced back to the Greek side, Alabaster *had an Imperial gold sword*. At some point during this year (if my
calculations are right), Jason and Reyna ran a quest to Charleston to recover torpedoed Imperial gold weapons. I have therefore referenced that adventure, but left it vague enough for the reader to infer how much Alabaster knows as makes sense to them. That's where Lethe came in most useful as a plot device! Her waters ensure that neither Percy nor Annabeth will have any memory of any of this. Possibly more so since the gods at this stage are so adamant that the camps are kept apart.
Percy Goes Rogue

Chapter Summary

The demigods try to jog their memories of what happened in Richmond.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In my dream, I followed Luke through an unfamiliar part of Richmond. The layout of the neighborhood and the design of the houses was similar to my old suburb, but I couldn't remember if I'd actually been in this area before.

Luke strode purposefully through the streets until he reached a statue of a Confederate army general standing in the middle of a traffic circle. Even though I wasn't close enough to read the plaque at its base, I was sure it was Robert E. Lee. I couldn't pinpoint a specific memory in which I'd seen it before, but maybe I had been here at some point during my runaway days.

Luke examined the statue for a long time. Then he looked across the traffic circle. There was an empty space between the buildings on that side of the street, but I had the strangest feeling that it was visible only to Luke and me. The cars and pedestrians seemed to speed up past it like they were hopping an invisible chasm in the ground.

Maybe it was Kronos, speeding up time for any mortals who got near.

Sure enough, Luke's eyes were a hard, piercing gold. It was a stabbing reminder that this wasn't him.

Kronos stepped up to the empty lot. Scorch marks ran over the earth as if the compound had been torched by an enormous dragon. Although the gardens around us grew rampant with weeds, this lot was completely barren. The air over it seemed to crackle with malevolent energy. Whatever had happened here, it had been so tragic, the earth still reverberated with power.

Kronos pulled Luke's sword from his scabbard. The blade took the form of Backbiter, Luke's double-edged sword of Celestial bronze and steel, but I knew it was really Krono's wicked symbol of power, the scythe that could sever a mortal's soul from his body with one cut. Kronos raised the blade and sent a shock wave into the ground.

The compound erupted, churning up rolling waves of dirt. Furrows appeared like an invisible rotavator was ploughing up the soil. Kronos stared intently at the roiling earth, as though waiting for it to spit up a jewel. When it yielded not even a single scrap, he cursed and sheathed Backbiter with so much force, I thought he'd crack the scabbard.

'Nothing,' he said angrily. He clenched his fist and glared at the upturned earth.

'Master!' Footsteps pounded down the pavement behind us. Ethan Nakamura ran up, dressed in the same black camouflage gear as Alabaster Torrington.

Kronos turned. 'I told you not to disturb me!

Nakamura shrank back. 'I know, sir, but—Torrington—the prisoners—we're being attacked!'
Kronos's golden eyes flashed even more dangerously, but his wrath had shifted target. 'Percy Jackson,' he growled.

He followed Nakamura back down the street. I wanted to run after them, but the earth rippled under my feet, throwing me off balance. I fell onto my back and sank into the furrows. Walls of soil rose around me to form a solid dirt tunnel. It was like being in the Labyrinth again, before Daedalus had sacrificed himself to collapse it.

Grover was next to me, scuffing his hooves nervously against the dirt floor. 'Everything smells of monsters down here,' he said. 'I can't find my way out.'

'I'll help you,' I told him.

He turned to face me, and suddenly he was no longer Grover, but a much older satyr with horns so long, they almost stuck into the ceiling. His face was carved with lines of wisdom and age. 'You must dig deeper, daughter of Athena. You must be prepared when your time comes.'

The god Pan had warned me of this before he'd passed on. He repeated it now: 'You will play a great role, though it may not be the role you imagined.'

'I still don't know what you mean,' I said.

Pan pointed to the tunnel ahead. A fork had opened up, each path leading to an unknown destination. 'Which do you choose?'

No, I thought, this isn't happening. It was over. The Labyrinth was gone. I couldn't still be in its unrelenting tunnels, forced to make impossible choice after impossible choice.

But of course, in my nightmares, I could never be free of the Labyrinth. And my choices hadn't ended with my quest.

'A single choice shall end his days,' taunted a voice I knew well, if only because it had appeared so often in my nightmares. Janus, god of doorways, hovered in the divider between the tunnels. Both his faces were smirking as they eyed me sidewise. He took me down the tunnel on the right, towards a light that was hard gold, like Kronos's eyes. It shone from the walls of a glowing sarcophagus—the coffin that had housed the pieces of Kronos's essence before he had claimed Luke's body for his own.

I threw open the lid of the coffin, and there was Luke, lying with his arms clasped around a gaping hole in his chest. It looked like a bullet wound, but it was clean, just a cylindrical column burrowing into his heart. I cupped my hands over it. Luke's eyes flew open, blue like a river and soft as a promise.

'Th—' he started, and then his eyes locked on me. 'Annabeth,' he gasped. 'You came back.'

I was about to pull him out of the sarcophagus when the lid slammed down, nearly taking off my fingers. A padlock clamped over it. I yanked my mother's key off my necklace and shoved it into the lock, but it warped into a twisted lump of metal. I banged against the walls of the sarcophagus. They became the bars of a cage. I stared through them into the frightened eyes of the little girl clutching her teddy bear.

'The Fates demand a life,' she hissed in the voice of the Oracle. And then she became the Oracle, Cath, with spiky black hair and sorrowful green eyes. She screamed, a long, injurious wail that sent ice spreading through my veins.
Someone pulled Cath from the cage, dragging her away. I lunged for her, but my hands only closed around the teddy bear, ratty and missing an ear.

My knees shook. The ground buckled. I fell, still clutching the forgotten teddy.

'Annabeth.' The voices echoing in my head sounded like they were coming from five people at once. 'Annabeth.'

I opened my eyes. I was lying on a hard, metal floor that seemed to sway gently beneath me. The teddy bear stared at me with its button eyes. I blinked at it in confusion. Then someone said, 'She's awake, thank the gods!

Percy's face swam into view. He knelt beside me, holding my hand. 'Annabeth,' he said in a shaky voice, 'do you know who I am?'

What a strange question. Was I still dreaming? 'Er, Percy, are you okay?'

He looked relieved. 'We were afraid you might be—' He shook his head. 'Thank the gods you're all right.'

Percy helped me sit up. We were on a metal river barge, which explained the swaying. Three more demigods and a satyr had joined our group. Our barge was harnessed to a pair of fish-tailed horses. They were like the hippocampi we'd once ridden in the Sea of Monsters, except these had dull, weed-coloured scales.

'River hippocampi,' Percy explained.

'What happened?' My head felt fuzzy. I held up the bear. 'Why—why do I have this?'

Percy frowned. 'You picked it up. I just ... brought it along with you.'

'Brought it along?' I tried to think. There'd been a fight, and an explosion, and ...

'We're still trying to piece everything together,' Percy said. 'I think we all got caught in a Lethe shower when Beckendorf exploded his last grenade.'

Beckendorf was toying with some nuts and bolts. He clicked them together with a grimace. 'Sorry,' he grunted. 'I didn't mean to. I was just trying to break open the cage.'

Percy patted him on the back. 'It was a good thought. You couldn't have known about the Lethe drip.'

The cage—of course. The younger demigods. 'Did it work?'

It was a stupid question. Even before my friends looked away, unable to meet my eyes, the answer was obvious. There were only four new faces on the barge. None of them were under the age of twelve.

My hands tightened around the teddy bear, as if it were an anchor against the wave of guilt rippling through me.

Percy cleared his throat. 'Anyway, the Lethe made this huge mist over the whole compound—we couldn't see a thing. We just had to run for it and ... hope the other kids made it out, too.'

'But how—' I didn't recall any of this. 'How did I—did you ... carry me?'
'Uh.' Percy's fingers darted through his hair. The tips of his ears were red. 'Everything's a bit fuzzy. Like, I can't remember who I was fighting, and Clarisse has a gold sword she doesn't know how she got.'

'Spoil of war,' Clarisse said with satisfaction. She had a garden trowel in her right hand, but when she flipped it upside down, it became a short sword with a golden blade. 'Who cares how I got it?'

'I could've sworn Annabeth had it first, though,' Percy said.

Clarisse glared at him.

'It's okay,' I said quickly. The sword gave me a bad feeling that I couldn't really explain. Whatever I'd known about it had been wiped cleanly from my memory. I found my dagger, fortunately back in its sheath, and held it up. 'I've got my knife.'

Percy looked like he wanted to ask why I'd pick my knife over a new sword—he'd asked me before, but I'd always sidestepped the question. It wasn't about the sword. I was a decent sword-fighter, but it just felt right to rely on my dagger. I could never replace it.

'So the Lethe mist took our memories—some of them, that is,' I said. 'Not everything. I mean, I still remember who I am, and you guys, and why we went to Richmond.'

'Just not the details,' Percy agreed.

I turned to the newcomers. One was the cow-faced boy, who even now was slumped against the side of the barge, his eyes drooping like he was about to pass out. The others were both girls, about thirteen or so. Both had slanted, elvish features like many of the Hermes kids, but their similarities ended there. One had a flat nose and short black hair that looked like it had been trimmed with a bowl over her head. The other had a messy braid the colour of dirty dishwater.

'Do you guys remember anything?' I asked.

'We were in the cage for days,' said the satyr. He pointed to the black-haired girl. 'I was trying to get Alice to camp, but she kept running off. By the time I tracked her down, she'd found this kid—er, Clovis, was it?'

The cow-faced boy's head rose at the sound of his name. His movements were slow and languid, like he was still in a Hypnos-induced trance. I was surprised he'd had the presence of mind to follow us out of the ironworks compound.

'Sam and I tried to release him,' Alice said. She rubbed her forehead. 'Usually I'd good at picking locks, but ... anyway, this pair of thugs attacked us, and next thing I knew, we were both locked up, too. And the other kids, I guess they got captured the same way. I don't know. I was asleep. But Julia said she dreamed she was coming to join an army.'

Julia plucked at the stray hairs of her braid. 'It made sense at the time.'

'A trap,' Percy said. 'Hypnos manipulated your dreams.'

'I'm sorry,' said Clovis. 'It's my fault.'

Alice frowned at him. 'No, of course not. You were just the first to get caught.'

'No.' Clovis covered his face with his hands. They were pale and spindly, a strange mismatch with his round, bovine features. 'I was the bait.'
'Bait?' Clarisse loomed over him with her new spoil of war pointed at his chest. 'What do you mean, bait?'

Clovis backed up against the side of the barge, his sleepy eyes growing wide and terrified. It made him look more like a cow than ever.

Beckendorf put down the metal pieces he'd been fiddling with and pulled Clovis away from Clarisse. 'Let the kid explain.'

'I called you there,' Clovis said. 'I—I can sort of find people's dreams and, uh, intercept them.'

'Hypnos said his sons were luring demigods to Kronos,' I recalled. 'That means—'

'Hypnos is my dad.' Clovis turned pleading eyes on me. 'He made me do it. My mom—she's been in a coma for ages. He said if I helped in the war, the Titans would have the power to wake her up.'

Clarisse let out a harsh laugh. 'And you believed it?'

Clovis hung his head. A moment later, he swayed on his feet. His eyes fluttered shut. Beckendorf caught him with a grunt as he toppled sideways.

'Is he okay?' Alice asked.

'Fainted, I think,' Julia said.

Clovis's mouth fell open and let out a snore. Clarisse snorted in disgust. 'No—I don't believe it. He's sleeping. We couldn't have left him in Richmond?'

'It's a good thing we did rescue him,' I said. 'Without him, Hypnos can't trick any more demigods.' But I couldn't look at Clovis. The thought of the half-bloods we hadn't managed to save nagged like an itch I couldn't scratch.

I guess it wasn't really his fault. Kronos had manipulated plenty of demigods with his false promises and subtle threats. How many kids of minor gods were out there, with powers we hadn't even imagined? If Kronos coerced them all into serving him, what would we be up against?

A low whinny from the river hippocampi got our attention. The barge was slowing. Up ahead, the river widened into a bay.

'They're saying we'll hit the ocean soon,' Percy translated. 'The barge isn't meant to go on open water.'

'We could call the pegasi,' Beckendorf suggested. 'The barge was great for getting us out all at once, but maybe if we split up now, two of us can fly these guys to Long Island, and the others can—'

Sam the satyr raised his hand. 'I'll stay. As long as the kids get there safe, my job's done.'

We docked the barge along Hampton Flats and Percy whistled for the pegasus. I watched the cars trundling across the I-64, disappearing into the tunnel bridge that led to Virginia Beach. It was a pretty impressive structure, but the architecture wasn't on my mind right now. Two years ago, Percy and I had escaped from Luke's cruise ship into this very river. The *Princess Andromeda* couldn't navigate the narrow river channels, but I wondered if it was waiting off the coast. It was strange that Kronos hadn't followed us away from Richmond Iron Works. Maybe the Lethe mist had helped us lose him. I'd heard stories like that before, fogs that descended and obscured whole armies, or spirited heroes away from otherwise-certain death.
But those were cases where the gods had intervened. Were they looking out for us now? Was the mist really Lethe-induced?

I wished I could remember.

Percy ran his hands back and forth through his hair, ruffling up his grey streak. 'Annabeth, did you bring your cell phone?'

'I don't exactly have pegasi on speed dial.'

'Ha ha, funny.' His foot tapped agitatedly along the dock. 'It's—I just remembered something else Hypnos said. About test strikes on Manhattan.'

'On mortals,' I recalled. No wonder Percy wanted to make a call. I dug around in my backpack. Ordinarily, it would be suicide for half-bloods to carry cell phones, thanks to the uncanny connection monsters had with mobile service networks. But my phone was special. My dad had gotten one with a privately encrypted signal, which offered me some protection from monster hackers. I found the phone and tossed it to Percy.

'Are you crazy?' Clarisse demanded. 'Like the eight of us here aren't already giving off a monster red alert?'

Sam looked aghast. 'Why do you even have a cell phone?'

I explained about my dad's army contacts and the phone's untraceable signal. Beckendorf's eyes lit up. His fingers twitched, like he couldn't wait to get back to camp and try copying my phone.

The winged silhouettes of our pegasi appeared in the distance while Percy made his call. Judging by his silent frown, no one was picking up. Finally, he said, 'Mom, when you get this, call me—er, call Annabeth back, okay? I need to know you guys are okay.'

'No answer?'

He shook his head and handed me back the phone.

'You hang on to it,' I told him. 'She's probably just out. I bet she'll call back in no time.'

'I called her cell,' he said. But he pocketed my phone.

Blackjack, Champ, and Pork Pie soared in from the north. To our surprise, the other three pegasi were with them, along with Silena and Michael. Beckendorf leapt to his feet immediately and waved his arms frantically until they touched down on the dock.

'I thought you guys were going straight to camp!' he said.

'That was the plan.' Silena dismounted from Cupcake. She was more dishevelled than she'd been when we'd parted ways in Philadelphia. Her shiny hair was matted and tangled. There was even a bruise blooming on her cheek.

'Until we ran into trouble coming out of the city,' Michael said. With a black eye and long scratches down his sleeves, he looked only marginally better than Silena.

'What sort of trouble?' Beckendorf reached out to touch Silena's cheek, pulling back only at the last second. 'Are you okay?'

'I'm fine,' Silena said, though she looked disappointed when he dropped his hand. 'This strange bird
came after us and tried to steal the bag of stuff we got from Panacea.'

'We chased it south for hours,' Michael said. 'It nearly made off with the jar of gold flakes, but Silena got it back.'

'Good job, girlie.' Clarisse thumped her on the back.

'I just—that stuff saved Charlie.' Silena lifted her chin. 'I wasn't going to let some monster bird make off with it!'

Having our full complement of pegasi solved our transport problem. Percy, Silena, Michael, and I each took a passenger with us to fly home. It wasn't long before we touched down on the fireworks beach at the north shore of camp. Beckendorf, Silena, and Clarisse went to stable the pegasi, while Michael and Sam took the new kids up to the Big House. I shook my head as I watched them go. Alice had flown with me, and over the course of the journey, she'd filched a pen from my backpack and dyed Strawberry's auburn mane black with the ink. That girl would fit right in with cabin eleven. I'd bet our new stock of panacea that she was a daughter of Hermes.

Which made me think of the half-blood who had stolen my diary in Richmond. With pickpocketing skills like that, he was probably a Hermes kid, too.

Like Luke.

And like Luke, he'd chosen the other side. We'd been so convinced we were doing the right thing, freeing our fellow demigods from Kronos's clutches, but in actual fact, we'd already lost so many of them by the time we got there.

Maybe I should have chosen the little ones instead.

'Hey.' Percy touched my shoulder. 'You okay?'

'Yeah.' I undid my necklace and slipped my mother's key off the leather cord. The burnished silver had turned coal-black. The shaft was twisted from when I'd tried to shove it in the second padlock. 'It's just ... all those kids.'

'We rescued three of them.'

'Out of what, twenty?' I dropped the key into the surf. It was useless now, and it just reminded me of the awful choice I'd made.

'That wasn't your fault. And maybe some of the others did get away.'

'Some of them went back to Kronos,' I said bitterly. Like the diary thief. 'One of them stole my book.'

Percy's brow furrowed. He slipped his backpack off his shoulder and dug around inside it. A moment later, he held up the green leather diary. 'This book?'

My eyes widened. 'You got it!'

'Well, yeah. You were having a tug of war over it. I figured it was important. What is it?'

I took the diary and ran my fingers over its spine. 'I—I'm not sure. I'm still reading it.' Why had the kid gone for my book, of all things? It was probably the most useless of everything I carried. Why not Daedalus's laptop, or my invisibility hat, or—
You must dig deeper, daughter of Athena.

The pieces clicked. The theft, my dreams, Thalia...

'Of course,' I whispered.

Percy scratched his head. 'Er, what?'

'Kronos was searching for Thalia because he thought she had the diary. Because he—I mean, Luke left it to her. In Charleston.' I was still fuzzy on the connection between the diary and Richmond, but I felt like the answer was only just beyond my grasp, like a logic puzzle I just hadn't found the missing piece to quite yet.


Something in his tone made my hair stand on end. It was like he wished he'd left the book behind after all. I couldn't help feeling defensive. 'Yes.'

A storm cloud darkened on Percy's face. 'So what's in it? All his gloating about the kids he's killed?'

I hugged the book to my chest. 'It's not about—that's not—Luke wouldn't—'

'Oh yeah?' A large wave crashed violently against the shore. I wasn't sure if it was Percy's doing, or just a coincidence. He adopted a bad imitation of Luke's voice. 'Dear diary, lured a bunch of demigods into my trap today. Don't need them all, but I'll feed them to the monsters, so it's all good.'

It was as if we were stumbling through the Labyrinth again, arguing as we ran from Antaeus's arena. I'd tried to convince Percy that something was up with Luke, but he'd shut me down with the same sarcasm.

'You're impossible! Kronos laid the traps. Luke isn't—he'd never hurt a little kid. He was just like them—like me. When he found out he was a half-blood, he left home, too. He was only nine when he ran away!'

Percy's nostrils flared. 'News flash, Annabeth. Luke is Kronos. And he was always a jerk.'

'No he wasn't!'

We stood a foot apart, glaring at each other. My stomach was a churning mess of hurt and frustration. It struck me that just last summer, we'd stood in this exact position, having the same argument. I thought we'd moved past it, but ... evidently not.

Percy dug into his pocket for my cell phone. His mom still hadn't returned his call. I thought he was going to dial her again, but he just thrust the phone at me.

'I'm going to go check on her,' he said abruptly.

'But Percy, you can't—'

'Just tell Chiron I'm following up loose ends from the quest.'

When I didn't move, he pressed the phone into my hand and turned away. I watched him wade into the surf and give a loud whistle. A moment later, an ocean hippocampus with scales every colour of the rainbow swam up. Percy climbed onto its back. He disappeared into the waves without a backward glance.
The teddy bear doesn't really have any further significance, but I found it a nice piece of imagery, and also, it's a reference to the interview with Annabeth from *The Demigod Files*, in which she admits to have a teddy bear in her trunk (shh, don't tell anyone!)

The mist that enabled our heroes to escape has roots in Trojan War mythology. *In one of the battles, Zeus is said to have created a fog that descended over the battlefield, allowing the Trojans to advanced against the Greeks.*

A part of this chapter attempts to answer the question of how on earth did Percy know at the beginning of TLO how old Luke was when he ran away, when he sees Rachel's painting in his dream. As far as I can tell, it's only *after* in later visions that he learns more about Luke's history. Thus I chose to have Annabeth relate that tidbit of information here.

Alice and Julia are indeed Alice Miyazawa and Julia Feingold from ToA—as is Clovis from HoO. I've tried to include as many origin stories and minor character cameos where I can. Those of you who are more eagle-eyed may also recognise Sam the satyr from the interactive adventure novel, *The Demigods of Olympus.*
It was hard to say whether our quest counted as a success. We'd rescued Sam and the three half-bloods, but there were so many others we hadn't liberated. As far as I could tell, we'd fulfilled the prophecy, but there were so many gaps in my memory that I couldn't be certain. And the problem with prophecies was that their lines were so vague, so many events could apply to them.

In the end, Chiron ruled that we should burn the symbolic end-of-quest shrouds anyway.

'The safe return of our camp leaders is a matter for celebration in itself,' he declared at dinner. His gaze flickered over the empty Poseidon table, but he didn't highlight Percy's absence. 'And whatever the setbacks, you have brought back a valuable commodity for our infirmary stocks.'

'I'll work on brewing some panacea right away,' Will promised.

I couldn't keep a sulky note out of my voice when I explained to Chiron that Percy had gone to tie up a loose end from the quest. Part of me wanted to complain about him breaking camp rules, but even mad at him, I wasn't quite petulant enough to deliberately get him in trouble.

Chiron gave me his intent, scrutinising look that always felt like he was X-raying me. When he said, 'I see,' I got the sense he'd guessed why Percy had skipped town—and it wasn't to do with the quest or even worry about his family.

'We will save his shroud to celebrate when he returns, then,' he said. 'Come. Let us proceed to the amphitheatre.'

Burning the shrouds didn't make me feel any better. We decided to burn a few for the fallen as well, which made it a mixed celebration. I skipped the campfire singalong after, not at all keen to join in the cheerful songs led by Michael and his cabin. In my current mood, I'd much prefer target practice. Preferably with a picture of a certain messy-haired demigod as a target.

Strains of *Grandma Got Eaten By A Minotaur* warbled out behind me as I made my way back to the cabins. Twilight was setting in, casting long shadows over the green. The central hearth roared, tended by a rosy-cheeked girl who sat so close to it, her skirts were indistinguishable from the flickering flames: Hestia, goddess of hearth and home. Sitting across the fire from her, with his back to me, was a kid in a heavy aviator's jacket. A pitch-black sword hung from his belt.

'Nico?'

He turned. Every time I saw him, Nico di Angelo seemed to age more than he should. He'd been ten at our first meeting, and a year after that, his wide-eyed innocence had given way to a moodiness that harboured centuries worth of rage. He must be about twelve now, but his gaunt cheeks and the deep bags under his eyes made him look way older. His fingers curled around a large skull ring on his left
hand, twisting it from side to side the way I often played with my own camp necklace. He met my eyes with an old man's gaze, then looked away quickly as he muttered a greeting.

'Where have you been all year?' Percy had mentioned seeing him in the Underworld at Christmas, but surely Nico couldn't have been down there all this while. Even if he was the son of Hades, there were strict rules about living people hanging out in the land of the dead.

'Around,' Nico said vaguely.

'Searching for family,' said Hestia. 'Just like you, Annabeth. Have you found your answers?'

I wasn't sure if she was addressing me or Nico. He picked at his ring, not looking at either of us.

'My family—well, my dad's in Europe,' I said.

'You have to dig deeper than that, my dear. Family is important. It anchors us to the world. Without that anchor, it is too easy to lose sight of who we are, to be cast adrift.' Hestia poked a log into the flames, where it crackled and sent sparks shooting into the air. 'All your choices lie in my domain, you know. When your time approaches, you must know what you are facing.' She turned to Nico. 'As must you, Nico.'

Nico slammed his hand on the ground. 'I've tried! I've searched all over for answers, but I just can't—' His face contorted like he was about to cry, but he caught himself and said, in a more controlled voice, 'My mother and sister are dead, and my father refuses to tell me about any of it.'

I blinked. Although Hal hadn't recorded what had become of the siblings he and Cath had tried to warn, I knew Nico and Bianca had lived in the Lotus Hotel for seventy years. It must have been their mother who'd been caught in the blast just before Hades had cursed Cath. 'She died in an explosion.'

Nico stared at me, suspicion written across his face. 'How do you know that?'

'I—' Should I tell him about the diary? It was funny how he didn't remember the event, but maybe Hades had done something before he hid them away.

Anger practically radiated off Nico's skin in a tangible wave. If I were honest, he scared me a little. I didn't like how he reminded me of Luke, spending his days as a hardened runaway on the streets, looking older than he should. Nico could have had a home at camp if he wanted, but he'd chosen to head out on his own. I didn't think Nico would go over to Kronos, especially after he'd fought with us last summer, but...

I'd seen how incensed Nico had been last year when Bianca had died, and how he'd set out to avenge her. I thought of all the half-bloods who had flocked to Kronos, all furious with their lot in life. What would Nico do if he learned that he'd lost his mom because the king of Olympus had put a hit on him?

'I read about this big explosion in D.C. seventy years ago.' Technically it wasn't a lie. 'I just put it together. Bianca told Percy you guys lived in D.C. before—er, well, before.'

Nico's face darkened at the mention of Percy. Was he still angry at him for Bianca's death? I thought he'd gotten over that, but maybe he'd rekindled his fury after stewing over it for a whole year.

'Nico ...' I touched his hand, but he jerked it away as though my skin was hot as Hestia's coals.

'I have to go.' He got abruptly to his feet. 'I only came to—I was just looking for ...' His eyes met mine and darted away again. Pink crept into his sallow cheeks. 'Never mind.'
I'd gotten this weird vibe from Nico last year as well, like I made him nervous. Possibly like the way
Percy made my heart flutter from time to time. I wasn't sure how to deal with it. But if Nico did have
a crush on me, maybe I could convince him to stay safely at camp.

'Where are you going to go?'

'To look into what you said.' He glanced in the direction of the amphitheatre, where the other
campers were coming down the path. The singalong was over.

'You should stay. It's not safe out there. Kronos is gathering half-bloods, and—'

'No,' Nico said flatly. 'I don't belong here.' He turned away and stalked off towards the woods.

Hestia propped her chin on her hands as she watched him go. 'I hope he will remember our chat.'
She cocked her head to one side and considered me. 'Just as I hope you will remember ours.'

'What?' I tried to recall what she had said. Something about digging deeper and understanding the
importance of family. An anchor, she'd called it.

Hestia winked. 'Remember me, Annabeth Chase. I am afraid the next time we meet, you will not
have the luxury of indecision.'

She vanished into the flames with a pop.

Will Solace stepped out onto the porch of cabin seven. He must have skipped the campfire
singalong, too. 'Was that ...'

I thought he was going to ask about Hestia, but he finished, '... Nico di Angelo?'

I glanced at the edge of the woods, where Nico was barely visible among the trees. 'Yeah. You
remember him?'

'The kid from last year,' Will said, scratching his chin. 'Where's he going?'

'I don't know. He just said he wasn't staying.'

Will frowned. He seemed to be considering going after Nico. But before he could say anything
more, the other campers reached us, flushed from the campfire and rounds of singing. Some of them
spotted Nico, casting suspicious glances at his retreating form.

Nico didn't turn. He slipped into the woods and was gone, like he'd melted into the shadows of the
trees.

I went into my cabin and sat cross-legged on my bunk, turning over each of the beads on my camp
necklace. One bead for each summer, keeping a tally of my childhood. Bookending them was my
dad's college ring, the peace offering he'd sent me when I was ten. Even though I'd been angry at
him for so many years, I'd kept the ring. I hadn't given up on him completely.

Something was trying to come together in my head. My fingers found the hilt of my dagger and
curled automatically around it. The familiar grip helped me organise my thoughts.

Nico was going out into a dangerous world because he was desperate for answers about his family.
Percy had returned to Manhattan because he was worried for his. Our argument ran through my head
—his insistence that I should relinquish my stupid hope that Kronos's hold on Luke wasn't
permanent. Maybe he was right. All I had left of Luke was a broken promise and an
incomprehensible diary.

I still didn’t know why Kronos wanted it, but there was only one way to find out.

The diary was a little battered from the fight in Richmond, but still intact. I’d lost the fold that marked my page, so it took me a while to find where I’d left off. Finally, I located the right section, and cracked on.

There were no overt symptoms of Hades's curse. Cath seemed okay: she continued to deliver her prophecies summer after summer. I tried to imagine smoke and poetry spewing from a twelve-year-old instead of a mummy, but it was hard to picture. For ten years, the twins spent summer at camp. Then Chiron became worried.

When Cath and I turned twenty-two, Chiron called us into his office for a serious chat.

'We’ve never had an Oracle over the age of twenty-one before,' he said. 'The spirit of Delphi prefers virgin maidens, you see.'

'Well,' Cath said, rubbing a medicine pouch with my written scrap of her Great Prophecy. She wore it around her neck all the time. I couldn’t understand it. I knew she hated that prophecy, after the misfortune it had brought, and she refused to talk about it to anyone, even Chiron. Yet she wouldn't be parted from it. Maybe she was afraid someone would find it and learn what it said. 'Well, what a way to make me feel old.'

'You're still young and beautiful, my dear,' Chiron assured her. 'And that is what troubles me. You should have the chance to go out into the world. Fall in love. Get married.'

Cath shrugged. 'I'm okay staying here. I like camp. And I can work as a counsellor. Or a strawberry girl for the new director.' She cracked a grin. The camp had just gotten a new director, fresh from Olympus. Rumour was he’d gotten expelled for chasing a wood nymph that Zeus had his eye on, and now had to serve 100 years of exile at Camp Half-Blood.

'That's not funny,' I complained.

Cath made a halo over her head. 'I mean picking strawberries in the new fields, of course.'

Chiron cleared his throat. 'What about you, Hal? Surely you don’t want to spend your life as a summer camp counsellor. It should be safe for you to leave and make a life in the mortal world now.'

I hadn't really thought about it, but Chiron was right. As much as I liked camp, it wasn't exactly the ideal career choice. Besides, I was getting tired of knowing things about people's futures that I could never talk about. Maybe in the mortal world, my powers would start to fade.

Hal left Camp Half-Blood for good and moved to D.C. to become a musician, but Cath stayed on as the camp's resident Oracle. At first she visited her brother regularly, but then the visits got further and fewer between. Five years later, they saw each other maybe only once a year.

So when she sent him an impromptu message one summer—scaring Hal's music student half to death when her face appeared out of nowhere—he was pretty shocked.
He was even more befuddled when she asked him to read her future.

_For sixteen years, she'd assiduously declared that she just didn't want to know what she'd said in her prophecies. What could have happened to make her change her mind?_

'Can't you—can't you prophesy for yourself?'

Cath paced back and forth in the Iris message, twisting her pouch round and round on its leather cord. 'I tried to book a flight to D.C.,' she said, not answering my question. 'They're full up at the moment, but I'm waitlisted. As soon as a space opens up this week—well, I'll see you in D.C. '

'Did something happen, Cath? A vision, or—oh gods, it wasn't Hades, was it? Did he—'

Cath shook her head. 'I'll tell you when we meet. I have to go now.'

Hal sensed that something drastic must have happened to make Cath consider leaving camp in the middle of summer, when her services as Oracle were most in demand. He decided not to wait for her to get the flight, and instead drove up to meet her at camp. Unsurprisingly, he ran into trouble in New York State (he was a demigod; what else was new?)

To be fair, the monster bird hadn't been after him. The girl it was chasing had flung her dagger into his windshield, causing him to hit the brakes just as she leapt out onto the bonnet of his car. When he got out to check on her, she screamed for him to get down. The girl slapped at the swooping monster with her satchel. It ripped, spilling sheet music all over the ground.

Hal's description of the battle was brief. He distracted the monster with awful music and the girl stabbed it. Standard demigod stuff. Except the girl turned out not to be a demigod—but both her parents were.

'My mom comes from a crazy long line of them. It's like the gods just kept coming back to our family or something.'

'And you all survived?'

The girl traced a finger over the hilt of her dagger. Maybe it was an insensitive question, since she wasn't past her treacherous teens yet. I knew that as a demigod who'd made it into my twenties, I was something of a rarity. Once you got there, life was pretty normal—barring crazy half-demigods (did that make her a quarter-blood?) jumping into your car, I guess—but making it to age twenty was the hard part. Many of my old friends ... well, I still don't like to think too much about that.

I changed the subject. 'So, uh, you go to Camp Half-Blood?'

'Not this year. I really want to get into music school, so I stopped to focus on that. I have an audition at the School of Music in D.C. tonight. I was on my way to the airport when ...' She waved her hand at the scattered sheet music and sighed. 'I guess it's a good thing I left early. I still have an hour. If I make it to JFK in twenty minutes, I should still make my flight.' She looked at me hopefully.

'Uh, sure. I can give you a lift.' It wasn't too long a detour. I could still make it to camp by mid-morning. A long crack ran down my windscreen where her dagger had hit it, but it would live. Anyway, I figured I owed her, after nearly running her down.

'Thanks!' She gathered up her sheet music and stuffed them back into her ripped bag.
The moment Hal shook her proffered hand, he had a vision: engines stalling, blaring alarms, a plane crashing into the tarmac and bursting into flames. It was clear that a bad accident lay in Jenny’s future.

He decided he couldn’t let her die. He warned her about the accident, though he wasn’t sure if she would believe him.

Jenny pursed her lips. I wondered if she would call me a liar and a charlatan, like so many kids at camp had before. Finally, she said, ‘Like Cassandra of Troy.’

‘What?’

‘The Seer. You know, the one who predicted the downfall of Troy, only nobody believed her.’

‘You have to believe me. That flight isn’t safe for you. I’m trying to save you.’

Jenny clenched her dagger. I wondered if she meant to attack me, but she just stared long and hard into the blade, as though trying to see the future I had described in its shiny surface.

‘Okay. I believe you. I—my dagger brought me to you for a reason.’

Feeling bad that she now had no transport to D.C., Hal offered to drive Jenny down after he’d met with Cath. They made their way to camp ... only to find that Cath had already left. Chiron told them she’d gone to the airport an hour ago, just in case a seat on a flight opened up unexpectedly.

The implication of this hit Hal and Jenny right away.

They drove south immediately, even though Hal knew in his heart that he was already too late. They must have been the first mortals to reach the scene, but someone still beat them there.

When I saw him kneeling amidst the charred remains of the aircraft, a splash of gold against the ashy debris, my heart spiked. Maybe he had worked a miracle.

But the flare of hope was short-lived. When you have a twin, it’s like being on a permanent telephone network. There’s always a buzz, a dial tone even if no one’s talking on it.

My line was dead.

Jenny made a strangled noise. ‘That’s what—I would have—’ She turned to me with wide, watery eyes.

‘You’d better go.’ My words came out harsher than I intended.

Jenny dabbed at her eyes and fumbled for the handle of the car door.

‘It’s not your fault,’ I said more gently. ‘But you’d still better go.’ I clenched my fists. ‘I mean, I’ve got a bone to pick with a god. I don’t think it’s safe for you to hang around.’

Jenny grabbed my hand. ‘Then take this.’ She pressed her dagger into my hand, hilt-first. ‘It’s been in my family for ages. My mother told me it would always protect its owner.’
I gawked at it, momentarily distracted. 'It nearly got you run over.'

She shook her head. 'It led me to you. And you—you saved me. I want you to have it.'

Numbly, I took the dagger. Jenny squeezed my hand and then she opened the door and was gone.

To say that Hal's confrontation with Apollo didn't go well would be like saying the Trojans suffered a minor defeat to the Greeks. The god of prophecy was incensed that Hal's warning, well-intended as it had been, had cost his Oracle her life—and effectively trapped the spirit of Delphi in a dead body. That was the curse of Hades: dead or alive, Cath would remain the Oracle until Hades's children ceased to be hunted.

Apollo sent Cath's body home to Camp Half-Blood. I guess that was the beginning of the Oracle as we knew her today. As for Hal ... Apollo sent him home, too. But not the home Hal imagined.

He brought Hal to Virginia, to the mansion in Richmond that overlooked a traffic circle with the memorial statue of General Robert E. Lee. With a jolt, I realised that this had to be the empty lot Luke had visited. Fifty years ago, something had stood there: Hal's childhood home-turned-prison.

In a rage, Apollo confined Hal to his old bedroom, with nothing but snake skin to wear. He raised bars down the middle of the room, as if to drive home the point that this was an imprisonment. And even more chilling ...

... the sound of castanets rang out like gunshots. Something clattered up the stairs outside, pounding down the hallway with galloping footsteps. There was a loud whump as the creature slammed up against my locked door.

'Apollo! Father!'

I choked. They were my words, but no sound escaped my mouth. Instead, my voice issued from the other side of the wall.

A moment later, the wall beyond the bars caved in. A pair of monsters the size of panthers crashed onto Cath's old bed, smashing it to bits. They prowled the floor like predators in a zoo enclosure, eyeing me malevolently with glowing red eyes that stared out of a protruding, hyena-like snout. I backed away from the bars, bumping up against the frame of my walk-in closet. My foot stubbed painfully against the safe on the ground.

Was this it? Would I end up as dinner to these monsters? Except why cage me in when Apollo could just feed me to them directly?

As if reading my mind, Apollo said, 'The leucrotae will not eat you. But they need to feed regularly on human flesh. They will lure their prey with your voice—to remind you how your voice led others to their deaths.'

One of the leucrotae peeled back its jaw and snapped it to produce the clacking, castanet noise I'd heard earlier. I let out a whimper, but again, the sound didn’t come from me. It issued bizarrely from the leucrota, like it was a bad ventriloquist and I was the puppet.

The disjointed start to Hal's diary finally made sense. He'd been trapped in his mansion for twenty years with a pair of monsters who spoke for him and used his voice to lure other demigods to their deaths. The only hope he had for ending his curse was a treasure inside the locked safe in his closet.
'It waits for its rightful owner to claim it,' Apollo told him. 'Then you will have a chance to set things right. Perhaps by then, you will have learnt why the future should remain a mystery. If you can do this, then this will be the day your curse comes to an end.'

I wasn't sure when I slipped from Hal's diary into dreams, but at some point, I found myself watching the nightmarish scene he had described, with the snarling leucrotae pacing the bars of his prison as he tore at the snake-skin suit his father had dressed him in. Green mist filled the room, gathering into the ghostly image of a beautiful girl with sad eyes. She reached for Hal's cheek, but before she could touch him, her flesh disintegrated. She turned into a withered skeleton, the Oracle that languished in the attic of the Big House today. Smoke poured from her mouth and enveloped the room again.

When it cleared, I was in a dark, echoey room. A warehouse, maybe. Luke sat on an empty crate with his head in his hands. It was a posture that was so Luke that I couldn't believe this was Kronos.

Then he looked up, and there was no mistaking the golden eyes and dangerous expression.

Kronos tapped his fingers against the edge of the crate, brooding. Alabaster Torrington stood an apprehensive distance away, leaning against the warehouse walls like he wanted to sink into them. He kept glancing at an open window near the ceiling, as though anxious for something to arrive.

A pair of luminescent green eyes appeared at the window. A screech owl with glittery patches among its dark grey feathers swooped down to Torrington. It deposited a jar into Torrington's hands, then vanished into a puff of smoke. A glowing card drifted to the ground in a shower of glitter. Torrington frowned at it, then examined the jar. It looked strikingly like the amphora Panacea had given us, with its contents sparkling like a pinpoint of light in the dim warehouse.

'Master!' Torrington approached Kronos, holding the amphora over his head the way one would present a gift to royalty.

Kronos took the amphora and flicked off the cap. He tipped out its contents, releasing a shower of gold into his palm. 'So this is what they were doing in Philadelphia,' he mused. 'It seems our spy has been holding out on us.'

'Was this what you needed, then?' Torrington asked. 'My messenger intercepted this, but it wasn't the only thing they had.'

Kronos held the amphora up to his face. The gold matched his eyes perfectly. 'It will suffice. Without this, they should fail. And perhaps if we acquire the other ingredients ... yes. Perhaps the book is inconsequential after all. If this works, the gods will be no match for us.'

The relief in Torrington's face was evident. 'You are pleased, then, my lord?'

'Your failure to hold Percy Jackson in Richmond is forgiven. When I dethrone the gods and ascend to rule the universe, I promise the children of Hecate will rise high.'

'Thank you very much indeed, my lord. From one demigod to another—'

Kronos's fist clenched around the sparkling amphora. 'What did you call me?'

Torrington stepped back hastily. 'Er, I mean—sorry, it's the body you inhabit. He is a half-blood, like —'

'He was a half-blood,' Kronos corrected. 'I shall dispense of him soon enough.'

A rushing filled my ears. I shall dispense of him ... The words made me sick. My head spun. I
dropped to my knees on the cold warehouse floor, my stomach heaving ...

'Annabeth!'

It took more effort than it should have to drag my eyes open. The bright sunshine streaming through the gaps in the cabin blinds made my eyes water. My stomach was still churning. My mouth tasted of bile. On top of this, someone was pounding on the cabin door. The sound drilled into my aching head.

'Go away,' Malcolm Pace groaned from his bunk. He pulled his pillow over his head. Someone coughed. All of my siblings were still in bed, even Celia Little, who was almost always up before the sun, working at her loom.

The banging continued, more insistent now.

'Annabeth!' It was Clarisse's voice. Why was she looking for me?

'Make it stop,' croaked Arthur Doolin. Someone else made a retching noise.

I sat up slowly. My head felt like the inside of a volcano, pressurised and ready to explode. I staggered the marathon distance from my bunk to the door.

Clarisse and Beckendorf stood on the cabin porch, flanked by Michael and Will Solace. The two sons of Apollo looked nearly as woozy as I felt.

'Oh, cursed cattle of Apollo.' Will peered into my cabin. 'You guys, too?'

I frowned. 'What's going on?'

'Everyone's sick,' Beckendorf said.

'Everyone except me and Beckendorf, that is,' Clarisse added. 'And a couple of the Apollo kids.'

Michael glared at her. 'Only the ones who didn't step outside.'

'Outside' Judging by the sun, it was late morning, but the cabin green was empty. A sickly-sweet scent hung in the air, like all the strawberries had rotted in the fields. I wrinkled my nose. 'Is this what I think it is?'

Will nodded. 'I think we've got ourselves a plague.'

Chapter End Notes

The outlines of Hal's story come from The Diary of Luke Castellan in The Demigod Diaries. Details are, of course, my own imagination (as is the character of Cath).

In a previous version of the story, I had a different character for the thief, but while it played on more details of Greek mythology, it made for too complex a cast with no real advantage, so I scrapped it.
A Plague Hits Camp

Chapter Summary

Camp Half-Blood gets struck down by a mysterious sickness.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

We didn't have enough nectar and ambrosia. Not that it would have done much good if we had more. Nearly every camper was suffering from a mysterious ailment. It was worse than the time our camp borders had failed and campers had been injured left and right trying to fend off monster attacks.

Whole cabins were struck down. Athena and Hermes were miserable cacophonies of coughs and groans. Retching noises issued from the Hephaestus and Demeter cabins. The Aphrodite campers emerged in headscarves and long sleeves that obscured every inch of skin. None of them were willing to reveal the outbreak of rashes that disfigured their faces. From the smell emanating from cabin five, someone had had a puke fest, or—

'Explosive diarrhoea,' Clarisse said grimly. 'It set off a bunch of the land mines, and—you don't really want to hear this, do you?'

I shook my head. I was nauseated enough already.

It took a while to gather everyone in the Apollo cabin, the only place the sickening smell didn't permeate. Even the Big House was wreathed in a nasty, greenish cloud. Will tried to get to the infirmary for emergency stocks after we'd used up all of cabin seven's meds. He got as far as the strawberry fields before he keeled over, shaking too hard to keep walking. Clarisse had to haul him back to cabin seven, which was now more severely crowded than Hermes cabin. It was just as well our numbers were down this summer, because there'd be no way to fit everyone in otherwise. We tucked the sickest campers in two to a bunk, while the rest of us sat on the floor, staring at the golden walls and trying to figure out what to do.

Even Chiron and Mr D hadn't been spared. Beckendorf tried to fetch them, but the doors to their quarters were locked. No one responded to his banging.

'Mr D might be ignoring me,' Beckendorf said. 'Hard to tell, with him.'

'Chiron wouldn't, though.' Of this I was certain. Something had to be drastically wrong for him to disregard a call for help.

'Can immortals even get sick?' Katie Gardner wondered.

'Depends what's causing the sickness,' Will said. He was sitting on his bunk with his hands pressed to his forehead.

'Oh, I don't know, maybe the god of plagues?' Clarisse glared at Michael. ' Seems a little coincidental that cabin seven's the only safe spot.'
'Hey!' Michael jumped to his feet, like he was ready to rush Clarisse. Even after taking ambrosia, his arms were shaking. His nose twitched uncontrollably, like someone had put a permanent sprig of pollen under it. 'I'm not the one who's mysteriously immune. You thought about that?'

Everyone's head swivelled to Clarisse and Beckendorf, who were, of course, the only two still standing. The previously unharmed Apollo cabin members had fallen prey to the plague once they went out to help other sick campers.

Beckendorf crossed his arms defensively. 'I don't know why we're okay, I swear!'

'Don't blame Charlie or Clarisse,' Silena said. 'They've been helping out all morning.'

'What if it was that creepy kid?' said Connor Stoll. 'I saw him yesterday when we got back from the campfire. He was hanging around near the woods, then he just disappeared. Looked pretty suspicious to me.'

It took me a moment to realise he must be talking about Nico di Angelo. Could Nico have done something? He did have powers none of us understood. But he'd also been talking to Hestia. If I knew anything about the goddess, it was that she protected the heart of camp. She wouldn't appear to Nico if he bore us any ill intentions.

Before I could counter Connor's accusation, Will jumped to Nico's defence. 'You don't know he had anything to do with this. Loads of stuff happened yesterday. I mean, the quest team brought back three new campers. Those two girls seemed pretty cagey just before the campfire.'

'That's because they swapped out Drew's makeup for pegasus dung,' Silena muttered. 'We thought at first that's why she broke out in hives, except—'

'Pegasus dung's not poisonous,' Travis finished. 'It just stinks. Anyway, all the new kids are sick, too.' He jerked his head towards the far side of the cabin, where Julia, Alice, and Clovis were in fact among the sickest of the lot. 'If they did something, you'd think they'd leave themselves out of it.'

'That's another thing I don't get,' Katie said. She sounded like she was struggling through a bad head cold. 'Why does everyone have different symptoms? I mean, if we're all suffering from the same plague, shouldn't we be, you know, the same?'

Will pressed his fingers against his temples. 'Poisoning,' he said after some thought. 'It shows up different for everyone. And there are antidotes to poison, so maybe ...' He looked at Beckendorf and shrugged helplessly.

'I haven't done anything differently,' Clarisse said, 'and I feel fine.'

'Maybe it's delayed action,' Michael muttered. 'When you least expect it—wham.' He seemed to half hope this would be the case. For Clarisse, anyway.

'Wait.' The answer pushed into my foggy brain, so obvious I couldn't believe I'd taken so long to make the connection. 'During our quest, Beckendorf and Clarisse both took the panacea! When we got attacked in Philadelphia.'

'It cured Beckendorf's poisoned wound!' Silena recalled. 'Maybe it's still in effect.'

I nodded. And then the real solution fell into place. 'And we brought back the panacea recipe.'

'And I started brewing it last night!' Will added.
A palpable wave of relief flooded through the cabin. 'So we can fix this,' Michael said.

Will raised his hand sheepishly. 'One little problem. It's in the infirmary.'

The implication took a while to sink in. When it did, we all stared at him, aghast. The panacea was in the Big House, which no one could get near without practically passing out. Well, except Beckendorf and Clarisse.

And then something worse occurred to me. 'Michael,' I said, 'you remember what Panacea said, about distilling the herb of invulnerability?'

Michael fell back onto his bunk. 'It's poisonous if not neutralised by gold.'

'Which explains why we're safe in here,' I said. 'The cabin walls are gold. It probably filtered out the poison.'

Will paled. 'So you mean maybe I ...'

Clarisse pointed a threatening finger at him. 'You screwed it up?'

'Hey!' Michael pushed himself back to his feet. 'Don't start blaming Will.'

'I followed all the instructions!' Will dragged his hands through his hair, making it stand up on end. 'I added the gold just like it said. But maybe ... I don't know, maybe my skills just weren't good enough.'

'You're the best healer we've got,' I assured him. 'This isn't your fault. Maybe she just missed something in the instructions, like the sequence, or—'

'Or maybe she was so annoyed with your crap rhymes that she gave you a dud recipe,' Clarisse muttered, still glaring at Michael.

'You know what? I'm sick of you, La Rue. I've had enough. Curse you! Curse you and your whole bullying cabin!' Michael lifted both hands to the sky—or roof, at any rate. A blinding light filled the cabin, accompanied by a musical humming in our ears.

'Was that supposed to do something?' Clarisse sneered when it faded away.

Michael's face contorted in confusion. Then he swayed on the spot and collapsed back into his bunk.

'He overexerted,' groaned Will. 'Magic takes a lot of energy to begin with. And he's not fully recovered yet. It must have wiped out his strength.'

'So the idiot messed up his cursin'. Teach him to mess with Ares cabin.' Ellis Wakefield's eyes widened. He clapped a hand over his mouth.

'A rhyming curse,' Will said wearily. He shook his head at Clarisse. 'You just had to goad him!'

'What do you mean, a rhyming curse?' Clarisse said. 'I'm not speaking in rhyme.'

'Well, that's great, but I'm speaking in rhyme. Is it gonna be like this for the rest of time?' Sherman Yang demanded.

'I guess Clarisse is still protected by the panacea,' Will mused. 'But he cursed all of Ares cabin.'

Clarisse looked disgusted. 'You mean my whole cabin's gonna be spouting poetry? Styx! How long
is this going to last?'

Will shrugged. 'A week, maybe two? We're not that powerful, but who knows what got into him.'

'Guys,' Beckendorf interrupted, 'can we get back to the real problem? We need medicine. Can we fix the panacea?'

'It's in the Big House,' Katie pointed out. 'Will couldn't even get near it.'

Beckendorf raised his hand. 'I can go fetch it.'

It was a good thought, but I spotted the obvious flaw. 'If you bring the undiluted poison into the cabin, won't that knock us all out?'

Silence fell as everyone contemplated this catch-22.

'Well, we can't just hide out in here forever,' Silena said at last. 'And I don't want to wear a balaclava for the rest of my life.'

I turned the problem over. 'What if Beckendorf gets the ingredients? Then we can make a new batch, take it, and go fix the original once we're all immune.'

The others agreed that this was a good idea, so we sent Beckendorf off to the Big House. He returned fifteen minutes later with the bear-skin package and amphora of gold flakes. As soon as we tipped out the amphora, the problem was apparent.

'Correct me if I'm wrong,' Silena said, staring at the glitter shower that fell out, 'but that's not gold.'

I touched my finger to the glittering pile. The flakes sparkled in the light of the cabin walls, so bright that they were easy to mistake for the actual stuff. But upon close examination, they were only rounded plastic particles, the kind used in body glitter. I wouldn't have noticed the difference so quickly, but trust a daughter of Aphrodite to know her cosmetics.

Without this, they should fail.

My blood ran cold, and I was sure it had nothing to do with my poisoning symptoms.

'Silena,' I said slowly, 'you said you were attacked coming out of Philadelphia.'

'Yeah, by some weird bird.'

'A screech owl?'

She blinked. 'How did you know?'

The frost in my veins settled into a block of ice in my stomach. 'What happened exactly?'

Silena twisted a lock of hair around her finger. 'Well, it didn't go after us precisely. It was like, more interested in our bags. It snatched my backpack and flew off before we really realised what was happening. We chased, but Michael only had one arrow left and he was worried he'd miss if he tried to shoot it down. It was zigzagging around so fast. But I had some aerosol body glitter in my purse, so I told Michael to sort of shoot-spray it.'

Travis raised an eyebrow. 'Body glitter? You just randomly have body glitter on you?'

Silena put her hands on her hips. 'My make-up is always in my purse. You have a problem with
'That?'

Will elbowed Travis in the ribs.

'Go on,' I said. 'How did you get the panacea back?'

'Well, you know how body glitter gets into everything?'

We looked at her blankly.

'Okay, trust me, it's crazy hard to clean out. Anyway, Michael exploded the bottle over the owl. Its feathers got all glittered up and it had to stop in a tree to pick the bits out of its wings. That's when we caught up and snatched our stuff back. It didn't even put up a fight. I guess it realised it was outnumbered.'

'And the bag was intact—the panacea, the amphi...ra ...?'

'Obviously it got shaken around, but everything was still inside.' Silena frowned. 'You don't think a bit of jostling could hurt it?'

I shook my head and pointed to the pile of glitter that had poured out of the amphi...ra. 'You had golden body glitter, didn't you?'

The blood drained from Silena's face. 'I—I didn't think ...'

'That owl was a servant of Kronos.' I told them about my dream. Silena's face got paler by the second when I revealed how Torrington had presented Kronos with an identical amphi...ra.

'Then I pretty much gave him the glitter to swap out. And I never even noticed.' Silena buried her face in her hands. 'I thought I—I thought I could ... It's all my fault!'

Beckendorf put an arm around her. 'No,' he said firmly. 'You did what any hero would have done. It wasn't your fault Kronos's owl tricked you.'

'What are we going to do, though?' Will asked. 'Now that we can't brew the panacea or neutralise the poison?'

'There's got to be a way,' I said. I paced the length of the cabin, trying to remember Panacea's exact instructions. The trick is gold, she'd said. Unfortunately gold was in short supply around here.

'Anyone got drachmas to spare?' Connor asked.

'That won't work. Panacea said money and medicine can't mix. We need pure, untainted gold.'

'What about this cabin?' Beckendorf waved his arms around. 'If we could melt down the walls ...'

All the Apollo kids looked at him in alarm.

'You want to melt our walls?' Austin Lake cried.

'You realise they're the only thing keeping the poison out?' Will pointed out.

Beckendorf shrugged. 'Unless you have a handy stash of gold lying around somewhere?'

'There's the Golden Fleece—that's gold, right?' Travis suggested.
'And risk being swamped by monsters?' Katie argued. 'They're still on the prowl outside, you know.'

'No need.' Clarisse put her right hand reluctantly on her belt. She was the only one in full battle armour, as though she'd geared up to fight the plague. Or maybe she just slept in it. I'd never been entirely certain if she did. From her sword sheath, she drew out the golden spoil of war she'd claimed during our battle in Richmond.

'You couldn't have shown that to us sooner?' Kayla Knowles grumbled. 'Like, before people got it in their heads our walls are dispensable?'

Clarisse pointed the tip of her blade threateningly at Kayla. The five campers nearest to her backed away, falling over each other in the process. 'I'm already giving up my spoil of war to fix your cabin's mess. Don't make me regret this.'

'How is it our cabin's fault?' Kayla protested.

One of the Ares campers opened her mouth to argue, then I guess she remembered the rhyming curse because she shut it again, looking mutinous.

'Stop it!' Beckendorf bellowed. Everyone fell silent. 'We've got Clarisse's gold sword. Can we, like, melt it down and fix the problem now?'

I took the blade from Clarisse before she could decide not to share after all. 'You'll have to take it to the forge,' I told Beckendorf. 'As for neutralising the poison ...'

Beckendorf took the blade. 'Do I just pour in the melted gold?'

'I don't know. I'd do it the same way Panacea did, to be safe. Which means me or Michael should go with you.' I glanced at Michael. He'd have been the ideal candidate, seeing as he at least had some healing magic. But he was still KO-ed on his bunk. I squared my shoulders. 'I'll go.'

'Are you sure, Annabeth?' Silena fretted. 'It could be dangerous.'

When were things ever not? I'm sure,' I said. 'Melt down that gold and let's neutralise some poison.'

+++ As a precaution, Beckendorf returned from the forge with two gold face masks. We put them on and took the rest of the gold, which he'd shaved into little flakes and tipped into a bronze vial, off to the Big House.

The poison fumes were so thick now, I could see them curling like sickly green creepers up the farmhouse walls. Little tendrils of mist extended towards the cabins.

'We'd better hurry,' I said. 'It looks like it's getting worse by the minute.'

Armed with our vial of gold, we approached the infirmary. Inside the Big House, the poison choked the air. It wafted out of the infirmary in clouds that reminded me of the smoke that issued from the Oracle's mouth along with her prophecies.

_Beware, beauty, traps in the land of liberty._

I groaned.

'What?' Beckendorf asked, tensing up in alarm.
'It was in your prophecy. The trap, beauty—'

He cursed. 'It wasn't the Stymphalian birds after all.'

'Yeah.' I took a deep breath, which was a mistake. Even behind my gold mask, inhaling the poison fumes was like shoving a spike up my nose.

'Annabeth!' Beckendorf caught me as I staggered.

'I'm fine,' I said. 'Let's go fix this poison.'

By the time we found the bowl with Will's distillation, my head was spinning badly. I took the vial of gold flakes and tried to recall exactly what I'd seen Panacea do.

_A pinch for safety, two flicks to cure. Add a third when it settles, and a last drop to be sure._ The rhyme teased its way into my aching head. I added the gold to its beat. On the last drop, the distillation crackled like fourth of July fireworks.

And then it exploded.

Half-brewed panacea splattered into our faces with startling heat. If it hadn't been for our gold masks, Beckendorf and I would have been fatally scalded. As it was, the metal surface burned so bad, I had to rip off the mask.

I swooned, my head close to exploding. The next moment, the world went black.

+++ 

I was suffocating in a sea of poison mist. It swirled around me in towering clouds, obscuring my surroundings. I was drowning ... drowning ...

Someone grabbed my wrist.

'I got you!' Percy said. He hauled me through the mist, onto solid ground. I lay there, trembling. Sweat beaded on my brow. My skin was damp and feverish.

Percy knelt over me, worry etched into his features. He touched my forehead. 'You're sick. What's going on, Annabeth?'

My voice was hoarse. 'Poison at camp.'

Percy's body tensed. His thumb traced a line down my cheek. 'I'm coming back right now.'

'No,' I said weakly. 'What if you get sick, too?'

'I'm not leaving you alone.' His other hand closed around mine. 'I'm coming.'

His touch evaporated. Fog closed in, drowning out his face. When it dissipated, I found myself back in the dim warehouse where Luke held court, attended by Alabaster Torrington. A third, unknown man knelt at Luke's feet. He wore a cloak so dark, it looked like the very shadows were wrapped around him. His face was hazy and seemed to shift constantly between a million different features.

'It is done,' Shadows said. 'The trial worked perfectly. All is in place for your strike.'

'Excellent.' Kronos's cold voice sounded as much like nails on chalkboard as ever. 'When the time is right, we will attack.'
'Why no now, sir?' Torrington asked. 'If our plans are ready?'

Luke's face curled into a sneer. 'You are a magician, but not a strategist. You have not seen the full implications of the item you brought me.'

Torrington smoothed down his hair nervously. 'Implications?'

'Opportunities, perhaps. If we wait ... if we secure the last piece of the puzzle, we will be able to deploy an unbeatable weapon. The gods will not see it coming.' Kronos rubbed Luke's hands together. 'Send your messenger to Camp Half-Blood, Alabaster. My spy will bring it an item to guarantee our victory.'

Torrington bowed. 'But—you said before your spy was holding out. If they do not deliver ...'

Kronos's face flickered. His eyes wavered, turning from gold to blue, to gold, and finally settling into Luke's irises, wide and worried. When he spoke, his voice was softer, more Luke and less Titan lord.

'Tell them—' He sounded like he was struggling to be heard over a bad telephone line. 'Tell them that it is the only way to draw the battle away from camp. The only way to safeguard their home. Tell them it will save more lives. That—that always worked.'

The change in Luke's demeanour did not escape Torrington. 'Did you just—are you all right, my lord?'

Luke blinked. His face froze in confusion, then his expression melted back into Kronos's haughty one. 'Of course I am! And this plan will ensure our victory. We will wait until the final pieces are in place. But believe me. Percy Jackson will not see his sixteenth year. I will control the prophecy.'

The vehemence in his voice made me shiver. My whole body trembled. The ground was shaking. Cracks erupted along the floor, swallowing my feet. I fell through them ...

... and landed on a battlefield. Two armies charged towards each other, but the fight was centred on a single warrior. He was like a one-man whirlwind, spinning through the opposing forces and spitting out corpses in his wake. When he had whittled his enemies down to a handful of terrified, fleeing warriors, he sheathed his sword and surveyed his handiwork with a manic gleam in his eyes. A half-crazed laugh erupted from his throat. It sent shivers down my spine. The sound rang of retribution, of Furies, of spirits that should be confined to Tartarus.

His men returned to him, flushed with adrenaline. At the sight of their commander laughing like a madman, their victorious expressions gave way to nervousness. They all backed away, except for one stocky youth.

'Achilles,' said the brave youth, putting a hand on his commander's arm. 'Come back to us.'

For a moment, it seemed like Achilles would turn on his friend. Fire blazed in his eyes. His laughter faded, but his expression remained flushed with bloodlust.

Then he blinked and focused on the man in front of him. His mind seemed to return from somewhere far away. 'Patroclus.'

'I am here,' Patroclus said. 'Remember who you are.'

'Achilles. I am Achilles.'

'Yes.' Patroclus sighed. 'I fear for you. With every battle we fight, I fear what this war will do to you.'
'To me?' Achilles scoffed. He removed his helmet and ran his hands over his body. Although he had spilled the blood of hundreds, his own skin was unmarked, without even a bruise to mar its surface. 'I cannot be harmed, Patroclus. I am invincible—an invincibility my mother sought for me, but won through pain and agony. I survived what no man ever has. I alone returned alive from the River Styx, stripped of all but the barest vestige of my mortal vulnerability ... but stronger for it.'

'I know that,' Patroclus said. 'And I have no doubt the prophecies will ring true—that with you on our side, Troy will fall eventually. But you grow further from us, Achilles. Further from me. I fear you push your invulnerability to the limit. Divinity and mortality were never meant to mix.'

'I will do what is necessary to protect my people,' Achilles's gaze softened as it raked over Patroclus. 'My family.'

Patroclus grasped his hand. 'Do not forget that. If you ever lose sight of what anchors you ... I fear you will pass a point of no return ...'

The scene faded. My eyes fluttered open. Percy's face swam into view, looking almost exactly as he had in my dream, down to the deep crease in the middle of his forehead. I had the fleeting, giddy thought that this was what he would look like when he got older, with worry lines running permanent furrows in his face. It made him look more mature, more handsome.

I shook the thought from my head. 'Percy? What are you doing here?'

He cracked a smile, though the worry lines around his eyes remained. 'I saw you in my dreams.' His eyes widened. 'Er, I mean, I had a dream and you were in it. A demigod dream—you know.' I almost wished he hadn't backtracked. His first sentence had set my heart beating faster. 'You told me camp was sick and everything.'

That was my dream. Did this mean it had actually been him—or his dream self, at any rate—with me? Oh gods. What stupid things had my dream self said? I vaguely remembered telling him not to come lest he get sick, which was really dumb since he'd taken the panacea in Philadelphia like Beckendorf and Clarisse.

I struggled to a sitting position. My head felt like a herd of pegasi had trampled through it, but the horrible, sickly stench of poison was gone. It was more like dealing with the aftermath of a bad cold. 'When did you get here?'

'I came as soon as I woke up from my dream. That was, er, three days ago, I think?'

'It didn't seem possible. My dreams couldn't have lasted that long.

Percy handed me a bowl of what looked like yellow porridge. 'Here. Will said it's supposed to help.' He dipped a spoon in and brought it to my mouth like he meant to feed me, then stopped and gave me the spoon handle-first. He rubbed awkwardly at the back of his neck.

The thick porridge tasted of butter and déjà-vu. I'd never tried it before, but Will had made the exact same stuff for Percy the night he'd crash-landed on the porch after fighting the Minotaur.

'Ahh, our brave hero awakens.' The infirmary door opened and Chiron wheeled in, followed by Will. 'How are you feeling, my dear?'

'I've been better,' I admitted. 'But I'm okay. What happened when I was out? Is the poison gone? Did the panacea work?'

'Yes and no,' Will said. 'Whatever you and Beckendorf did, it cleared the air. Took a while to
dissipate, but it was gone by the time Percy arrived. Chiron came to get us. He and Mr D woke up once the air was de-poisoned.'

Chiron tugged on his scraggly beard. 'How very embarrassing,' he said. 'I cannot remember oversleeping like that since ... well, perhaps since the Party Ponies convention of '69.' He shook his head. 'Crazy stuff.'

'You and Beckendorf took a big hit, though,' Will continued. 'We found you passed out in the infirmary.'

'Beckendorf too?' I said in alarm. 'I thought he was protected by the panacea?'

'The panacea confers health and vitality—physiological immunity,' Chiron said. 'It still has limits. I imagine that against a physical explosion, it would do little good. And its protection will wear off over time.'

'But he's okay? Beckendorf, I mean.'

'Yeah, he recovered before you,' Will said. 'He's already back at the forges. You were the one we were worried about. If you didn't wake, I wasn't sure what to do. We don't have any more panacea.'

'Surely we could brew it again, properly this time?'

'We already used up Clarisse's sword. And even if we melted down the Apollo cabin—and I'd prefer we didn't—the herb of invulnerability ... well, we lost that.'

'What?' I nearly choked on my buttery porridge. 'How?'

'It disappeared. We searched everywhere. It went missing while we were cleaning things up. I—I guess I didn't keep a close enough watch on it.' Will ran a tired hand over his face. He'd probably run himself ragged over the last few days doling out healing charms.

'Kronos wanted it,' I realised. I quickly explained my dream. Percy's brow furrowed again, only now he didn't just look worried; his eyes grew cold and angry, almost like the Greek warrior Achilles's.

'But how did Kronos's messenger enter camp?' Will asked. 'Peleus is on guard, and Argus—'

'Argus was knocked out,' Percy said. 'First time I every saw all his eyes closed.'

'And Torrington's messenger is a screech owl. It could've flown past Peleus.'

'The magical barriers should have kept it out,' Will argued.

'Kronos mentioned a spy,' I said miserably. 'If they brought it out to him ...'

Percy and Will fell silent. It wasn't the first time we'd suspected that we might have spies at camp. But I couldn't imagine who it could be.

Chiron sighed. 'We cannot accuse anyone without proof. But perhaps as a precaution, we should keep future strategic discussions among head counsellors only.'

He glanced apologetically at Will, who shrugged. 'At any rate, panacea's a no-go. Maybe we'll get lucky and the Titans will knock themselves out trying to brew it.'

'Yeah, great odds on that,' Percy muttered.
'It's all right,' Will said. 'We've survived all this while without panacea. We'll manage.'

Chapter End Notes

The plague idea was taken very liberally from the story of Chryseis in the *Iliad*, a daughter of a priest of Apollo who was taken by the Greeks as a spoil of war for the commander Agamemnon. The Greek army was struck by a plague that would not lift until they returned Chryseis. Subsequently, Agamemnon demanded Achilles's spoil of war, Briseis, as a replacement, leading to Achilles pulling out of the Trojan War in anger. TLO touches on that later half of the legend; I wanted to give voice to the earlier part of it. Hopefully that comes across in the building tension between Clarisse and Apollo cabin. Working it around a related part of the myth is a bonus!

As for the rhyming curse—well, Annabeth did say 'Not again!' in TLO when it happens, suggesting that wasn't the first instance of it. The previous instance of the curse just had to happen off-screen from Percy's perspective!
We Get More Fireworks Than We Bargained For

Chapter Summary

Kronos's next strike interrupts the biggest dating event of the season.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After the panacea poison scare, it took a while to return to normalcy. Tension lingered throughout camp at first, with everyone worrying about what trick Kronos would pull next. But a week passed without the slightest hint of an attack, not here, nor in Manhattan. Percy sheepishly reported that his mom and stepdad had just gone on a weekend writing retreat that had a no-phones-allowed policy.

June drew to a hot, balmy close, and our attention turned to matters within camp. The rhyming curse Michael had levied in his fit of irritation wore off after a week, but the Ares cabin stayed fuming mad. Disgruntled by the loss of her spoil of war to what she insisted was 'those losers' screw-up,' Clarisse stomped around in a towering bad mood. Campers skipped to the other side of the fields when they saw her coming, lest they got a taste of her electric spear. Even Chris (whom I still couldn't figure out if she was actually dating) got zapped a couple of times when he accidentally said the wrong thing.

In an attempt to resolve their differences, Chiron put both cabins on the same side for capture the flag. But they spent so much time fighting each other, Beckendorf strolled into their territory and made off with their flag virtually unopposed.

'You cost us the win!' Clarisse screamed at Michael after the game.

'Come off it,' Michael told her. 'You were supposed to go after the flag, not us!'

'I'll pulverise you!'

This might have escalated into another pitched battle, but Chris stepped in with the tentative suggestion that maybe they should try and work together next time they were on the same side. This probably would have gotten him pulverised, except he played a wild card and asked Clarisse to the Fourth of July fireworks in front of everyone.

Even so, it was touch and go for a minute. We all stared, wide-eyed, wondering if Clarisse would zap him anyway. (She did—but then she said yes.)

Chris's distraction might have calmed Clarisse down, but it didn't kill her desire for revenge. She even enlisted me to help her win our next game (or at least whip Apollo cabin's butt). It was a first, Athena and Ares teaming up, but after working with Clarisse so many times over the past year, it wasn't the shock it might once have been.

Of course we got the flag (I hadn't lost a game in five years, and I wasn't about to start now). Even with Percy and Beckendorf heading up the opposing team and the complication of an unexpected but providential adventure involving a rogue automaton dragon, a mound of Myrmekes, and Beckendorf finally asking Silena to fireworks night (loooong story), my well-planned strategy brought the flag
firmly into red team hands. (But I was confident the blue team would get it back if I played on that side next game.)

July brought with it our annual diversion: the Fourth of July fireworks. For the younger kids, it was the most exciting night of summer, when they got to stay up past midnight watching Hephaestus cabin's explosive extravaganza. For the older kids, it was better known as the biggest dating event of the summer. Probably because it was the only dating event we had. Whenever July rolled around, camp gossip tended to centre on who was taking who to the fireworks.

Chris's bold proposal to Clarisse had caused quite a stir, but it was Beckendorf and Silena who became the 'it' couple this year. After being swarmed by Myrmekes and nearly fricasseed by a bronze dragon, Beckendorf finally decided that asking her out couldn't be scarier than facing a fifty-ton hunk of bronze bent on frying his butt. They became inseparable following our adventure.

Camp gossip couldn't get enough of them, especially after Chiron caught them together in the Hephaestus cabin. As punishment, he set them on KP for a week (on alternating days, of course). For good measure, he tacked an addendum on every camp announcement to remind us that campers of different parentage were not to be alone in a cabin together without supervision.

This, of course, just fuelled the gossip about who would hook up with whom this year.

On fireworks night, I shared a picnic blanket with Percy on the dunes of the north beach, watching the rockets explode into the sky over Long Island Sound. It wasn't the first time we'd watched the fireworks together, but it was a different matter without Grover or Tyson with us. We weren't far from Beckendorf and Silena and the other officially-dating couples, some of whom were more focused on creating their own 'fireworks', so to speak.

I wasn't sure if being here together counted as a date. It wasn't like I'd ever been on a real one. I mean, there was that time last year that Percy asked me to the movies ... except I'd gotten as far as his school in Manhattan before monsters, explosions, and an annoyingly pretty mortal redhead had put an end to those plans. I'd never even found out whether Percy had intended it to be an actual date.

And things had gotten way more complicated since then. Between our arguments, and Percy's skittishness, and his new friend Rachel Dare ... well, I could hardly figure out what he thought any more. At the moment, he looked like his hellhound Mrs O'Leary did when she needed a bathroom break. His legs twitched restlessly. His hand fidgeted against the blanket, inching closer to mine.

I turned my hand palm-up, fingers splayed to make things easier for him. Percy glanced at it. His hand crept closer. Then he hesitated, looked away, and wiped his hand on his jeans.

Strange how he had no problem taking my hand when we were running for our lives, or when he was comforting me. But when the circumstances involved an overwhelming number of date-like trappings ...

Was that the problem? Maybe he just didn't want to date me. Maybe he was happier when we were just friends.

I tucked my hands back into my lap, trying to swallow down my disappointment.

Beckendorf's voice rose abruptly over the crackle of fireworks. 'Those aren't—we didn't make—'

I sat up sharply. In the distance, across the Sound, a bright light burned over the north shore. Unlike the multi-coloured fireworks popping high above our heads, this was an intense blaze with a green tinge to the flames. But it was thirty miles across Long Island Sound. How could we possibly see a
burning structure this clearly?

Percy and I exchanged a look. All awkwardness gone, we ran to the edge of the beach.

'What's on the other side?' Percy asked.

I tried to picture the state map in my head. 'Connecticut, I think.'

'New Haven.' Connor Stoll appeared behind us, looking deadly serious for once. 'It's—we used to live there.' He glanced at his brother Travis, who was striding over, hand-in-hand with Nyssa Barrera.

No one was paying attention to the fireworks any more. We gathered at the water's edge, staring at the impossible blaze.

'Nothing burns that bright,' Beckendorf said. 'Except maybe ...'

Silena's hands clenched around his arm. 'What?'

'Greek fire.'

A nervous undercurrent passed through our ranks. If Greek fire was burning across the Sound, this was no mortal accident.

'Why New Haven?' Percy wondered. 'Isn't that like, Nowhere, Connecticut?'

Connor crossed his arms. 'It's only, like, a major traffic intersection.'

'With an Ivy League college,' Travis pointed out. 'Half the CIA's forces are Yale graduates.'

'How do you know that?' Nyssa asked in amazement.

'So, what, Kronos is against higher education now?' Percy said.

'Well, not many people know this, but there's a shrine to Hermes up there,' Travis said. 'It's kind of how we got "discovered." We tried to steal—'

Nyssa hit his shoulder. 'From your own dad?'

'Can we get to the point?' Silena interrupted.

'I think his point is, the shrine to Hermes is under attack,' Beckendorf said.

Across the water, the Greek fire burned on, putting a damper on our festivities. We trudged dejectedly to our cabins, no longer interested in fireworks. It was clear the same thing was on everyone's mind: if the Titans were in Connecticut, they were way too close for comfort.

Something else about the location bugged me. I'd never been to New Haven, or heard about the shrine there, but I felt like I knew something about Connecticut and Hermes. I just couldn't figure out the connection.

It probably goes without saying that I didn't sleep well that night. I drifted in and out of dreams, half of which made no sense: unknown armies clashed on unfamiliar plains; two bodies lay in a pool of red; a bird with bulging eyes dive-bombed a teenage girl ...

Then I saw Thalia, sitting on a chair by a cluttered kitchen table. She fiddled awkwardly with her
disguised shield bracelet while a middle-aged woman with snow-white hair knelt at her feet, wrapping long, white bandages around her bloody leg. I would have thought she was at a safe house with her Hunters, except Thalia wasn't wearing the silver circlet that marked her as Artemis's lieutenant. She also seemed younger, though the signs were subtle: a slight roundness to her cheeks, wider eyes.

The clincher was the girl sitting on her other side. She was about seven years old, dressed in an oversized t-shirt and baggy jeans rolled up several times at the ankles. Her blonde hair was pulled up in a messy ponytail. She sat tugging at the stringy hair of a beanbag Medusa—it had a red X knitted over its face, and each woollen hair ended in a snake-head bobble—and kicking her legs impatiently against the chair.

I was staring at my seven-year-old self.

This had to be a random mash-up of a dream, a scene that juxtaposed stuff from my memories with a bizarre setting. When had I ever seen a room like this? The table was covered with trays of blackened, monster-shaped cookies and plates of sandwiches that might have been PB&J, except they were so soggy and covered in mould that it was impossible to tell. My stepmother would never have tolerated such a mess in her house.

Then it clicked. There was a house I'd visited with Thalia and Luke. I'd nearly forgotten. Luke had brought us here shortly after a dragon had razed one of our safe houses to the ground, crushing Thalia's leg in the process.

This was an old memory, after all. But where was Luke?

The white-haired lady tied off Thalia's bandage and beamed at us. 'Did I tell you when Luke was a baby? He crawled right out of the cradle and into next door's cow field. He stole all the cows from the stables and led them into the pond!'

'Um, are you serious?' Thalia said.

'Of course!' The woman had a singsong voice, almost like a lullaby. She went to the kitchen counter and grabbed two glasses, which she set on the table next to the cookies and sandwiches. 'He's the god of thieves, you know.'

'Isn't that Hermes?'

'Oh, Hermes,' sighed the woman—Luke's mom. She found a jug of red liquid—Kool-Aid, maybe—and filled the two glasses. Then she picked up two charred cookies and dumped them inside. 'He's Luke's father, you know. And he said Luke had a big job ahead of him. So I made him a guardian to watch over his cradle.'

She offered the glass of cookie-flavoured bug juice to my younger self, then plucked the beanbag Medusa out of my hands and shook it in Thalia's face. Thalia leaned back, rubbing her new bandages like she was having second thoughts about letting this crazy woman treat her wound.

My younger self fished the burnt cookie out of her glass and inspected it. She looked at the doorway and held up the cookie, showing it to someone in the other room. Her mouth formed the words, Can we go now?

My real memory of this incident was fuzzy. I guess it had just faded into the stuff of nightmares. I hadn't really understood at the time how crazy Luke's mom was. But watching the scene now, it was evident that Ms Castellan couldn't string two coherent sentences together.
Through the doorway, I saw Luke pacing back and forth before a man in winged trainers. From the sharp, bitter tone of their voices, theirs was no pleasant chat. I couldn't make out their conversation over Ms Castellan's nonsensical chatter. At least, not until a shout rang out: 'Then you don't care!'

Hurt and angry as it was, Luke's voice was a comfort. I'd heard Kronos's voice issue from his lips for too long now. Even if this was only an old memory, it was a relief to hear him sounding like him.

Ms Castellan stopped mid-sentence. 'Luke? Is that you?' Her gaze turned inwards. Whatever she saw clearly frightened her. Her eyes went as wide as the burnt cookies. 'Is my boy all right?'

Thalia leapt to her feet in alarm. An eerie light was shining from Ms Castellan's eyes.

'What's wrong with her?' my younger self whispered.

Ms Castellan lurched towards seven-year-old me, hands outstretched. My younger self leaned back in her chair and almost toppled backwards.

Thalia grabbed her and pulled her out of Ms Castellan's reach.

'You—' rasped Luke's mom. She started to shake uncontrollably. 'You'll save my boy. Won't you? Won't you?'

My younger self's bottom lip trembled. Thalia hugged her. 'Shh,' she said. 'It's okay.'

'Thalia, Annabeth!' Luke shouted from the other room. 'Come on! We're leaving!'

We wasted no time scrambling from the kitchen. Thalia bobbed her head awkwardly at the man in the other room as we rushed past him. I realised he was the god Hermes—tall, with salt-and-pepper hair, fluttering wings sprouting from his shoes, and the most distraught expression I'd ever seen on a god's face.

Luke was already at the front door, banging it open so forcefully that it slammed back on its hinges. He strode out into the night without a backward glance, leaving us to chase after him.


We ran into the woods. And then the scene shifted. Luke stood in front of a green-and-gold conflagration, his head thrown back in laughter. The expression on his face was crazed and wild, the way an unstoppable hurricane might look if it took human form.

'The gods deserve it,' he said, and although the gold in his eyes belonged unmistakably to Kronos, his voice held the same raw hurt and anger of his fourteen-year-old self. 'I will tear down every source of their power—brick by brick.'

His words echoed across the night sky: brick by brick.

+++ 

The next morning, we sat around the ping-pong table in the rec room, holding another war council. Chiron stood at the head of the table, his tail swishing back and forth with nervous energy. Mr D was gone; he'd been called to Olympus early this morning. The gods were apparently having their own council after Kronos's attack last night.

'New Haven is only the beginning,' Chiron said. 'The gods' seat of power may be on Mount Olympus, but they draw power too from their shrines—the sites where they were revered. Kronos
knows he cannot simply take on the Olympians together in direct combat. He is threatening their individual sources of power instead. When the gods are concerned about their individual interests ... this divides them.'

I shivered, remembering Kronos's laughter as he watched the Hermes's shrine burn. The way he had sounded like a younger Luke storming away from his mother's house ... a house in Connecticut.

Was it really Kronos's decision to attack New Haven? Or did Luke have something to do with it?

'But what can we do?' Percy asked. 'Can we protect these other places?'

Chiron stroked his beard. 'Annabeth, do you have a map?'

I opened the interactive map programme on Daedalus's laptop. Unlike Google maps, Delta maps showed three different viewing levels: aerial, street, and underground. I switched to aerial view and beamed the map onto the wall so everyone could see.

Clarisse pointed to Pier 86. 'Ares's temple is on the Intrepid.'

'And Athena has a Parthenon replica in Tennessee.' I drew a circle around it with my finger.

My heart sank as we picked out the places where our godly parents had individual strongholds. They were spread too far around the country. We couldn't possibly guess which Kronos might go for next. And if we headed out to defend them all, we'd be spread too thin.

'I guess that's what Kronos wants,' Beckendorf said. 'To lure us out.'

'So what, we're just gonna let him blow everything up?' Clarisse demanded.

'You have a better idea?'

'You bet. The best defence is a good offence.'

'What are you suggesting?' Chiron asked.

'I say we lead an attack. Stop waiting for them to come after us. Attack them in their home territory.' She slammed her palm on the wall right on the dot that was San Francisco.

'That's nuts,' Percy said. 'It's all the way across the country. And we'd be walking right into the Titan's back yard. You don't know what that place is like now. It—' He looked at me and stopped, probably remembering that I was the only person who'd been there within the last year.

'He's right,' I said. 'We're not getting anywhere near Mount Tam. But ... Clarisse is right, too. We can't just sit around waiting for Kronos to make the first move. I have another idea.'

I killed Delta maps and found another folder: a collection of defensive plans for every major city in the United States (and probably elsewhere in the world, too. I still needed to do a complete inventory.)

'We know Kronos hit New Haven, and he was last in Richmond. I'm guessing he'll close in on Long Island eventually, but we don't know how he'll approach. But if we could set up a ring of defence—not far, close enough that we can fly out and back within an hour or two—we could set traps to take out any monsters he sends past those points. Guerilla tactics. If we thin out his army, it'll be harder for him to launch a co-ordinated offence.'

'When you say traps,' Travis said slowly, 'what exactly are we talking about here?'
I showed them some of Daedalus’s ideas: movement activated guns hidden in highway tollbooths, explosives stashed in libraries (of all places!), dormant statues waiting to be mobilised. ‘The beauty of most of these is that we could activate them and let them run. Theoretically, once we set them off, we wouldn’t need to stay around to monitor them.’

Beckendorf peered at the map of Brooklyn that I’d used as an example. ‘Automatons? Uh-uh. That’s a no-go. Even if we could activate them ... the Colchis bulls still act up, and—remember the dragon?’

I winced. ‘Okay, so we’ll keep that as a last resort. But the Jersey Turnpike and the Danbury library ...’

‘That might work,’ he said with an engineer’s frown. ‘Does this mean we need another quest, then? To set up the defences?’

Chiron’s tail swished unhappily. ‘I’m afraid so.’

‘Two in one summer?’ Percy said dubiously.

‘We’re at war,’ I said. ‘We have to do whatever’s necessary.’

‘Annabeth better lead this one,’ Beckendorf said. ‘She’s the strategist.’

‘But—’ Percy gave me a worried look.

I crossed my arms. ‘You got a problem, Seaweed Brain?’

He shut his mouth. I shut my laptop. ‘I guess I should ... go see the Oracle, then.’

As I climbed the stairs to the attic, it struck me that I must be the only demigod in camp history who’d gotten permission to approach the Oracle two summers running. It also struck me that we still hadn’t worked out if Beckendorf’s prophecy had played out in full. The panacea plague had distracted us from it completely.

The attic was always eerily silent. On my way up, I could still hear the scraping of chair legs and the bounce of a ping-pong ball as the restless counsellors started a game. But the trapdoor might have been a portal into a different world. Dust bunnies drifted around like lazy clouds. Cobwebs swayed in corners and stretched across old artefacts on the shelves. I shuddered at the sight, but at least their makers were absent.

The Oracle sat in her customary tripod under the window. She’d been a ghostly presence in the attic for all my years at camp. In the hierarchy of undead creepiness, it probably went disembodied spirits, Oracle, and then zombies. But now that I had an inkling of the girl she had once been, she seemed even spookier. I couldn’t help superimposing my mental image of Cath over the husk of the Oracle. What had it been like when she’d spouted prophecies from the mouth of a regular camper?

I took a deep breath and approached her.

‘O spirit of the Oracle of Delphi, tell me my destiny.’

Silence. I waited for her to sit up, for the green smoke, the raspy voice ... for her to do anything at all.

The Oracle remained still. She’d never seemed more dead.

‘Oracle of Delphi,’ I tried again. ‘I have been issued a quest. I need a prophecy.’

The Oracle continued to sit mute and immobile. I could see my own silhouette reflected in the glassy
whites of her eye sockets.

'I am leading a quest to defend New York against enemy forces. Can I have a prophecy?' I tried every variant of *I need a prophecy* that I could think of. When the Oracle still did not budge, I had to give up. It was obvious I wasn't going to get a prophecy, or even a straight out, *Sorry, we're closed.* Her empty shell had the vacant stillness of a boarded-up house.

'What did she say?' Percy asked when I finally returned to the rec room.

'Nothing.'

Six pairs of eyes swivelled to me—everyone's except Chiron's. He was studying his hands with a deep crease in his forehead.

Beckendorf scratched his head. 'Nothing, like that was the prophecy, or—'

'Nothing, like she didn't say anything at all.' I dropped into the seat between Percy and Silena. 'Not even a whisper.'

'Has that happened before?' Silena wondered.

In my experience, it never had. The Oracle had even answered me the time I'd crept into her attic without permission to solicit a prophecy. I looked at Chiron, but to our surprise, it was Percy who answered first.

'Er, yeah.' He ran his hand sheepishly over the back of his head. 'That time Annabeth got, um—I mean, when the Hunters were here. I went to see the Oracle, but...' He fixed his eyes on the ping-pong ball rolling about on the table. Rapidly, he recounted his previous unauthorised and fruitless audience with the Oracle. He'd left out this part of the story when he'd told me about his quest with the Hunters two years ago. Had he just not thought it relevant, or had it been a deliberate omission? I noticed he skipped over exactly what he'd asked the Oracle.

Silena's mouth fell open. 'But that was the time she took a field trip to the woods! Just to deliver a prophecy to the Hunters!'

'Yeah,' Percy muttered. 'Bit of a "screw you, Percy."

We all looked at the door, wondering if the Oracle might come thundering down the stairs to offer my quest to someone else. When no decrepit mummy appeared in the doorway, Chiron cleared his throat.

'I do not think that these are similar circumstances. For one, Annabeth did not visit the Oracle without permission.'

Percy became suddenly interested in his fingernails.

'For another, Beckendorf's prophecy did warn us ...' From the front pocket of his shirt, he produced the folded leaf on which I'd recorded the long prophecy at the start of summer. We all leaned forward to examine it.

'*Six commanders on airborne steeds,*' Beckendorf said. 'We did that—though we didn't exactly get to Charleston.'

'Richmond could be near a place *flames lay waste,*' Silena pointed out. 'That's a really ambiguous line.'
I shivered, thinking of the empty lot that must have once held Hal's mansion. I still didn't know what had happened to it, but 'burnt to a crisp' was entirely possible.

'Annabeth chose which cage to open.' Percy winced and gave me an apologetic look. 'Not sure about the water being steadfast stuff. Maybe it's got to do with escaping down the river?'

'Or maybe it just means how you got her out of there,' Silena said, winking at me.

I felt my cheeks reddening, and quickly moved on. 'To the warrior and archer, spoils of war amass—that'd be Michael's panacea and Clarisse's sword. And the trap in Philadelphia—when Kronos's messenger stole the panacea from Silena.'

Silena shrunk into her seat, her face pale. Beckendorf squeezed her shoulder. 'I don't know what to make of the hero's fate, though. Or the stuff about legends and sacrifice.'

'That could be you, Percy, and Clarisse,' Michael pointed out. 'The three of you got injured in Philly, but then withstood the poison. And the whole quest was pretty epic.'

Clarisse glowered at him. 'And I sacrificed my new blade for your stupid screw-up.'

Chiron held up his hands, forestalling another argument. 'There are two more lines:

'The spirit of Delphi shall rest now until
The first prophecy at last the Fates do fulfil.'

'They fit with something that happened many years ago. A warning I received that seems to only be coming clear now.'

'What do you mean?'

'Until the Great Prophecy comes to pass,' Chiron said, 'I believe this one,' he tapped the leaf, 'was the last we shall receive.'

At the mention of the Great Prophecy, all heads turned to Percy. I didn't think anyone else knew precisely what was in the Great Prophecy, but rumours about a half-blood kid of the Big Three turning sixteen had been flying about camp for a while now. Percy resumed his examination of his fingernails, but I saw his jaw tighten.

'Does that mean we can't leave, then?' Beckendorf said. 'I mean, the rule is we can't go anywhere without a quest, and no prophecy means no quest, so ...'

Clarisse slammed her hand on the ping-pong table, making the ball jump. 'Well, I didn't get a prophecy when I went to scout the Labyrinth. Maybe it's time we change the rule.'

'That wasn't in summer, though,' Travis pointed out.

Chiron's tail twitched. 'The rule was introduced to keep our campers safe and minimise disruption to training in the summer session. But—you have a point. Our battle last year showed that we cannot simply sit inside the magic boundaries and hope for the best. We are fully at war now, and ... rules must change.' He put his head in his hands. When he raised it again, his face seemed to have gained ten years. 'I will allow you to lead this mission, Annabeth. But let us keep the strike force small. A group of three. You may pick two companions to go with you.'

I turned automatically to Percy. But unlike last year, when he'd readily agreed to follow me into the Labyrinth, this time he hesitated. Maybe it was the talk about the Great Prophecy that worried him.
Or maybe everything that had gone down in the Labyrinth made him wary now. Either way, it was a tense few seconds before he nodded, his jaw set in a grim line.

I picked Beckendorf as my second companion. He was handy with tools and mechanics, and if anyone else could understand Daedalus's complicated defence plans, it would be him.

'Sure,' Beckendorf said. 'I owe you one.'

The meeting adjourned. I should have headed straight back to my cabin to get ready, but I'd just remembered something.

'Chiron?'

He looked up. 'Yes, my dear?'

'When you said Beckendorf's prophecy fit with something that happened years ago—do you mean when the Oracle died?'

Chiron steepled his fingers. He nodded his forehead against them as he contemplated my question.

'The Oracle was not always a mummy,' he said at last. 'In fact, the last fifty years were the first time in history that the spirit of Delphi did not inhabit a living host.'

'Because her original host died in a plane crash.'

Chiron went still. 'How did you know that?'

I explained about Hal's diary—in particular, the curse Hades had laid on Cath and her untimely death in the plane crash from which Hal had saved Jenny.

'Ah.' Chiron rubbed his beard. 'I always wondered what had become of young Hal.'

Considering Hal must have been nearly thirty when Chiron had last seen him, it was odd to hear him described as 'young'. But then, Chiron was four thousand years old, give or take a century.

'The previous Oracle of Delphi was indeed a young lady named Catharine Green. She and her twin brother came to camp in the 1940s. But I did not expect the spirit of Delphi to stay with her for as long as it did. Usually it moves to a new host once the current one ages, leaving the old host free to continue her life. We never did understand why Delphi was so attached to Cath. But now that I know ...'

'She never told you about Hades? His curse, I mean.'

Chiron shook his head. 'The day before she died, Cath had a strange ... let's call it an episode. A stranger episode than usual, anyway. She went sleepwalking in the night. We found her in a cave near the top of what is now Half-Blood Hill, communing with invisible spirits. The morning after was the first and only time she told me the Great Prophecy in its entirely. Then she insisted on seeing her brother before she would speak of any more. She was distraught, like she'd finally seen how her prophecy would play out. She said something about the days of no guidance, and—well, "the spirit of Delphi shall rest." It was almost those exact words.'

He gave me a rueful smile. 'At any rate, Cath got on that fateful flight to D.C. The plane went down. Apollo himself delivered her body back to us, and she has resided in the attic ever since.'

I wondered morbidly if Cath's corpse had just fallen from the sky into the fields. Had she been
wreathed in the spirit of Delphi's green smoke? Maybe she'd appeared in the dining pavilion and put everyone off food for days. Or straight in the attic, scaring people there out of their wits. Maybe that was why Chiron had always been hesitant to send us there.

'The pieces are finally starting to come clear. May I see this diary, my dear? It may help me to work out some of the mysteries surrounding the Oracle of Delphi.'

I hadn't finished reading Hal's diary yet. Maybe there were bits further on that might finally explain its connection to Luke. I still hadn't worked out why Hal's name seemed familiar. But I'd never get to it before my quest. And connection to Luke or no, the stuff about the Oracle had to be the important bit—the stuff Kronos would be interested in. The diary was better off in Chiron's hands right now.

So I fetched the diary and handed it over before we left.

Chapter End Notes

I had initially a full long chapter on *The Bronze Dragon* that started first in my notes from TIM, and then this fic, but ultimately, while that chapter was fun, it didn't fit with the plot narrative and tone of either story. I mean to write it up (eventually ...) as a one-shot outtake from this chapter, but ultimately, I've only given it a descriptive summary here.

Are Yale graduates really populating the CIA? I only have internet sources to back me up.

Some logical reasoning about Chiron's knowledge about the curse on Delphi: in the TLO flashback where May Castellan tries to host the Oracle, he does not seem to know why the Oracle won't take, but by the time Rachel makes an attempt, he seems to think it safe because Hades's curse is over. The diary forms part of my logical explanation for how he came to that knowledge between the two events. (Also leading to the foreword on the diary in *DoLC*. But more to come on that ... I promise we haven't seen the last of Hal's story yet!)
Chapter Summary

Percy draws intentionally on his water powers for a special strategy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

My defensive strategy took Percy, Beckendorf, and me on an arc over the East Coast. I picked out a ring of cities in a sixty-mile radius from Manhattan: tight enough to hedge our bets if Kronos chose a concentrated attack; loose enough that if he spread his forces, we could still catch them before they congregated. Admittedly, the coastline remained a weak link in my plan, but I'd figure out something else for that. Maybe we could track down Luke's cruise ship ... but that was a different strategy for a different mission.

We rigged the toll booths on the Jersey Turnpike near Edison to shoot Celestial bronze darts at every vehicle that came through (they couldn't hurt any mortals, but monsters would get a deadly face-full if they tried). In Morristown, we activated a statue of George Washington that Daedalus had configured to spew bronze mist—harmless to mortals, but guaranteed to knock out any monster or demigod that attacked it (I hoped no neutral demigod was foolhardy enough to go randomly poking the bronze cast of a son of Athena). And, in a serious coup by Beckendorf, we managed to trip-line the entire compound of a Monster Donut near the Greek colonnades in West Point. Any monsters who fancied a snack would be netted in high quality Celestial bronze fibres (Hephaestus-certified).

It was in the Parsippany-Troy Hills that we spotted the tour bus.

I probably wouldn't have considered this township—it was small, with only one notable landmark that was of little interest unless you were an architecture buff—but Daedalus had left one important note about the place: demigod campsite, 1908.

I didn't know what Daedalus meant. Had it been an offshoot of Camp Half-Blood, or had the camp relocated there temporarily? Or had there been a completely different group of demigods running around in the hills, maybe unclaimed children of minor gods like the ones who had flocked to Kronos en masse? Camp Half-Blood's American roots definitely went as far back as the Civil War, but the exact time it had migrated to this continent depended on when the central seat of Western power had crossed the Atlantic. Maybe just after the Revolutionary War.

Once we got there, it was easy to see why Parsippany-Troy would have made an excellent campsite. It was a lush valley of rich farmland, bordered by towering mountains on the east, freshwater lakes to the north and south, and wetlands on the west.

And the Stickley Arts and Crafts Museum looked almost exactly like our Art and Crafts cabin (before I'd redesigned it, that is). I was willing to bet its architect was a sibling of mine. The log house had apparently launched its own architectural movement in the early twentieth century. Whether Gustav Stickley had adopted the designs from camp or vice versa, they seemed like proof that the place had once served as a demigod hangout.

'I wonder what happened,' Beckendorf said. 'It'd be kind of cool to have more campsites across the
country, you know? Easier for demigods who live far away to actually get to camp.'

I'd never really thought about where Beckendorf's real home was. He'd been a year-round camper ever since he'd crash-landed in the canoe lake with a flying Greek trireme six years ago. In retrospect, I should have asked, but then none of us really liked to talk about our journeys to camp. They invariably involved monsters, death, or both.

'I guess they didn't have a good border like ours,' I said. 'Camp only works because the monsters can't get in.'

'Would you go to camp in San Francisco if you had the option?' Percy asked.

For some reason, the question made my cheeks grow hot. 'Well, no. That's different.' Even though my school and family was on the West Coast now, I'd been at Camp Half-Blood forever. I could never imagine being anywhere else. 'We should check out the farmhouse. Daedalus didn't leave specifics, but they must have had some basic defences.'

'If not,' Beckendorf patted his bag of supplies, 'we'll set up our own.'

An enormous double-decker tour bus pulled up outside the farmhouse museum, the kind you usually see rolling up to tourist hotspots like Disneyland or Atlantic City. It was strange that so many tourists would want to explore the history of the Arts and Crafts Movement. I mean, I found it fascinating, but this sort of place usually only drew kids forced into field trips during the school term.

'Guys.' Percy dragged us through the museum door. 'Look.'

He pointed out of the windows. The bus doors had just opened. A group of little old ladies descended. This would have been perfectly normal, except these senior citizens had gossamer wings sticking out of their knitted shawls. Their shrivelled arms and legs were not due to age, but the fact that they had bird claws and talons instead of regular limbs.

'Harpies!' I hissed. 'And not the good kind.'

Percy grimaced. 'Are there ever good kinds?'

'You know what I mean—not like the ones at camp.' I squinted at the lettering on the side of the tour bus. It said something like TITANIC TOURS. 'Those are Kronos's harpies.'

After the harpies came a trio of ogres—ten-foot giants with four hair arms apiece. That explained the size of the bus. These ugly dudes would never have fit in an ordinary coach.

The ogres were followed by bare-chested Laistrygonians with naughty tattoos over their hairy torsos, slithering snake women on trunk-like serpent legs, and—rounding off the group bizarrely—a pack of perky cheerleaders in purple and black uniforms with pom-poms to match. One of them did a cartwheel right off the bus.

'Empousai,' Percy groaned. 'I hate those demons.'

'Quick, in here!' We ducked into the nearest toilet as the monsters filed into the reception area. The empousai were complaining loudly as they entered.

'Whose idea was it to come here? It's like, totally boring.'

'Yeah, there isn't even, like, a gift shop!'
'Oh, be quiet,' snapped a harpy. 'You dragged us through the Mall of America when we passed through Bloomington. You can take an hour of historical sightseeing.'

The museum receptionist didn't seem to find it strange that a horde of monster tourists were crowding her lobby. With the Mist, she probably thought they were senior citizens chaperoned by high school students racking up community service hours.

'You must be the three o'clock tour! I have your booking right here. If you'll just wait a moment, your guide will be right along. Can I offer you some Trojan Water? It's bottled straight from the Parsippany Lakes!' She passed out plastic bottles like candy.

One of the ogres swigged the proffered Trojan Water and pulled a face (which didn't look all that different from his regular expression). 'Wish the boss would hurry up with his plans. I'm sick of sightseeing. I wanna smash some demigod heads!'

'Boss has his reasons,' scolded a dracaena. 'If he says wait, we wait. And besides, I'd much rather tour the fifty states than wait down below. Tartarus is so lame.'

As promised, the tour guide showed up a moment later. 'All right, folks!' He clapped his hands together and beamed at the disgruntled monsters, either not noticing or not caring that half of them were less than thrilled to be here. I guess he did this spiel often for disinterested school tours. He led the entire group into the building without losing his perky smile.

Once they disappeared into the next room, Beckendorf muttered, 'Let's get out of here.'

I put a hand on his arm. 'Wait. This is a huge opportunity.'

Percy looked at me incredulously. 'A huge opportunity to get ourselves killed if we don't leave before they come back!'

'Yes, but we came out here to booby trap places like this so they'd take out monsters that pass through.'

'Except we didn't have time to set any traps,' Percy pointed out. 'And look how many there are. How are we supposed to take them all on?'

'Blow the place up?' Beckendorf suggested. 'I have supplies.'

'You sound like Clarisse.'

'I'd do it with more finesse,' Beckendorf grumbled. 'All Clarisse knows about is dynamite.'

I peeked through the toilet door. The receptionist was humming to herself as she wrote in a notebook. She'd left a bottle of Trojan Water on the counter. It gave me an idea.

'No,' I said. 'We're not destroying an architectural landmark if we can help it. Not to mention, mortals might get caught in the crossfire. What we need is something more stealthy.'

I told them the plan.

+++ I sent Beckendorf off to the tour bus with my invisibility cap. He would take charge of one half of the plan. The other part depended on Percy.

'You want me to do what?' he said when I told him what to do.
'Make the toilets explode,' I repeated.

'I thought you said we weren't blowing the place up.'

'Messing up the plumbing isn't the same as blowing up the building,' I said. 'And we need to make sure the monsters don't use the facilities before they get back on their bus. They're bound to be, uh, full up after all that water.'

'Remind me again why we want their bladders bursting when they get back on the road?'

'Because that gives Beckendorf a trigger for his explosives—the flush system. If the plan goes well, it will activate when the bus is well away from here, but before it reaches any other town.'

Percy turned this over in his head. 'It's brilliant,' he admitted. 'But are you sure monsters even use toilets?'

I punched his shoulder. 'Can you mess up these toilets or not, Seaweed Brain?'

Percy screwed up his face like he had constipation. A second later, the water in the toilet bowls sloshed out onto the floor. Wet, but not exactly devastating. The toilets were surprisingly well-maintained.

'Um, that's a start, I guess, but could you, like, make it really bad? Remember we want them totally out of order.'

Percy furrowed his brow. 'I don't like to make a habit of blowing up toilets, you know.'

'You got the ones at Camp Half-Blood pretty good once.'

'It's good motivation when someone's trying to give you a swirlie.'

'I could always try to stick your head in,' I offered.

'Ha ha. No thanks, Wise Girl.' Percy thought for a moment. 'Just give me a sec.' He concentrated again, but this time the expression that flooded his face was less stomachache and more *I'm gonna murder someone.*

The stalls vibrated. The faucets hummed. It was all according to plan, but I started to regret asking Percy to do this. His eyes darkened. His hands balled into fists.

He grabbed my wrist. 'Get out of here.'

I didn't argue. I hurried out the door. A moment later, I heard the unmistakable sound of bursting pipes. Dirty, foul-smelling water seeped out from the crack under the door. The receptionist looked up in alarm.

Percy burst from the toilet, completely dry except for the sheen of sweat across his forehead. His expression had mostly cleared; only his eyes still held a trace of the seething rage he'd called up.

'Hey!' cried the receptionist. 'What did you do?'

Percy looked between us and marched out of the building without a word. I gave the receptionist an apologetic look. 'Pipes must've burst. You might want to get an out-of-order sign up.'

I found Percy alone in the parking lot, mopping at his brow with his shirt sleeve. I'd never thought much about how demigods with magic powers summoned them (Athena kids didn't have magic,
after all; we had to rely on our wits and logic). I guess it made sense that Percy needed angry energy to produce bigger explosions. The times I’d seen him really summon his power had all been emotionally-charged. Clarisse’s attempted swirlie aside, there’d been the time he’d doused a forest fire during the Battle of the Labyrinth. Or who could forget Mount St Helens, when he’d drawn so strongly on a supply of glacial water that he’d unleashed the worst volcanic explosion in decades?

I couldn’t help wondering just how much he could do, if he got mad enough.

'Hey,' I said. 'You okay?'

'Yeah,' he said after a brief pause.

'What were you thinking about in there? That got you mad enough to ...'

A cloud passed over his face. 'You don't wanna know.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't think—'

'It's fine.' His tone made it clear he didn't want to discuss it further. 'Let's go find Beckendorf.'

+++

Beckendorf finished rigging his bombs not a moment too soon. He got back to us just as the monsters finished their tour and poured out of the museum. I noted with satisfaction that most of their complementary Trojan Water bottles were empty.

'It shouldn't take long,' I said. 'As soon as the first monster hits the toilet ...'

'Greek-fire-in-a-box,' Beckendorf said. 'The flush will break it open, and—'

'Ka-boom,' Percy finished.

We summoned our pegasi and followed the bus from a safe distance behind. It was trundling across an empty stretch of highway when the flush triggered, perfectly to plan.

The explosion was more beautiful than all the Fourth of July fireworks combined.

'Good job, guys,' Percy said. 'Let's go home.'

Chapter End Notes

To any residents of the Parsippany-Troy township (probability that I have a reader from there is low, but who knows?), I hope I haven't misrepresented your region. Most of my research comes from Wikipedia, and you can read more about the Stickley Museum at Craftsman Farms here.

Beckendorf's history is a little head-canon I have. I always thought he had something to do with the Greek trireme bead on Annabeth's necklace, but it's a story I've not really had the chance to flesh out more.

The little adventure here is indeed a fleshing out of Percy's comment about Beckendorf rigging a bus to go boom as soon as the first harpy went flush.
We Plan A Military Strike

Chapter Summary

As the summer heats up, Annabeth finds it more and more difficult to deal with her feelings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Percy never told me what awful thoughts he'd drawn on to explode the toilets in the Stickley Museum, and I didn't dare ask. After we got back to camp, we skirted around each other for a few days. Then on Friday, he stopped me at the end of sword-fighting practice.

'Uh, Annabeth.' He wet his lips nervously. His hands ran over the grey streak in his hair.

I put my sword away and gave him a quizzical look.

'It's Paul's birthday this Sunday.'

It took me a while to remember who Paul was. Even when I recalled this was his new stepfather's name, I couldn't work out what he had to do with anything. 'Okay ...'

'And, uh, since there's no rule about leaving camp now ...' Percy brought his hands down and twisted them behind his back. 'I'm, uh, going home for the weekend. I think my mom would like me back for it.'

'Oh.' I could no more imagine myself skipping camp to celebrate Janet's birthday than I could picture myself advertising Monster Donuts. I didn't even know when any of my stepfamily's birthdays were. (And not that I was going to make a big deal of it, but my birthday was on Tuesday.)

'I just thought I should, uh, tell you.' He shifted his weight from foot to foot, as if he were confessing a serious crime rather than merely announcing his intention to take a weekend off.

My stomach did a slow, uncomfortable roll over. 'Percy, is this because of what happened in Parsippany-Troy? I—'

'No,' he said, a bit too quickly. 'Um.' He rumpled up his hair again. 'It's weird. All the stuff this summer. It's only the start of July and it already feels like we've been on ten quests.'

'We've only had two.' But I knew what he meant. This summer wasn't normal. We were at war, and there was no escaping the constant reminder of it.

Percy rubbed his hand over his face. 'I know. It's just ... camp was supposed to be a break from the real world, but now it just seems like ...'

'I know.'

'I need to feel like—like this isn't all there is.'
Ice stabbed at my heart. 'What do you mean?'

He wouldn't meet my eyes. 'I don't know. Maybe I'm just tired of all the monster guts.' He tried a faint smile that didn't quite meet his eyes. 'I'm just going to take two days off, okay? Chiron said it was fine.'

And he left the arena, leaving me feeling like the summer temperature had plummeted into autumn chill.

+++  
Percy still wasn't back on Monday.

Over the weekend, a few messages from our satyr scouts fluttered in, suggesting that we check if our booby traps had netted anything. Beckendorf wanted to head out to have a look, but we waited all morning and Percy didn't show.

'I'll IM him,' I said. 'Maybe we can pick him up along the way.'

But when I threw my drachma into the rainbow, I got a shock.

It took a second to spot Percy. He was walking through his living room door, saying something about cookies. The focus of the Iris-image was on a girl with a cloud of frizzy red hair, who sat on the couch waving a paintbrush in Percy's direction. Even before I saw her face clearly, I knew who she was. I'd followed that cloud of red hair through a deadly maze last year.

Rachel Dare laughed and swiped her paintbrush across a blank notebook page. It made a red stroke across a monogrammed company logo: DE. She seemed so comfortable and relaxed, lounging there like it was her own couch. It was obviously not her first visit to the Jackson household.

'This is what normal people do,' Rachel said.

I cut off the message before she could turn and see me. My heart raced like I was speeding through the Labyrinth again. Her words made a sour knot in my chest. For a demigod, having a normal life was like my dream of building a utopian city: a tantalising idea, but impossible in reality. We just didn't fit in the mortal world. After all, when you can't tell people who you really are, and change schools more frequently than your wardrobe, mortal friendships don't last very long.

But Rachel Dare was no regular mortal. With her rare ability to see through the Mist—better than the rest of us, I even had to admit—she was probably as close to our world as a mortal could get.

And Percy was still hanging out with her, just a normal teenager chilling at his place with his friend ...

(or a girlfriend?)

... during a summer vacation.

This is what normal people do.

My mind couldn't help flying to the one disastrous time Percy and I had tried to hang out like normal teenagers in Manhattan. After he'd trashed his high school orientation, our afternoon plans hadn't made it very far.

Yet between his new stepdad and Rachel, Percy had completed his freshman year at that same high
school and acquired a mortal friend he didn't have to hide stuff from. This could be his life. Without camp and the prophecy, he could be a normal teen with a cool mom and a decent stepdad. He could have, instead of me, a normal best friend who got him. Who might even be able to protect him from monsters—my job, I thought with a pang—with her uncanny ability to pick them out before they got too close.

Maybe he'd finally realised it, too.

A knot in my chest rose to make a lump in my throat.

'Annabeth!'

It took three hollers before I registered that Beckendorf was calling for me. I walked out of my cabin on wooden legs.

'Percy's busy,' I said shortly. 'Let's get Clarisse to go with us.'

It was a quick reconnaissance. We found two of our traps sprung, but since monsters didn't leave corpses behind, we couldn't ascertain how many we'd actually taken out. When we gathered the next morning to report our findings at yet another war council, Percy was still MIA.

His absence nagged at me like an itch under my skin. I told myself it was because I had to do the recon mission with Clarisse, who complained all the way there and back that we hadn't set enough explosives. Or because we should have the full complement of counsellors at this meeting, yet Chiron just acted like Percy's absence was no big deal. In fact, everyone else shrugged it off as well.

'Happy birthday, Annabeth,' Silena whispered when we entered the rec room.

'Shut up,' I muttered. She was just being nice, but I didn't want the reminder. Turning sixteen no longer felt like something to celebrate.

_Sixteen against all odds_. Although the prophecy line didn't refer to me, my birthday reminded me that we were inching closer to Percy's sixteenth every day.

Did he realise that, too? Was it why he was reluctant to return?

Or did he have a more persuasive, redheaded reason to stay out in the mortal world?

I sat with my arms crossed over Daedalus's laptop, listening to Beckendorf recount the key points of our scouting run.

'Ve should have gotten, like, video surveillance or something,' Beckendorf said.

I drummed my fingers on my laptop. 'I think Daedalus had some ideas. I'll have a look later.'

My mind refused to call up any specifics offhand. This just grated at me more.

'It's still not enough, though,' Clarisse said. 'Traps are all good and well, but I say we need a targeted strike.'

'Like what?' Travis bounced a ping-pong ball idly against the table. 'Even if Annabeth does manage to track the monster army, we can't exactly go marching out in full force. We don't even have a full force.'

'Direct combat is out,' Chiron agreed. 'But what Beckendorf and Annabeth did with the monster tour bus last week is promising: minimal manpower, maximum damage.'
'Like the Trojan horse,' Katie mused. 'Except with explosives instead of soldiers.'

'So we find a truckload of monsters and blow it up,' Clarisse said. 'I can get behind that.'

'Unless Kronos is sending them in separate batches,' Pollux pointed out. 'We'd never right that many bombs ... could we?'

'The *Princess Andromeda.*'

My head jerked up at the sound of his voice. Percy stood in the doorway, his weekend bag slung over his shoulder.

I sprang to my feet. 'Nice of you to show up.'

Percy looked taken aback at my acerbic welcome. 'Sorry I'm late,' he said. 'Traffic out of Manhattan was a nightmare.'

'Late? You said you'd only be gone the weekend!'

Percy raised his hands defensively. 'It was one extra day! My mom and Paul both had this writing seminar after work, so I felt bad bugging them to take me back.'

'Oh, *that's* your excuse—'

'Annabeth.' Chiron put a hand on my shoulder, forcing me back into my seat. 'There's no harm done. Percy, please join us.'

I snapped my jaw shut so forcefully I nearly bit my tongue. Percy eyed me warily as he took a seat at the opposite end of the table. The other counsellors looked nervously between us. Katie and Pollux both drew their chairs back a few inches, as if afraid to get caught in the crossfire. This didn't improve my mood at all.

Chiron cleared his throat. 'As we were saying, we want a strategic target that can take out as many of the Titans' forces with as little cost to us as possible. Percy, you seemed to have an idea?'

'Yeah.' Percy avoided my gaze. 'I thought—well, Kronos's got this cruise ship, right?'

'Luke,' I snapped.

'What?'

'It's Luke's cruise ship, not Kronos's.' I shouldn't have made a fuss—half the camp no longer referred to him as Luke these days—but I was suddenly not in the mood to hear Percy act like Luke didn't exist any more.

Percy's jaw tightened, but he forged ahead. 'I spoke to Tyson last night. Poseidon's been trying to sink the ship, but he can't control the waves because the fighting with the old sea Titans is so bad. So I'm pretty sure the ship's still chugging around somewhere. It's Kr—' he glanced at me, 'Luke's best bet to transport most of his forces. I mean, last time we were aboard, that thing had dozens of monsters, and that was with the ship half-empty. It could have hundreds by now.'

'And if Poseidon's pre-occupied, the sea approach makes the most sense,' I concluded grudgingly. Ordinarily, I would have been proud of Percy for his solid strategy, but today all I felt was annoyance. 'If we can take out that ship ...'

'It'll be a big strike.' Percy looked relieved that I wasn't shooting down his suggestion. 'Plus, we're
talking sea attack. That's my territory.'

'Oh, so we should depend on you?' The words flew out of my mouth before I could stop them.

Percy leant back, clearly stung. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'You're not gonna run off on us again?'

The room seemed to acquire its own tense heartbeat. The other counsellors inched their chairs back like Katie and Pollux.

'Now, Annabeth—' Chiron began.

Percy got to his feet. 'It was just a few days!'

'You missed the last mission!'

'Um, it was only recon, Annabeth,' Beckendorf put in.

'That's not fair.' Percy crossed his arms. 'You could've called me.'

'I did!' I bit down on my lip so hard I drew blood. 'Forget it.' I gathered up Daedalus's laptop and stalked out of the room.

'Hey,' I heard Percy protest. 'I'm going to pull my weight, guys. I'll go on the next mission, I promise.'

I didn't stay to hear Chiron's reply. Outside the Big House, I leant against the wall, hating the hot tears that pricked at my eyes. So Percy had missed one mission. Nobody else seemed to think it was a problem. Why was I this angry about it?

It was not because of Rachel Dare.

It definitely wasn't because he'd clearly forgotten my birthday.

Percy didn't emerge from the Big House with the other counsellors. They gave me a wide berth, casting wary looks as they passed. Only Beckendorf and Silena stopped in front of me.

'He's talking with Chiron,' Beckendorf said. He had a curious look on his face, like he was examining a malfunctioning machine he hadn't yet figured out how to fix.

I swiped brusquely at my eyes. 'Did I ask?'

Silena uncurled her arm from Beckendorf's. 'We're going to the forges. Do you want to come?'

She trod heavily on Beckendorf's toe.

'Ow—I mean, yeah!' he said. 'You can show me those ideas you were talking about. For surveillance and stuff.'

'Well, I ...'

They didn't give me a chance to refuse. Silena took my right arm, Beckendorf my left, and they frogmarched me off to the forges.

I had to admit their plan helped. Diving into Daedalus's treasure trove of inventions always served as
a good pick-me-up. It did cheer me a bit to find the idea that had eluded me during our war council: designs for a magical video shield that tapped into light rays. If we got it to work, it would broadcast images from anywhere touched by the sun or moon, allowing us to track Luke's forces without needing to leave camp at all.

Beckendorf squinted at Daedalus's blueprints.

'The shield part is easy enough.' His hands were already moving, playing with loose screws and metal scraps from the work table. In the time I took to explain the principle of Daedalus's invention, he had already fashioned a loose approximation of its design.

Beckendorf passed the miniature shield to Silena. She peered into it like it was a hand-held make-up compact.

'It's pretty,' she said, 'but am I supposed to see something besides myself in it?'

I took the prototype from her. 'I'm guessing the transmission is the complicated part.'

Beckendorf nodded. He was now twisting together a bunch of thin, coppery filaments. 'Light is a combination of different wave frequencies. Ultraviolet, infra-red ... not so different from radio waves. Mortals already use those to communicate. The trick is to tap into the right wavelength. I'm guessing about a thousand nanometres.'

Silena's eyes began to glaze over, though her brow remained furrowed in concentration. Percy had the same look whenever I went on too long about architecture. By now, I knew he wasn't all that interested in design, but I always appreciated his effort to feign attentiveness.

Well, when I wasn't hopping mad at him, anyway.

'He means we need to wire it like a cell phone,' I explained. 'Except, using, uh, like, a different frequency.'

We set to work on the prototype. Silena and I handed Beckendorf tools and held stuff in place while he fit the wiring together with something he called an electromagical transducer. As we worked, Silena peppered him with questions about the magic. She seemed much more interested in that than mechanics. Maybe it was because of her own Charmspeaking abilities.

After a couple of hours, the test shield showed a revolving CCTV-like footage of the camp boundaries. Beckendorf hadn't quite figured out the zoom and pause functions yet, but it was a start. He promised he'd keep working on perfecting the functions before transferring it to a full-scale model. (He was also confident he could add magical voice activation, power-saving, and user recognition, but as long as the shield did its job, I was satisfied.)

I left the forges in a considerably better mood. When I returned to my cabin, Percy was loitering on the porch with a bunch of envelopes tucked under one arm. His hands twisted awkwardly behind his back.

'Hey,' he said cautiously, like he was half-afraid I'd bite his head off.

'What do you want?' My anger had mostly dissipated into a faint ache in my chest, but my words still came out more challenging than I'd intended.

Percy winced. He took a deep breath and said, 'Are you still mad?'

'I'm not mad,' I said automatically.
'You seemed pretty—' He caught himself. 'Fine. Whatever.' He sighed and looked at his sneakers. 'I don't want to fight, Annabeth.'

'Me neither,' I said.

He looked up hopefully. 'Yeah?'

'Yeah.'

We stood in awkward silence for a moment. Then he brought his hands out from behind his back. There was something in them, a cylindrical brown object with a smooshed-up blob on top that seemed to be ...

'Percy, is that a cake?'

'Uh, yeah.' His cheeks were pink. 'I just—I thought maybe you'd be less pissed off if I got you something for your birthday.'

'I wasn't—never mind.' It was incredible how quickly I could go from tired and miserable to giddy and elated. 'You remembered.'

He looked sheepish. 'I, uh, almost forgot. But then I had to sort the mail, and this came for you.' He handed me the cake, flipped through his stack of letters, and held out a postcard.

It had a picture of a large tower, along with some words scrawled in cursive print. The handwriting on the back was my dad's. At the top of his message, he'd scribbled, HAPPY BIRTHDAY!

'Thanks,' I said. Then I peered more closely at the blue blob on Percy's misshapen cake. 'Is that an owl?'

'Yeah.' Percy scratched his head. 'I guess I should have made it grey or something, you know, for Athena, but—'

'Your mom makes blue food for special occasions.'

'Yeah. You remembered.'

'Your mom's cool.'

I took a bite of my birthday cake. It was pretty good, though the blue frosting made a ring around my mouth. I started to lick it off, then I realised that Percy was staring at me with a strange expression.

Staring at my mouth, to be exact.

My heart accelerated like it was in the finals of an Olympic sprint. The world tunnelled. I forgot that Rachel Dare even existed.

'Percy?' I whispered.

He took a small step closer. His voice was slightly hoarse. 'I, um—'

The door banged open behind me. Startled, I dropped the cake. Percy's stack of letters scattered over the porch.

Malcolm stepped out. When he saw the two of us, he looked chagrined. 'Sorry. Didn't realise—'
'Just, uh, delivering mail,' Percy said lamely. He gathered up the letters and retreated across the green like a horde of hellhounds was after him.

Malcolm looked at me curiously. 'Were you two ...?'

'Just talking,' I said firmly. What did he think he'd interrupted?

To be honest, I didn't even know what Malcolm had interrupted. My heart was still hammering as I pushed past him into the cabin. The way Percy had just looked at me ...

I was probably reading too much into this. I mean, we'd been at each other's throats just this morning. How could I go from that to hoping he would—hoping he might ...

Maybe it was a good thing Malcolm had interrupted ... whatever he had. I might have lost my head again and done something totally idiotic.

_Stupid Seaweed Brain, _I thought.

A small voice in my head whispered back: _Who's the real Seaweed Brain now?_

Why was it that my brain seemed to go haywire around Percy so often these days?

Annoyed, I brushed tears from the corner of my eyes. It took a few hard blinks before the postcard Percy had delivered came back into focus. The loopy cursive on the front was impossible to read, but the picture was familiar: the iconic tower that featured in just about every romantic movie set in Europe. There was even the obligatory couple on a park bench under its arches. But enamoured as I usually was with famous architecture, the wrought iron lattice tower gave me no comfort right now.

I turned the card over. There was my dad's large _HAPPY BIRTHDAY_ at the top, with his message underneath. In consideration of my dyslexia, he'd written in large, careful print, so he couldn't fit much in the space. He'd taken my stepfamily to Paris for a short getaway, they missed me, and hoped I was having a good birthday at camp. Janet and the twins had added a few pleasantries at the end. I suspected she'd actually reminded my dad about my birthday (he was as hopeless as Percy with dates), but I appreciated his message nonetheless.

_Family, _I thought. What was it Hestia had said when I'd seen her at the camp hearth? _It ties us to the world._

What would it have been like if I _had_ taken my dad up on his offer? If I'd gone with them to Europe, and to Greece and all the places on my bucket list? What if I'd been there with them, standing under the Eiffel Tower and gazing up at its majestic crossbars?

I tossed the postcard aside. There was no point thinking about what might have been. For better or worse, I'd chosen camp. This was the place I called home.

_You have to dig deeper than that, my dear, _Hestia's voice admonished me.

I buried my head in my hands. She was right. Maybe I'd reconciled with my family, but deep down, they'd never kept me anchored.

And I was terrified that the people ... maybe even the _person_ who actually _did_, might leave me behind after all.
Apologies for the impromptu physics lesson ... or well no, I'm not sorry. I'm enough of a
geek to be thrilled to combine science and magic (as I'm sure Beckendorf is)!

Those of you who've followed this for a while might be interested to know that parts of
this chapters initially started out in a draft for TIM. Points to you if you can guess which
scene, and where it had originally started out in my series plan!

And speaking of chapters that started out in drafts, anyone who wanted to see
Annabeth's PoV of *The Bronze Dragon* will be pleased that I have a bank holiday
weekend here and hope to whip that into shape for Monday. So look out for a short
outtake soon. ;)

Beckendorf Makes His Own CCTV

Chapter Summary

Percy goes home again and Beckendorf perfects his surveillance project.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

July passed in a flurry of raids. While Beckendorf worked on perfecting the video shield, we relied on our satyr scouts for messages. Chiron had kept them out well into summer this year, hoping that they'd find more half-bloods once we'd foiled Hypnos's plans. So far, they weren't having any luck. We tried to get in touch with Grover several times, but all our Iris-messages bounced back. He must be incognito like the Hunters. At least, I hoped so. If was really in trouble, he would probably call Percy on their empathy link.

The satyrs sent us valuable information on Titan strongholds, where the monsters were congregating. Clarisse got her way about running an offensive, and we ran multiple raids on neighbouring cities. Demeter cabin harvested a bunch of bronze scythes from a farm facility in Poughkeepsie. The Hermes kids pulled off a tricky switcheroo in Allentown, swapping out ten thousand daggers for fake knives. Percy and I led my cabin in a hoax on a monster farmhand, tricking him into slaughtering his own livestock and taking out half the meat supply for the monster army.

Sadly, our euphoria at these early successes was short-lived. The Titan's supply of monster encampments seemed endless. And Percy went home almost every weekend, usually coinciding with the completion of a big mission.

I told myself I didn't care. We never mentioned his 'mortal breaks'. Or what had happened—or almost happened—on my birthday. If either topic came close to hand, we'd end up skirting around each other for days. I got a dull ache in my chest every time it happened. I'd wish he would go away for a while, like that might relieve it, but when he did go, the ache would be replaced by a flock of butterfly jitters that I couldn't dispel.

As we moved into August, the tension at camp ran higher than ever. We chalked up more losses than wins: raids that failed miserably, half-bloods lost to monsters, a growing number of satyr distress calls that we could no longer handle. Aphrodite and Apollo went on a joint mission and lost half their team. It took Beckendorf a week to convince Silena it wasn't her fault. She refused to lead any more missions after that.

Nearly every war council ended with someone in tears. Half-blood recruitment was down to zero. We had satyrs as far out as Canada and Mexico, but no way to send them the reinforcements they needed.

The one bright spot left was our plan to hit the Princess Andromeda—an operation we'd started calling the Trojan Bomb, after Katie's offhand comment when we'd initially conceptualised it. The plan was our best shot to make an actual dent in Kronos's assembled forces—maybe even hitting the Titan lord himself.

Beckendorf had amassed a growing collection of explosives, ranging from portable vials of Greek
fire to time-delayed dynamite charges. Clarisse found us an abandoned shipyard in New Jersey with a fleet of ancient aircraft carriers for our dry runs. I guess they were toys of Ares or something. The discarded military vessels were as big as Luke's monster cruise ship, giving us something to practice on. Clarisse even managed to beg an allowance of undead Confederate soldiers to pose as monsters. We could blow them up a dozen times and they'd just come straight back for our next practice session.

Our plans grew more solid by the day. We picked Percy and Beckendorf to be our front runners for the mission, though all the senior counsellors were involved in the planning and practices. With Percy's natural seafaring abilities and Beckendorf's expertise with explosives, they were the obvious choices. Clarisse grumbled about missing out on the action, but even she acknowledged that this strike was too important to screw up.

Meanwhile, we were all getting an overdose of demigod dreams. Hardly a night went by without someone waking in terror. I came in for my fair share of them. Like the Labyrinth, each twist took me into a more horrific layer of the nightmares. I plunged into the glowing, cavernous heart of Mount St Helens, where Percy tumbled out of Hephaestus's ice cave, his body charred and smoking. The tunnels narrowed into the dark, twisted passage of the Cyclops's mansion in Brooklyn, where a pair of snarling wolf-lion hybrids—leucrota like the ones in Hal Green's diary—guarded my friends. The beasts snapped at me, eyes gleaming red in the darkness.


'No!' I cried. 'Don't kill him!'

Luke paused long enough to meet my eyes. Percy brought his feet up, the way Thalia had done on Mount Tam. And in the same way, Percy's kick sent Luke hurtling off the edge of the cliff.

'No!' I ran to the edge. Percy pulled me back.

'You had to make a choice,' he said. His form shifted into that of Janus, the god of doorways and decisions. The two-faced god rubbed his hands together gleefully. A snap of his fingers transported me to the bottom of the cliff, where Luke's body lay twisted at an odd angle.

'Luke,' I whispered. Wake up, I wanted to say, but I feared that he would open his eyes and they would be pure gold.

He sat up, his eyes blue and terrified. 'Annabeth?'

'Luke.' Relief flooded through my chest. It was him—scarred and bitter, but with his own voice, his own eyes. His own soul. 'Are you okay?'

'He—he's going to take over, Annabeth.' Luke grabbed my wrist. 'I don't have much time. He's going to use me as a stepping stone to get what he wants. Please, you can help me. We can run away from all of it.'

It was almost exactly what he'd said to me last year, before we'd gone into the Labyrinth and he'd come out as Kronos. The dream deposited us on my doorstep in San Francisco, where he had turned up, unarmed and pleading.

'It's your choice, Annabeth.'

I pulled my arm out of his grip. 'Luke, I want to help, but—'
I'm lost, Annabeth.' His voice trembled. 'You have to find me. I can't—I can't ...'

His wild expression hardened into the anger that had brought him to Kronos. His gaze shifted to an invisible person behind me. 'You don't love me.'

I was losing him. 'No—no, Luke, don't—'

Clouds rolled across the sky, throwing us into darkness. Luke's eyes gleamed gold. 'It doesn't matter,' he said in the cold, reverberating voice of the Titan lord.

'Sir?' It was Ethan Nakamura's slightly accented voice, but I couldn't see him clearly in the darkness. 'You said to find them—Thalia Grace is with them, defending the Temple of Artemis—'

'The girl discarded what was left to her. It cannot be as important as,' Kronos waved his hands over his body, 'Luke thought it was. And if my spy's information is reliable, Delphi is broken. The Oracle has delivered her last prophecy. The Great Prophecy must be mine now. Olympus will fall, and I will no longer be fettered by this mortal body's ... weakness.' He said this in the same sneer as he'd used the last time he'd searched Luke's memories. 'It is time to deploy my secret weapon.'

His arm shot out and pulled my dagger from its sheath. In a moment of pure terror, I thought he would slit my throat with it.

But then his hands trembled. His form flickered. Suddenly, he was seventeen again, with a fresh claw mark across his face; the next second, he was fourteen, holding out a knife and a promise. And then he was nine years old, with terrified eyes that had already seen too much.

Bars rose between us, red as blood—a perverted memory of the cages of children I'd failed to save.

'Help me.' Nine-year-old Luke's broken voice cut straight to my heart. He glowed as bright as a god taking his true form, and was consumed in a blinding supernova.

When the light faded, I found myself in Luke's childhood kitchen.

'My son—his fate ...' Ms Castellan's eyes shone with an unnatural green light. She clutched at her face with one hand; in the other was the beanbag Medusa toy. She thrust it at me like an accusation. 'A single choice shall end his days.'

I shrank back back and bumped into the cluttered table. A tray of burnt cookies clattered to the ground.

Little Luke appeared in the doorway, in the form of his wide-eyed nine-year-old self. He tugged on his mother's sleeve. 'What's wrong with her, Mommy?'

'Luke—' I reached out to him, but he curled away from me in fear.


I stared at my hands. They had become smooth, flat, and sharp at the edges—a pair of bronze blades like the one on my dagger.

'You will play a great role, daughter of Athena,' Luke's mom said solemnly. And then she opened her mouth and screamed, and screamed, and screamed.

I put my blade-hands over my ears, but I could not block out the sound. It was liquid, filling my ears
and nose and mouth. I was drowning in Ms Castellan's screams ... falling ... choking ...

Arms tightened around me. Percy, making a bubble of air around us like he'd done two years ago in Siren Bay. The world righted itself. I relaxed in his embrace.

But it lasted for the briefest moment. Rachel Dare's voice rang out from a distance, as ominous as any Oracle's: 'This is what normal people do.'

Percy let go of me. The lines of his face were drawn in deep consternation. I sank through water as dark as blood, that left an awful, metallic stench.

I woke in a sticky tangle of sheets. My stomach clenched painfully from the terror of my dreams. Or maybe it was almost having Percy to make things okay at the end, the way he'd used to before everything went haywire this year. My dream highlighted so plainly how I was losing him to ... to what? Normalcy? The mortal world?

A mortal girl?

Tears pricked at my eyes. How was it that the final bit of my dream filled me with pain more crippling than the nightmarish visions before?

My chest constricted. The cabin was too hot, too claustrophobic. My legs tapped restlessly against the wooden floor.

I had to move. Before my uncontrollable fidgeting could wake my siblings, I picked up my dagger and headed outside.

I don't know why I picked the sword-fighting arena. Maybe I needed to feel like I was doing something, even if it was just decapitating a bunch of training dummies. At any rate, I found myself slicing and slashing as if it would ward off the Great Prophecy and its terrifying consequences. Percy's hellhound, Mrs O'Leary, gladly co-opted the dummies I decimated as new chew toys.

I wasn't sure how long I'd been at this—long enough to work up a decent sweat and bury my nightmares in Mrs O'Leary's new heap of headless chew toys—when someone clapped from the doorway.

'Impressive. Seven out of ten.'

He was leaning against the door frame, a duffel bag slung over one shoulder. The appreciative, lopsided grin on his face was worth a million nightmare suppressants.

I slashed the last dummy to sawdust without even looking at it. 'I should get ten out of ten, Seaweed Brain.'

Percy laughed and dropped his bag on the ground. Mrs O'Leary bounded over to lick his face. He scratched behind her ears with one hand. The other found his magic pen and twirled it between his fingers.

'Points off for sloppiness,' he said in his best instructor voice. 'You didn't leave any for anyone else.'

'Oh?'

'How am I supposed to train now?'

I raised my sword. 'I'm sure we can work around that.'
He quirked his lips and flicked off the cap of his pen. Riptide sprung into action.

It had been a while since I'd sparred with Percy. He'd taken over as sword-fighting instructor this summer, which meant he mostly spent training sessions helping the younger campers. But he must have been practising in his own time, because he was still insanely difficult to beat. He moved with an unpredictable rhythm, impossible for me to keep a step ahead. His sword flowed like an extension of his own arm.

I couldn't win our match on skill alone. But when skill wouldn't cut it ... well, there were other ways. 

Percy pressed me back, manoeuvring me into a corner. I let him come at me, presenting the base of my sword as an easy target. He fell for it. With a look of triumph, he disarmed me.

When he stepped in close to claim his victory, I brought out my dagger and met his blade at the hilt. It was a difficult hit I'd never have been able to pull off without my affinity with my dagger. I gave a hard twist. Riptide flew from Percy's hand.

It was Luke's old advice: daggers were easy to conceal, and they could find weak spots in an opponent's defences.

I put the tip of my blade to Percy's surprised throat. 'I win.'

Percy's jaw fell open. 'That's cheating.'

'I never said I'd play fair.' I withdrew, sheathing my dagger. 'You should know by now—I always have a plan.'

He laughed and wiped his shirt sleeve across his forehead. 'You got me.'

We grinned at each other. Both of us were sweating profusely, but this was a good sweat, earned from exertion rather than fear. In the rush of endorphins from our sparring match, my worries had retreated. Percy, too, seemed relaxed and happy, more at ease than I'd seen him all summer.

He removed his armour. Under his breastplate, his shirt was clinging to his chest. With his face shining, eyes still sparkling from the excitement of our duel, he looked ... really good.

My heart skipped, and I was sure it had nothing to do with my nightmares. They were definitely miles away right now.

I tucked my messy hair behind my ears and tried to get a grip. This was such a rare moment in our tumultuous summer—just the two of us, everything comfortable and easy. Did I really want to ruin the moment?

Percy pulled his water bottle and a towel from his duffel bag. Something about this struck me as odd. It was only after I took the sip he offered me and passed the bottle back that I worked out what was wrong.

'Why had he brought his duffel bag to the arena?'

A dull cramp seeped back into my stomach. 'You're going home again, aren't you?'

Percy's head snapped up at my accusatory tone. He twisted the towel in his hands.

'Yeah.' His voice sounded like it was tiptoeing around glass. 'I'll be back in a couple of days.'

I should have been used to this by now. It wasn't the first time he'd gone this summer, after all. Half
of my brain screamed at me to let it go, to not ruin the perfect moment we'd just shared. The other half dredged up the scene from my dream: *that's what normal people do.*

He'd come by to lift my spirits, and now he was going to run off and let me drown in misery again. Just like in my nightmare.

*That's not fair, Annabeth,* argued the logical side of my brain.

But a tsunami of bitterness was already sweeping words out of my mouth. 'So you're just going to leave. Again. What about camp? And the Trojan Bomb?'

'I'm not skipping out on you guys. I'm only in Manhattan. You can IM me if anything comes up.'

The memory of my last IM made another painful twist in my gut. I wanted to scream. One moment, we were fine. The next, it was like he'd pulled my trick with the dagger and thrown my feelings into disarray.

'You're impossible, Percy Jackson.'

Percy looked like he'd messed up a trick test question. 'I don't get it. What's the matter?'

My insides were full of broken glass, as jagged and fragile as my voice. 'Never mind. Nothing. It's fine.'

'Doesn't sound like—'

'Just forget it, Seaweed Brain.'

Someone cleared his throat. Beckendorf had shown up sometime during our exchange. He stood at the door, rubbing the back of his head awkwardly.

Mrs O'Leary pushed between us with a headless dummy in her mouth. She deposited it at Beckendorf's feet and gave a little whine, like she was waiting for a 'good girl!'

Beckendorf scratched Mrs O'Leary's ears, looking grateful for the distraction. 'Um, I was looking for you, Annabeth, but I can, er, come back—'

'No,' I said. 'Percy's leaving.'

Percy's mouth set in a hard line. 'I told you—'

'Just go. Run off.' Why couldn't I stop the bitterness bubbling from my throat? 'Go ahead. I don't care.'

Beckendorf flexed his fingers like he was searching for something to tinker with. 'You're going home for the weekend again?'

'Yeah.' The two of them exchanged a look. 'You can IM me if anything comes up, right?'

'Sure,' Beckendorf said. 'I'll come find you if we get wind of anything happening.'

Percy nodded and hoisted his bag onto his shoulder. Without a word to me, he strode out of the arena.

I refused to watch him leave. My fists clenched and unclenched as I stared at Mrs O'Leary's chew dummy, which was covered in hellhound slobber. It barely resembled a human any more.
'Annabeth?' Beckendorf was still there.

'What?' I snapped.

'Do you want to come try the shield? It's done.'

It took me a moment to understand what he meant. Despite flinging the Trojan Bomb like a discus at Percy moments ago, our plans to strike against Kronos seemed like a relic from a forgotten century.

Daedalus's shield. Right. I tried to feign excitement. 'Okay. Let's see it.'

The shield was on Beckendorf's main work table in the forge. It didn't look like much—just a regular round shield with a smooth, polished bronze surface—but then magic items weren't always noticeable at first glance. Beckendorf concentrated for a second, and the surface came to life. A video of downtown Manhattan played across it, showing a long line of cars crawling over the Williamsburg Bridge. It paused there for a second, then moved on like an aerial surveillance camera, down FDR Drive to Manhattan Bridge, scanning East River, past Brooklyn Bridge ...

'Default setting is Manhattan,' Beckendorf explained, 'but you can request specific locations, or even people. I can activate it by thought, but it should recognise your voice commands as well.'

I watched the video shield travel several more streets around the southern tip of Manhattan. 'Show me the Titan army.'

The video buzzed, then zoomed out into a satellite image over the East Coast. It scanned through scenes at warp speed, like a bullet train shooting across the country. Flashes of scales and claws and hair flew past, too blurry for me to make out specifics.

'Too many locations,' Beckendorf said. 'We need it to focus on one.' He concentrated again. The shield settled on a large gathering on a park lawn. There were twenty or so monsters, mostly dracaenae and harpies. They trotted away from a concession stand that said MONSTER BURGERS. A menu board under the sign promised, TODAY'S SPECIAL: CHEESE STEAK—AUTHENTIC PHILLY SUN CATTLE.

'Great,' I said, looking at the stuffed burger buns in the monsters' hands. 'They're snacking on sacred beef.'

The video moved along. Three golden chariots were parked outside a building with glass windows. They were hitched to a fleet of miserable-looking pegasi, who were clapped in iron around their legs and bore blinkers over their eyes. They'd probably been pressed into Titan service, like Percy's friend Blackjack. A small group of demigods in black armour stood around a black-and-purple banner with a scythe emblazoned in the centre.

Beckendorf pointed to the glass-window building. Inside was the mounted exhibit of the disguised symbol of American freedom. 'Isn't that ...'

'The Liberty Bell,' I said, nodding.

'Should we do something? I could ...'

'No.' I rubbed my forehead, trying to slip back into strategic mode. 'I mean, not you. Now that the shield's working, you and I need to focus on tracking the Princess Andromeda, work out the best time to deliver the Trojan Bomb. And if that's soon, we'll need you and—and Percy to go after it.'

'Look at those chariots, though ...' Beckendorf pointed at the pegasi. 'I bet they fly.'
He had a point. Flying chariots would be a huge asset. And those poor pegasi ... 'Clarisse and her team are fresh for a raid. We'll send them in. And ...' I considered the Liberty Bell. 'Maybe Michael could take the Apollo team to stock up our medical supplies.'

Beckendorf frowned. 'Are you sure?'

I guess he was worried about the last time we'd brought back supplies from the Mütter Museum. 'I'll tell him to get only ready-made panacea. There was no problem with that. And there's other stuff, too. Will did say we were running low on nectar and ambrosia.'

'Ares and Apollo, then.' Although the raid had been his idea, Beckendorf sounded sceptical. I tried to run through reasons why this plan might be a bad idea, but my head ached from my fight with Percy.

Raid were always dangerous, but this was tame compared to some of the ones we'd conducted last month. And my strategy was sound: we needed Apollo to access the secret pharmacy, while the Ares cabin was best at direct monster combat. The plan checked out.

'Ares and Apollo,' I confirmed.

Chapter End Notes

I drew inspiration for some of the raids (including the livestock slaughter) from actual raids in the Trojan War, with plenty of CHB-style embellishment, of course.

For those of you who might have been interested in the Bronze Dragon outtake that would have gone between chapters 13 and 14, it's posted here.
Chapter Summary

Overnight, the situation inside and outside camp gets dire.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Philadelphia raid was quick. Clarisse and Michael returned with their teams the next day, having taken out a handful of monsters, razed two enemy chariots, and brought back the last one loaded with nectar and ambrosia from the Mütter Museum. It was the first straight-out success we’d had in a while, which raised everyone’s spirits considerably.

That is, until the fighting started.

It began when the Apollo kids tried to wheel their new flying chariot into a parking space behind their cabin. Clarisse planted herself in the way, arms crossed.

‘Oh no—that chariot’s Ares property.’

‘No way,’ Michael said. 'It’s our spoil of war.'

Clarisse brandished her spear. 'We ran the raid.'

'And we liberated the chariot.'

'What is going on here?' Chiron clopped across the green just as Clarisse and Michael were about to come to blows. One look was enough for him to size up the situation. He picked them up, one in each arm (though he managed Michael with considerably more ease) and hauled them off to the Big House. The other counsellors and I exchanged looks before following them.

In the rec room, Clarisse and Michael's argument resumed in full force. Luckily, Chiron had had the presence of mind to strip them of their weapons before he set them down. They stood on opposite sides of the ping-pong table, hurling words at each other like missiles.

'I led the raid.' Clarisse thumped her right fist against her chest. 'That makes the spoils of war mine.'

'Oh? You didn’t seem to use those rules when you got that gold sword on Beckendorf's quest.'

'The gold sword you cost me!'

'Exactly how was that my fault?’

Chiron broke in before this could escalate into another brawl about the panacea incident. 'Enough! If you cannot settle this peacefully, we will arbitrate the matter. You will each present your case—one by one,' he added when they opened their mouths at the same time. 'Michael, you start. What happened when you got to Philadelphia?’

'We found the monsters right where you said they’d be.' Michael nodded to me and Beckendorf.
'About ten *dracaenae*, couple of harpies, ten demigods, hanging around the Liberty Bell. Clarisse and her team went straight into phalanx formation, just like in training, and my guys gave them distance cover with our arrows.'

Clarisse muttered something under her breath that sounded like, 'Cowards.'

Michael ignored her. 'We drove them away from their chariots and my team went in to free the pegasi. Sherman and Ellis set fire to two, but we used the last one to loot the museum.'

'Loot it?' I said sharply.

'Yeah. I mean, not on purpose, but it was already raided by the time we got there. Windows smashed and everything. Maybe the monsters trashed the place for kicks, I don't know. Couldn't find Panacea or Delphyne. So we just helped ourselves. But I left some drachma to cover what we took.'

'We wouldn't have,' Connor and Travis said in unison.

Michael glared at them. 'We're not thieves.'

'Funny, because you're stealing *my* chariot,' Clarisse snapped.

'For the last time, it's not *your*—'

Chiron raised his voice. 'And what happened next, Michael?'

'Well, like I said, we loaded the meds in the flying chariot. I sent Austin and Cynthia ahead with the loot and the rest of us went back to help Ares. They were still fighting in the park, so we gave them aerial cover until the enemy fled.'

'Thank you,' Chiron said. 'Clarisse, your version?'

Clarisse concurred sulkily with Michael's story. 'But you heard him—Ares fought the monsters. If it wasn't for us, his whole wimpy cabin would've been monster chow from the beginning. And then they ran off halfway to that museum.'

'We were *supposed* to pick up supplies.'

Clarisse shook her fist. 'You still left *us* to do the heavy lifting, so the chariot should be ours!'

'We were there at the start! We took it fair and square. Maybe if you hadn't burnt up the other two, you could've gotten your own.'

Chiron stroked his beard. 'He has a point, you know.'

'A point?' Clarisse looked angry enough to punch Chiron. 'We do all the fighting and you think *they* deserve the chariot?'

'Be reasonable, Clarisse,' Chiron said. 'Apollo cabin—'

'Oh no.' Clarisse stuck her hands on her hips. 'Every single time!' She listed every slight she'd received from the Apollo cabin, from Michael's interference with her initiation rituals to the loss of her golden sword. 'All you guys ever do is treat us like we're your personal thugs. Well, I'm sick of it.'

She turned on her heel and stormed out of the room.'
Michael stuck his tongue out at her retreating back. 'Can we go now? I got a chariot to polish.'

Chiron sighed and nodded.

I put my head in my hands. 'We shouldn't have sent them together. It was a bad idea. I should've seen it.' I'd known there was bad blood between them, but I'd overlooked it. It was true they hadn't had an altercation after Fireworks night—a possible sign that they'd moved past their differences—but there was a simple reason for my oversight. 'I—I was distracted.' My stomach turned over as I remembered the fight with Percy ... right before I'd deployed Ares and Apollo for the mission.

'It isn't your fault, Annabeth,' Chiron said. 'I would have hoped as well that they could set aside their difference in the face of a larger threat, but it seems I was wrong.'

+++ That night, I dreamt I was on the summit of a shaking mountain. The slope was barren, its vegetation killed off by a sulphurous cloud of haze. Rivulets of lava ran between the rocks, eating away at any plant life that remained.

Three massive figures tromped up the mountain, splashing through the lava like it was only a rain puddle. They were all giants, at least twenty feet tall. The largest glowed even brighter than the lava, so bright that it hurt my eyes to look directly at him. His light cut through the haze, shining a path straight to the spurting volcanic peak.

The other two giants were dull compared to their blazing brother, but each would have been impressive on his own. One had large, curly ram's horns sticking out on either side of his head. The other had a wreath of white ringlets framing his face, like an evil Santa Claus. The ram dude's hands bore what looked like a great twisted knot. A thousand eyelids fluttered sleepily along the length of the serpent's body—Delphyne, the guardian of Panacea's pharmacy. And evil Santa was marching Panacea herself ahead of him.

I sucked in my breath. The enemy we'd routed in Philadelphia must have been only a vanguard of a larger strike ... and we'd been too late. This must be why Panacea's pharmacy had been trashed.

This was really bad. The capture of a goddess—even a minor one like Panacea—was no small matter. Only another god, or a Titan, could have managed it. Which meant that these three giants had to be...

Ram Titan wrestled his prisoner onto a slanted slab of rock. 'Will this do?'

'A good place,' said Santa Titan. His hollow voice echoed like it was travelling down a wind tunnel. 'We shall do it here—the final sacrifice to wake our slumbering friend.'

Gold Titan uncapped a bottle in his hands and sprinkled its contents over the surface of the rock.

'You fiends!' Panacea twisted in her captor's arms. 'The panacea is meant to heal, not harm!'

'Oh, but it will heal,' Gold Titan assured her in a smug voice. 'Our brother Kronos planned it all well. His spy told us everything we needed to know—the location of your pharmacy, the secrets of your cure-all. They even handed over the herb of invulnerability.'

Ram Titan gave a raspy laugh. 'With its help—and a little contribution from you and your pet, of course—' he indicated Delphyne, twisting on the rock, 'we will bring forth the giant trapped beneath the mountain!'
'Indeed, Krios,' Santa Titan agreed. 'It would have happened eventually. Typhon has been stirring since that Jackson kid set off his volcano last year. But I doubt he would have broken free in time to join us had Kronos not devised this plan. I am the Titan of intellect, but even I bow before our brother's craftiness. He is well-dubbed the Crooked One.'

'Suck up,' Krios muttered. 'You can save the flattery, Koios. It's not like he's listening. There's no way that pathetic form he currently inhabits can offer him Titanic omniscience. Why, it's almost insulting to take orders from that weakling body.

'Peace,' said Koios calmly. 'You know Kronos had no choice but to secure a temporary form to bind his essence together. But it will not be long before—'

A deep rumble from the earth cut him off. The ground shook, almost toppling all three Titans to their knees.

'Quick,' Koios said. 'Hyperion, proceed with the sacrifice.'

Golden Hyperion produced a dagger with a long, jagged blade the colour of rust. He slashed it across Panacea's arm. The goddess cried out as golden ichor dripped from the cut. It mingled with the panacea on the rock in a burbling hiss. Delphyne writhed, every one of her billion peepers stretched wide in alarm.

'Now the serpent,' Koios ordered. 'Flesh from Typhon's previous servant.'

Hyperion's dagger came down again. Fortunately, my dream spared me the gruesome visuals. A white mist enveloped me. The trembling ground evaporated from under my feet. I was transported to a different slope, a different mountain.

I stood in the centre of a stone circle, next to an altar of white marble. Each of the stones surrounding me were carved in the image of a regal goddess with an owl etched into her chest: my mother, Athena.

A young girl in a white chiton approached the altar. Brambles stuck out of her braided hair. Her clothes were torn and stained. But her eyes—so pale her irises nearly blended in with the whites of her eyes—shone bright with determination.

It was my friend Izzy, the recruitment officer for the Hunters of Artemis. But this was a scene from her past, before she'd joined them. I'd learnt about it when trying to break the curse on the Necklace of Harmonia two years ago. Izzy had come here, to the Temple of Athena, to make a sacrifice that would lift the necklace's deadly curse.

I watched her slide the cursed necklace onto the altar and dedicate the dagger she carried to Athena. Lightning streaked the sky, momentarily blinding me. When my vision cleared, Izzy was gone. Standing in her place was Athena herself. The breast plate of her armour had an owl etched into it, so that she looked just like the stone carvings that encircled us. In her hands, she clasped Izzy's dagger.

'Mother?'

She studied the dagger, turning it over slowly. 'Every great victory comes with great sacrifice.' She sighed and offered me the knife, handle first. It fit my palm like a familiar glove.

'I do not have much time,' Athena said. 'Kronos has played his trump card. We gods must rise to his challenge.'

My gorge rose at the thought of the unspeakable deeds the three Titans had committed. 'That
mountain—the volcano. It was—'

'You recognise it,' Athena said. 'Of course, you have been there, deep inside.'

'Mount St Helens.' My heart sank. I had so many conflicting feelings about that volcano. My experience inside it had been one crazy rollercoaster package: passion and loss, courage and failure. All of this seemed to be reflected in Athena's eyes. I had no doubt my mother was keenly aware of everything that had transpired in the volcano's fiery heart. And that she did not believe I'd acted wisely at all.

'I warned you several times about Percy Jackson,' she said severely.

I shifted my weight nervously from foot to foot. Was she talking about the disastrous explosion we'd caused last year ... or that other thing that had happened between us? 'It wasn't all his fault Typhon's volcano erupted.'

Athena regarded me coolly. 'Was it not? What happened when you went ahead to scout Hephaestus's forge? Rather than sit and wait, he decided to act. As a result, he almost killed you both.' She shook her head. 'The daughter of wisdom and the son of the sea were never meant to be a team. The combination is too volatile.'

'I—'

'I know the choice you made. You provided him with a source of power—and you continue supply him. That power, left unchecked, is as dangerous as his fatal flaw.'

'What—' I meant to ask what Percy's fatal flaw was, but before the question was out, I thought I already knew. From the first week I'd known him, when he'd sacrificed his own ticket to safety to save Grover and me, Percy had already shown how deadly his loyalty to his friends could prove to himself.

Athena seemed to read my thoughts. 'It goes beyond personal loyalty. His need to protect, to save—it is greater than simply sacrificing himself for a friend. He insists on taking on the hero's mantle. When a demigod feels he must be the one to solve everyone's problems ... that is a dangerous thing.' She fixed me with a stern glare. 'How much has he overextended? His family. You. Grover. Even the di Angelo boy. He did not even know the full details of the prophecy when he rashly tried to claim it to spare young Nico. What will he choose when his need to play the hero conflicts with the wisest course of action? I am not at all secure to have the fate of Olympus rest on his hands.'

'Then that line in the Great Prophecy ...' I swallowed hard. 'A single choice ...'

Athena pursed her lips. 'That is not what I meant. You know it is not wise to try and interpret a prophecy. Claiming a prophecy—presuming yourself to be instrumental in how it will unfold ... such hubris is deadly.'

Chastised, I looked down. 'My fatal flaw.'

'A flaw of many a demigod—and god, too, for that matter,' Athena said. 'Take Hermes, for instance. His son was his pride and joy. And look how far the boy has fallen. Hermes is quite distraught.'

I frowned. 'But ... Luke never knew his dad. Hermes abandoned him and his mom before he was born.'

Athena's arched eyebrow reminded me that all the gods had pretty much abandoned their children—
including her. But I hadn't meant it as an accusation. 'I mean, Luke always said Hermes didn't care about him at all.'

Athena sniffed. 'I told him it wouldn't work. When he realised ... well, he insisted on trying to thwart Luke's fate. But he was short-sighted. He let his love for the boy blind him.' She straightened her war helmet. 'Relationships are like architecture. The key to building a permanent one is a strong foundation. If you get that wrong ... well, rarely do we get the chance to go back and re-lay the groundwork.'

Luke's mom drifted through my mind, with her strange eyes and crazy talk. It wasn't often that I felt fortunate about my own childhood, but compared to Luke, I'd been lucky. Even if he hadn't been great at showing it, my dad had cared. He hadn't been completely absent.

Luke's relationship with his godly father had been doomed from the beginning.

I wet my lips. 'Do you think ... could I still save him?'

'You think yourself capable?'

I was about to lift my chin and assert that I was, but something in Athena's tone stalled me. She wasn't derisive, merely inquisitive, as though she'd issued a challenging test question and was curious to see if I'd get the right answer. Nevertheless, my confidence faltered.

Hubris is your fatal flaw, I reminded myself. How many times had it gotten me in trouble already? Believing I had the answers, the right decisions, the wisdom to act ...

I ducked my head.

Athena tipped my chin back up. 'Do you know what makes a fatal flaw, Annabeth?'

'The things that make it easy for our enemies to manipulate us. That ultimately lead to our downfall.'

To my astonishment, she shook her head. 'They are simply traits carried to extremes. As dangerous as a flaw can be, lacking that trait completely can be just as bad. Take the story of Icarus: he is famed for pushing too high and toppling from the sky. Yet people always forget that he swooped too low as well and wore down his wings. Excessive pride can be your downfall ... but so can a lack of it. You still need to believe in yourself.' She touched the crown of my head. 'Do you understand?'

'I—I think so.'

'Good. Now, we must talk strategy.'

My laptop appeared on her altar, open to Daedalus's folder of city defences. I'd grouped them by function and numbered them according to their level of complexity: one for simple physical fortifications, two for adaptations of natural terrain; and so on. Athena scanned through the folders rapidly.

'He was always one of my most brilliant children. I am glad he passed on his legacy to you.' She trailed her finger over the touchpad, selecting five folders, including the one Beckendorf had vetoed at our war council. This was Daedalus's most complicated defensive activation sequence. I'd labelled it number twenty-three: the most complex of them all. It involved a chain of command across a series of carefully-placed city statues.

'Do you think we will need plan twenty-three?' I asked.
Athena nodded grimly. 'You should always be prepared for the worst. Remember—Kronos will have his secret weapons and back-up plans in place. But crafty as the Titan lord is, as long as I am the goddess of strategic warfare, we will always have something in reserve as well.'

She straightened her armour. A purple cape materialised on her shoulders, fluttering out behind her. In her full battle regalia, her commanding presence stole my breath.

'I may not have the chance to see you again before the Titans' assault arrives,' Athena warned. 'You must remember all I have said. Make me proud, daughter. Do not let me down.'

I woke up feeling like my brain had run a marathon. My mother's mixed praise echoed in my head, along with her command to bear all her advice in mind. Her warnings about Percy, her doubts about Luke, her analysis of fatal flaws ... There was so much of it, my head spun just trying to organise it.

It was almost enough to drive out the first part of my dream. Except we all got the brutal wake-up call at breakfast.

Argus came up to the head table, which was a bad sign. He never joined us at meals, preferring to eat where no one could see the eyes on his tongue. Now, he marched right up to Chiron and spread a newspaper over his plate.

Chiron's face went so pale, a hush fell across the tables almost immediately. Beckendorf and I ran up to the head table at once.

'What happened?' Beckendorf asked, but I already had a feeling I knew what the headlines would be.

Chiron turned the paper around. Maybe because I was expecting it, I had no trouble reading the text: **MT ST HELENS ERUPTION BLANKETS PACIFIC COAST.**

The black-and-white image underneath showed a massive crater in the side of the volcano, oozing lava and billowing plumes of smoke. I guess that was all the mortals would see. But behind the Mist, there was also a face in the smoke—a distorted, monstrous face with pitted cheeks and malevolent eyes. And the lava extending from the crater looked like misshapen figures crawling out of the mountainside.

Typhon, the storm giant, the biggest threat to the gods in history, had been released.

Chapter End Notes

Izzy and the Necklace of Harmonia refer back to the third story in this series, *The Necklace of Harmonia*. The Mount St Helens references draw from events in the previous fic, *The Impossible Maze*.

Percy's fatal flaw is an interesting one. 'Personal loyalty,' as many readers (and Percy himself) have noted, seems like one of those interview answer questions ('What's your biggest weakness?/I work too much ...') But as Athena astutely points out, the most dangerous flaws are the ones that appear good ... and I would speculate that it is the appearance that they are good even in excess of moderation—because the line between taking them too far and displaying them just enough is so hard to see. I'm a firm believer (and more so after writing this series) that there aren't really 'flaws' and 'virtues', just
characteristics, and taking them too far in the wrong circumstance tips the balance.

I've tried not to beat people over the head too hard with this point, but as you can probably read, I couldn't resist throwing my two cents in. I have loads more to say on this, but rather than make this note way too long, I'm going to put it in a separate post.
I didn't know if it was a good thing Beckendorf's video shield was fully functional. On one hand, we could finally monitor the Titans' progress across the country. On the other, after a morning watching Typhon wreck his way through Washington, we all pretty much lost our breakfasts.

Well, all of us except Percy. We debated if we should call him back from Manhattan, but since there was nothing we could do about Typhon, there wasn't really any point in fetching him.

'Let him have his break,' Chiron said. 'This summer has been hard on him.'

I wanted to point out that it was hard on everyone, and we weren't all running off to the mortal world, but Chiron had his serious face on—the one reserved for bad news and deadly prophecies. That killed all my arguments. We were well into August, and Percy's sixteenth birthday was so close, I couldn't think about it without my chest constricting. If the prophecy was indeed due to come true in two weeks ... well, I guess I didn't want to think about why he needed this break.

Or any other reasons Percy might have for staying away.

Percy still wasn't back when the video shield footage displayed the *Princess Andromeda* chugging up the Jersey coast, entering the fifty-mile radius we'd marked as our defensive perimeter. Given its position, we had less than half a day to launch the Trojan Bomb.

And Percy was vital to that mission.

'We'll have to IM him,' I said. 'Tell him to get back to camp.'

Beckendorf studied the cruise ship. It was churning through the water, faster than we had expected. 'I don't think there's time. If Percy gets held up on the Long Island Expressway again, we could miss our chance to strike before the ship gets too close.'

I would have felt smug—didn't this justify my complaints about Percy leaving?—except the jittery feeling in my stomach when I thought about IM-ing him overshadowed any compulsion I might have to say I told you so.

'What do you suggest then? I could go ... or Clarisse?' Ever since the arbitration meeting had gone against her, Clarisse had stomped around camp with her nose in the air, refusing to speak to anyone besides her own cabin mates. Getting a mission like this might pacify her. Then again, did we really want to make important war decisions based on Clarisse's feelings?

'Nah.' Beckendorf tapped the shield. The image spun away from the *Princess Andromeda* and travelled north to a stretch of beach on the south side of Brooklyn. A blue Prius was parked at the edge of the beach path. A short way from it, someone had laid out a large picnic blanket. I saw...
Percy's mom first, leaning against a guy who must be Percy's new stepdad. He was kind of handsome, but unremarkable, like an actor for TV ads. If I met him on a street, I'd know I'd seen him before, but be unable to place where or when.

Percy was down by the water's edge, emerging from the surf. He must have switched off his son of Poseidon thing because his hair was actually wet for once, sparkling in the sun. He'd let his clothes stay dry, so his shorts weren't dripping, but salty drops glistened on his bare chest.

I wet my lips, swallowing hard. Then I saw her.

Percy wasn't alone. Standing with her feet ankle-deep in the surf, her red ponytail frizzing out behind her, was Rachel Dare. Her bathing suit was plain, but it accentuated the curve of her hips. She planted her hands on them and gave an exasperated smile as Percy came towards her, shaking water out of his hair like a dog.

Sally waved to them and they sauntered up the beach to join her and her husband.

My heart, which seemed to have stopped momentarily, jolted back into a frantic pace.

Beckendorf cleared his throat. The shield went blank, but I could still see the after-image of Percy's family reflected in it.

His family—which didn't include me.

Dimly, I registered Beckendorf speaking.

'Uh—what?' My mind had gone as blank as the shield. What had we been discussing again?

'I said, I can just swing by and pick him up on my way south.'

I tore my eyes away from the shield. Beckendorf had a funny look on his face, a mix of worry, awkwardness, and ... was that sympathy in his eyes?

'Yeah,' I said, re-focusing on the issue at hand. The Trojan Bomb. He needed to get going. 'Take Blackjack. He should be able to carry you both.'

It crossed my mind that the timing of this mission wasn't so bad after all. I couldn't pretend to be gutted that Beckendorf would have to interrupt Percy's little family picnic.

Immediately, I felt bad for the thought. Then anger for my guilt crept in. If Percy had just stayed put at camp, none of this would be an issue.

Yeah, but he didn't want to be here with you.

I told the voice in my head to shut up. It wasn't about me.

Was it?

+++ We all turned out to see Beckendorf off (except Clarisse, who was still sulking in her cabin). Dressed in full Greek armour with his loaded bag of explosives under one arm, he looked strong and confident, as great a hero as any ancient demigod. Silena helped him saddle up Blackjack the pegasus.

'You'll be fine, Charlie.' She kissed his cheek and adjusted the straps on his armour. 'I—I know it.'
Beckendorf tilted her head up and gave her a kiss that made half the Aphrodite cabin swoon. 'I'll see you soon,' he promised. And then he mounted Blackjack and took off into the sky.

The rest of the evening crawled by. I tried to estimate how long it would take before we heard from them. Based on our dry runs in New Jersey, the whole operation should take no more than twenty minutes once they got to the ship.

Assuming Beckendorf managed to pry Percy away from his afternoon plans without problems (he wouldn't back out, would he? He'd promised.) Assuming they didn't run into trouble on the *Princess Andromeda* (we'd simulated as many scenarios as possible with Clarisse's zombies, but something could always go wrong). Assuming Luke wasn't expecting them (why would he? We'd been extra careful not to leak any details about the Trojan Bomb beyond the senior counsellors).

The campfire that night was particularly tense. Michael tried to inject some energy by bringing up old war songs, like *Hercules Busts Heads* and *Achilles Went Marching In*, but our singing was dull and lacklustre. We barely got the magical fire to rise past knee-height. The same thought was running through everyone's head: where were Percy and Beckendorf now?

Blackjack returned just before curfew. The wave of relief that cascaded over me was abruptly curtailed when he touched down by the volleyball court with neither Percy nor Beckendorf on his back.

Silena's fingernails dug painfully into my arm. 'Where are they?'

Blackjack neighed loudly. We looked at each other. Neither of us spoke horse.

It took a while to find a satyr to translate Blackjack's persistent neighing for us, as most of them had already retired to the woods for the night. Finally, we spotted Woodrow, the music instructor, cleaning out his pipes by the canoe lake.

'Um, he says he got Percy and Beckendorf to the big ship.' Woodrow's brow furrowed in concentration. 'Then Percy told him to get back to camp. Said they'd get out on their own.'

I nodded. 'That was part of the plan.' A loose pegasus on the ship deck would have been a red flag that something was up. If there hadn't been a good place to hide him, Blackjack would have had to leave.

'But they should have rendez-vous-ed with Blackjack after,' Silena said. Her fingers rubbed fretfully at her wrist.

I turned to Blackjack. 'Did you see anything? An explosion, or—'

Blackjack whinnied and shook his head.

'He says he hates that ship,' Woodrow translated. 'Bad memories. He got out of there as fast as he could.'

I cursed under my breath. I'd completely forgotten that Blackjack had once been a slave pegasus on the *Princess Andromeda*. Maybe the trauma of his captivity had overcome him.

Silena looked ready to cry. 'He promised he'd—even if the mission failed, he should still ...'

I shook her shoulder. 'It'll be fine. They could have gotten out on a lifeboat. Percy and I did that before. Maybe that's what's taking them so long.'
But by morning, Percy and Beckendorf still hadn't returned.

'Could we look for them?' Silena asked. 'In the video shield.'

The shield was blank. Beckendorf must have switched it off for some reason. I hoped my voice activation would work. 'Shield, show us Beckendorf.'

We waited, but the polished bronze surface stayed blank.

Silena frowned. 'Why isn't it working?'

'Maybe they're indoors. You know, where natural light can't reach. If they're still on the ship, we'd only see them if they were on the deck.' I tried again. 'Show us the Princess Andromeda.'

No change.

'Did we break it?'

I tapped the side of the shield the way I'd do if my phone had a bad reception, and tried again. Still nothing.

'Maybe Beckendorf locked the shield while he was away,' I said bracingly. 'Or it could be malfunctioning. We'll have to get him to fix it when he gets back.'

Silena looked slightly comforted, but I was less confident. Beckendorf rarely made mistakes with his craft. The shield had been working perfectly all this time. And he wasn't the type to get all secretive with his creations.

The rest of the day ticked by with impossible slowness. I ran through my duties on autopilot. I did cabin inspection, but couldn't tell you which cabin placed first or last. During Greek class, I barely heard the stories I recited for the younger campers. For all I knew, I'd taught them about Achilles and the Labyrinth and Orpheus's Twelve Labours. In Percy's absence, I was in charge of sword-fighting, but I was so distracted, I didn't realise Mrs O'Leary had peed all over the floor until the Demeter kids slipped on the mess and nearly skewered each other.

I went back to the forge after my fiasco of a lesson. Silena was there, cradling a metal object in her hands. When I came closer, I saw that it was a figurine, like a carving of a goddess, only the features resembled Silena's remarkably.

'Charlie made it for me,' Silena said in a hollow voice. 'He was so good at all this stuff.'

'Yeah.' I glanced at the magic shield lying on the work table. It occurred to me that I could try asking it to show me Luke. If it could find him, that might give me a clue as to what Percy and Beckendorf were up to. Except ... I wasn't sure whether finding Luke would be good news or bad.

'My mom told me this story once,' Silena said. 'About women during the Civil War. Sending their men off to fight and everything. Waiting bravely for them to return. She made it sound so romantic.' She stood her figurine on the table with a loud clink. 'But it isn't. It's awful.'

Fear put icy fingers around my neck. I hadn't even told Percy goodbye or good luck before the mission. In fact, the last thing I'd said to him was that I didn't care if he ran off or not.

It suddenly didn't matter that he'd been on a break. I didn't even care that Rachel Dare had effectively been the one to see him off to battle. All those things were petty concerns compared to the possibility of never seeing Percy again.
No. I refused to believe it. Percy had survived plenty of crazier things, situations with worse odds. Just last year, we'd thought he'd perished in the Mount St Helens eruption, and then he'd turned up two weeks later, absolutely fine.

I could not give up hope.

But I still didn't dare to check in the shield.

Our wait finally came to an end the next afternoon. I was training on the climbing wall when the conch horn blew—our signal to gather poste-haste. (Note to self: racing lava when your nerves are keyed to the highest pitch is not the best idea.) The alarm sounded from the north shore, where Connor Stoll was on look-out duty. I sprinted up the path, my heart hammering. When I neared the dining pavilion, it did a double-flip. I could have picked out the tall, messy-haired figure next to Connor in any crowd.

Chiron overtook me just before I reached the mess hall. 'Percy! Thank the gods!' He'd been stoic about Percy and Beckendorf's prolonged absence over the last two days, but I guess underneath, he'd been more agitated than he'd let on.

'But where ...' He stopped so abruptly, I nearly ran into him.

Percy looked like he'd been ejected from a toaster straight into a tornado. His shirt was covered in scorch marks. His hair stood on end.

But he was here.

I pushed ahead of Chiron and grabbed his arm. 'What happened?' Had the mission succeeded? 'Is Luke's—'

Percy's mouth set in a tight line. 'The ship blew up. He wasn't destroyed. I don't know—'

Silena appeared then, her eyes searching the pavilion frantically. 'Where's Charlie?'

Percy closed his eyes briefly, then looked to Chiron. Help, his expression said.

It was a punch in the gut. Somehow, I hadn't considered that only one of them might return. Surely if Percy had made it out, he would have brought Beckendorf with him. And if they had blown up the Princess Andromeda ...

'Silena, my dear,' Chiron said gently, 'let's talk about this at the Big House.'

Silena crumpled. The mantle of hope that had buoyed her up over the past two days seemed to leave her in a swift gust. Her tears were a stab in my chest. I thought about her saying goodbye to Beckendorf before he left and I couldn't seem to breathe.

To everyone's surprise, Clarisse stepped out of the dejected crowd. 'Come on, girl,' she said. They were the first words she'd spoken to any of us since the arbitration. 'Let's get to the Big House.'

The campers parted to make way as she practically carried Silena down the path, promising to make her hot chocolate. It was a sweet gesture, but I doubted even panacea could help Silena with this.

My chest was still constricted when I looked back at Percy. His face was contorted into an expression I recognised easily—guilt. I didn't know what had gone down on the ship, but I knew him well enough to be certain he would beat himself up about it for days, whether or not
Beckendorf's death had been his fault. Nobody dared to ask for details. The crowd dispersed in silence.

I realised I was still clutching Percy's arm. Awkwardly, I dropped it and touched my cheek. It was wet.

'I—I'm glad you're not dead, Seaweed Brain,' I said softly. My mother's warning rang in my head: *his need to protect, to save—it is greater than simply sacrificing himself for a friend.* It was horrible, but I couldn't help wondering if his safe return spelt hope for him. Maybe Athena's assessment wasn't entirely accurate.

Percy grimaced. 'Thanks. Me too.'

Chiron led us to the Poseidon table. Lunch was long over, but a nymph brought over a platter of fruit and cheese while Chiron asked Percy to tell us what had happened on the mission. Percy didn't seem hungry. He picked at his food, rolling the grapes beneath his fingers and shredding the cheese as he recounted the story. He didn't even sip at the blue cherry coke I asked the magic goblet to produce.

'We got to the engine room okay, just like we practised,' he said. 'But the monsters got wind of something wrong almost right away. Beckendorf didn't have enough time to set the charges. So I went to distract them.'

This was pure Percy. Even before he skimmed over his fight with the monsters on the ship, I could already picture it. He would have led them away from Beckendorf, risking his life in the process. I'd watched him do it a million times.

'Then I found Luke—Kronos, that is.' He fixed his eyes on the plate, carefully not looking at me. My heart jumped into my throat. I could barely breathe as I waited for him to continue.

'I fought him. He probably would have killed me. But they caught Beckendorf then. It was Ethan Nakamura. Someone had told him Beckendorf was there. Kronos said he had a spy at camp updating him about our movements.'

My spine prickled. We *knew* we had a spy—someone had passed the herb of invulnerability to Luke, after all. But the details of this operation had been strictly head-counsellors-only. Even if the spy had seen Beckendorf depart camp, they shouldn't have known where or how we'd intended to strike.

Had it been a lucky guess? Or ...

The alternative answer, the logical one, that the spy was one of our inner circle, didn't bear thinking about.

'Beckendorf had set the explosives by then, but he tried to fool Ethan. Acted like he hadn't done it yet. But Kronos didn't buy it. They found out we'd rigged the engine room. And Beckendorf ...' His voice wobbled. The grape he was rolling around fell to the ground. 'He wouldn't give them time to disarm the ship. He told me to run. And then he—he hit the detonator. I *had* to go. It was either that or die with him. Maybe I should have ... I keep thinking there had to be something I could've ... but ...'

I put my hand over his. He gripped my fingers like they were a lifeline.

'Percy, you did everything you could,' Chiron said. 'Beckendorf chose to press that button. You were right—he never would have made it out. And it would have done nobody any good if you had perished alongside him.'
Percy stared at his uneaten plate. Slowly, his hand uncurled from mine. 'Yeah. Yeah, I guess.'

I knew his mind was still running over scenarios, anything he could have done to change things. The obvious answer hit me: if they'd aborted before setting up the engine room, if Percy hadn't set himself up as a distraction so that Beckendorf could right the place ... maybe they could have pull out and waited for a better moment.

He insists on taking on the hero's mantle. In pure Percy fashion, he'd tried to take on all the danger, and it had backfired. Just like in Mount St Helens.

This didn't seem to occur to him. And it probably wouldn't help if I suggested it now, when he was so cut up about Beckendorf. Instead, I asked how he survived the explosion.

'I jumped in the sea.'

Of course. His affinity with water was what made Percy the best choice for the job.

'Tyson found me, brought me to my dad's palace.' He picked up his blue cherry coke at last and took a swig. 'It's a complete war zone down there.'

'I am not surprised,' Chiron said. 'By all reports, Poseidon has not been able to leave his home front for months. He was not even in attendance at the last solstice council—perhaps the first time in years that neither of Zeus's brothers turned up.'

'It's worse than that.' Percy's foot tapped agitatedly against the base of the stone bench. 'I had a dream about Mount Tam. Kronos's palace is back up. There were two Titans there—a gold one and one with horns on his helmet.'

'Hyperion and Krios?'

Percy shrugged. 'The gold one said he was coming east with Kronos's forces. Something about a little challenge the gods couldn't handle. I'm guessing more monsters are on the way. They seemed sure Olympus would fall in a few days.'

'We must call a war council immediately,' Chiron said. 'To discuss this spy, and other matters.'

Percy ran his fingers through his hair. 'Poseidon mentioned another threat. Something even bigger than the Princess Andromeda. I thought it might be that challenge the Titan mentioned in my dream.'

Chiron pursed his lips. When he met my eyes, I knew we were both thinking about Typhon's escape. The last we'd heard, the gods had headed out from Olympus to meet him in combat.

'We will discuss that also,' he said.

Percy squared his shoulders. 'One more thing.' He stood on the bench so that he was eye level with Chiron. 'When I talked to my father, he said to tell you it's time. I need to know the full prophecy.'

My heart started hammering again. Chiron's face turned grey and drawn, like his worst fears had materialised. I knew how he felt. For years, we'd kept the details of the prophecy from Percy, partly because the gods had veto-ed it, partly because sharing it could have been the catalyst that actually anchored the prophecy to Percy.

'I've dreaded this day,' Chiron said with a sigh. 'Very well. Annabeth, we will show Percy the truth—all of it.'
The eagle-eyed among you might spot the reappearance of Beckendorf's early gift to Silena in *The Golden Fleece*. 
I Hand Over Hal's Secret Slip

Chapter Summary

Chiron and Annabeth finally reveal the Great Prophecy to Percy.

Chapter Notes

Warning—there is some brief but possibly disturbing dream imagery at the end of this one.

Chiron sent Percy and me to the attic. The Oracle stared at us with her unseeing eyes, as broken and mute as the last time I'd come. I thought of what Chiron had said of her, and wondered if Cath, her long-dead host, had seen us in her final vision, the one that had made her IM her brother and indirectly led to her death.

Percy's gaze travelled around the rest of the junk in the attic: unclaimed spoils of war, broken weapons, more paraphernalia whose provenance we had long lost track of. Despite asking us about the prophecy, he seemed to want to stall the moment of truth, as though he finally recognised the danger that awaited him. He picked up a stained bronze scimitar—a spoil of war from last summer, when we'd fought the monster Kampê together during the Battle of the Labyrinth and nearly ended up as the dragon lady's dinner.

Percy fingered the tag on the scimitar. 'You remember Briares throwing those boulders?'

My lips twitched at the memory of a hundred hands burying Kampê under a hundred rocks. 'And Grover causing a Panic?'

If only it were so easy to chase Typhon off. Somehow, I had a feeling the storm giant could outshout even Grover's Panic.

Percy set the scimitar down and looked straight at me. The dust-strewn attic made his green eyes shine like reflective pools of algae. There'd been another moment in that same battle, when we'd been pinned under Kampê's massive bulk and I'd thought we were done for. I'd looked into Percy's eyes and thought they'd be the last thing I would ever see.

A creak from the floorboards brought me back to the present. I turned to the Oracle. 'Prophecy.'

Percy returned the scimitar to its shelf. 'Right. Prophecy.'

We approached the Oracle. Percy wet his lips nervously. 'I never understood this.'

'What?'

He gestured towards her skeletal body. 'Why it's a mummy.'

I shivered, thinking about Cath and her curse again. 'Percy, she wasn't always a mummy.' I painted
the story in brief strokes—how the Oracle used to be alive, the spirit passing along from one girl to another until it reached Cath. 'But she was the last.'

'What happened?'

'She—' I was about to explain Hades's curse, but the Oracle's eyes seemed to flicker, almost as though a warning light had come on inside her. I shook my head. 'Let's just do our job and get out of here.'

Percy shifted his weight to one foot. 'So what now?'

Maybe it was just me, but the Oracle seemed to be listening. I spread my palms respectfully. 'O Oracle, the time is at hand. I ask for the Great Prophecy.'

Nothing happened. Like the last time I'd approached her, she remained withered and still. Just my imagination after all. I was probably thinking too much about the girl she used to be.

The prophecy resided in a leather pouch around her neck. It had been there the first time I'd snuck into the attic, determined to get myself a prophecy for a quest. I slid the tiny roll of parchment that bore the Great Prophecy into my hands.

Percy stared at it. 'No way. You mean all these years I've been asking about this stupid prophecy, and it's been right there around her neck?'

'The time wasn't right.' As I said this, I wondered why of all people, the Oracle had chosen to reveal the prophecy to me. You'd have thought she'd pick the central figure featured in it. Snatches of my most terrifying dreams darted through my head. *Cursed blade ... a single choice ... 'Believe me, Percy. I read this when I was ten years old, and I still have nightmares about it.'*

That was an understatement. I shuddered involuntarily at the memory of my own hands as sharp blades.

'Great,' Percy muttered. 'Can I read it now?'

I glanced at the Oracle. Once again, I got the distinct feeling she was trying to warn me about something. I shook my head firmly. 'Downstairs at the war council. Not in front of ...' I shivered again. 'You know.'

+++ I don't know about 'council', but 'war' was certainly an appropriate description of the scene downstairs. Clarisse had made Silena the promised hot chocolate, but it sat neglected on the ping-pong table, precariously close to the edge. She must have forgotten her resolution not to speak to any of us until we came to our senses, because she was screaming at Michael at the top of her lungs. It sounded like a reprise of their fight from last week, only with them up in each other's faces this time. Clarisse hadn't yet gone for her knife or spear, but it was only a matter of time.

Percy strode in and shoved them apart. 'Stop it! What are you guys doing?'

Clarisse's hand twitched towards the spear strapped across her back. 'Tell Michael not to be a selfish jerk.'

Michael sniffed. 'Oh, that's perfect, coming from you.'

Clarisse banged her fist on the table. I snatched up Silena's hot chocolate before it could spill over
her, and set it down closer to the ping-pong net.

'The only reason I'm here is to support Silena! Otherwise I'd be back in my cabin.'

Percy blinked in confusion. 'What are you talking about?'

Pollux coughed discreetly and explained the situation.

Clarisse's hand tightened around her knife. 'You're in charge, right?' she said to Chiron. 'Does my cabin get what we want or not?'

Chiron looked like the last thing he wanted was to settle this argument again. 'My dear, as I've already explained, Michael is correct. Apollo's cabin has the best claim. Besides, we have more important matters—'

'Sure, always more important matters than what Ares needs. We're just supposed to show up and fight when you need us and not complain!'

'That would be nice,' Connor murmured. Katie elbowed him in the ribs.

'Maybe,' Clarisse said in a deadly voice, 'I should ask Mr D—'

Chiron slammed his hoof on the floor. 'As you know, our director Dionysus is busy with the war. He can't be bothered with this.'

As if Mr D would have bothered even under normal circumstances. It was a mark of how pissed off Clarisse was that she'd even consider him as a source of back-up.

'I see.' Clarisse pulled her knife and glared around the table. 'And the senior counsellors? Are any of you going to side with me?'

One by one, we each averted our gaze, from the Stoll brothers, to Katie, to Pollux, and Jake Mason, who must have been called in to replace Beckendorf. The sight of him was another stabbing reminder of our loss.

This must have struck Clarisse, too, because she seemed to remember why she'd come in the first place. She turned to address Silena. 'Fine. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get into this when you've just lost ... anyway, I apologise. To you. Nobody else.'

Silena just stared at her untouched mug. She didn't seem to hear Clarisse at all.

Clarisse flung her knife down. It hit the table with a clatter. 'All of you,' she announced dramatically, 'you can fight this war without Ares. Until I get satisfaction, no one in my cabin is lifting a finger to help. Have fun dying.'

And she stormed out of the council.

All in all, it wasn't a great start to the meeting. We didn't know if Clarisse was just blustering—surely she wouldn't actually be able to stay out of a fight—but an internal argument was not what we needed, not when the atmosphere already felt like a keg of time-delayed dynamite.

Chiron called the rest of us to order and motioned for Percy to share the Great Prophecy. I handed it over. He unfurled the parchment with trembling fingers, revealing the small, cramped writing. With a shock, I realised I knew that handwriting. It had covered the green diary I'd struggled through last month.
Percy stumbled over the words that I already knew by heart. I had to stop and correct him on a few words—his dyslexia was acting up, whether from the fine print or his nervousness. Maybe both. When he reached the line about the cursed blade, his hand drifted over his pocket, where Riptide must be. Was he thinking about fighting off Kronos's scythe?

'You see now, Percy, why we thought it best not to tell you the whole prophecy,' Chiron said. 'You've had enough on your shoulders—'

'Without realising I was going to die in the end anyway?' Percy said bitterly.

He'd jumped way too quickly to that conclusion. A sob threatened to escape my throat. I clapped my hands over my mouth and swallowed it down.

'Percy, you know prophecies always have double meanings,' I said. 'It might not literally mean you die.'

'Sure. A single choice shall end his days. That has tons of meanings, right?'

I'd expected him to be angry, to fight it, or put that impulsive, spontaneous mind of his to finding an unorthodox solution. He'd been there when Thalia sidestepped the prophecy, after all. He had to know the unexpected could always happen. But he sounded so ... resigned.

'Maybe we can stop it.' Jake Mason's voice was hesitant, like he wasn't certain of his new position among us. 'The hero's soul, cursed blade shall reap. Maybe we could find this cursed blade and destroy it. Sounds like Kronos's scythe.'

I appreciated the spirit of his suggestion, but prophecies didn't work that way. For one, we'd already lost our chance to destroy the scythe when we'd taken out the telkhines in Mount St Helens but not the blade they'd forged. For another, though Kronos's scythe presented itself as a likely candidate for the cursed blade, we'd never know if there was another one out there that we hadn't considered.

Chiron put his hand on Percy's shoulder. 'Perhaps we should let Percy think about these lines. He needs time—'

'No.' Percy shrugged Chiron off. His eyes flashed as he stuffed the prophecy into his pocket. 'I don't need time. If I die, I die. I can't worry about that, right?'

*His need to protect, to save—it is greater than simply sacrificing himself for a friend.* My mother's words twisted in my gut. Did he think this was the heroic thing to do? To go out in a blaze of glory? Would he run straight at his death if he thought it would save more people?

Anger gathered in the pit of my stomach. Didn't he get that I—that people would hurt if he did die? How could he give up so easily?

I couldn't meet his eyes. I toyed with the beads on my camp necklace as Percy moved the discussion to the spy at camp. Apparently Luke had even told him how they'd communicated, using a bracelet with a scythe charm. None of this brought us closer to ferreting out who was the traitor. Accusations flew, none of them helpful. All we could do was keep an eye out for the scythe charm—which the spy now knew better than to reveal.

'We need to find this spy before we plan our next operation,' Michael said glumly. 'Blowing up the *Princess Andromeda* won't stop Kronos forever.'

Chiron ran his hand wearily over his face. 'No, indeed. In fact, his next assault is already on the way.'
'You mean the "bigger threat" Poseidon mentioned?'

I sighed, remembering we had yet to tell Percy about Typhon's escape.

'Percy, we didn't want to tell you until you returned to camp,' Chiron said. 'You needed a break with your ... mortal friends.'

Percy looked mutinous, but the moment Chiron mentioned 'mortal friends,' his eyes shifted guiltily to his hands.

I looked away. It was hardly the best time to think about it, but my mind couldn't help conjuring up the image of Percy on the beach with Rachel Dare. My face heated up.

Chiron set up a rainbow using a goblet and a steam plate, and asked Iris for a situation update. The shimmering image of Mount St Helens appeared in the rainbow's misty colours, with Typhon's monstrous body crawling out of the spewing crater. The mortals probably thought the giant was a freak storm trawling through the Midwest. He'd gotten all the way to Kansas now, uprooting trees, smashing houses, and tossing cars about like a kid throwing a tantrum with his toy village.

'Typhon is marching forward—towards New York,' Chiron said. 'Towards Olympus.' He gave it five days before Typhon got here, which seemed like an overly optimistic estimate, given that the giant had already made it halfway across the country in two.

Then I spotted two glowing chariots, one gold and one silver: Apollo and Artemis. They dove under Typhon's arm and disappeared into the swirling blackness of the storm. The other Olympians buzzed around Typhon's head. I didn't see Zeus, but the lightning bolts that streaked through the black clouds had to come from him. They were slowing the monstrous giant—barely.

'But then who's guarding Olympus?' Percy asked.

I watched my mother fly into battle, a giant owl clawing at Typhon's ugly face. Athena had said something about Kronos's secret weapons and back-up plans. Was this it? Surely he wouldn't have put all his eggs in one basket, even one as powerful as Typhon. For three years, he'd bamboozled us with assaults on ten thousand fronts at the same time. Layer upon layer of deception. Always a million plans simmering away under the surface.

'It's a trick.'

Percy met my eyes. I knew he'd reached the same conclusion. He acted dumb a lot, but when he applied himself, he was no slouch at strategy.

'Kronos has another attack planned,' he said grimly.

No one else wanted to believe it. Typhon was enough bad news. And if Luke had known all along that we were targeting the Princess Andromeda ...

I exchanged another look with Percy. He sucked in his cheeks the way he did when there was something he didn't want to say. If our Trojan Bomb project had been a trap all along ...

We'd sent Beckendorf straight to his death.

There was nothing more to say after that. Chiron adjourned the council.

I helped a listless Silena back to her cabin, where her second-in-command, Drew Tanaka, promised she'd be okay.
'She'll get over it. I'll get her some catalogues. Retail therapy always helps.'

I wasn't so sure, but who was I to question how Aphrodite kids did things?

'Do you need anything else?' I asked Silena.

Silena dabbed at her eyes with a pink handkerchief. 'Can I borrow your phone? I—I want to call my dad.'

'Of course.'

Percy came to find me after I brought my phone over. I thought he might want to talk about the prophecy, or possibly Luke's strategies, but he was uncharacteristically quiet. I couldn't think of anything to say, either. We sat on the front steps of his cabin and listened to the wind rustling over the coral walls. There always seemed to be a breeze passing through cabin three.

The conch horn sounded for curfew. I got up. 'Um, I better go.'

'Yeah.' He ran his hand through his hair. 'Do you, uh, do you wanna do our chores together tomorrow?'

I smiled faintly. 'Sure. It'll probably be quicker if we help each other. I've got cabin inspection.'

'Sorting reports.'

'Right.'

He gave me an awkward smile. 'Uh, good night, then.'

After two nights tossing and turning while I fretted over Percy and Beckendorf's absence, I could have done with a proper night's rest. No such luck. My dreams were a minefield of battlefields and bloodbaths. I jerked awake in the middle of the night, a brief escape from a red-tinged dreamscape where a burly warrior fell face-first onto a rocky plain with an arrow through his heel. For some time, I tried to distract myself by looking through some of my favourite architectural designs on Daedalus's laptop, but eventually exhaustion got the better of me. I slipped back into the world of nightmares.

Luke cried out to me from inside a cage, pleading for help. 'He'll use me, Annabeth. He'll use the other way.' I released him, only to watch his eyes turn gold. A cruel smile spread across his face. He reached over his shoulder for his scythe. Its curved blade of celestial bronze and steel slashed through the air towards me.

My mother dove over my head in owl form, calling, 'A single choice will end his days.'

And then Percy was there, diving between me and Luke's—Kronos's—scythe. It sank into his chest.

'Happy birthday,' Luke hissed as he ripped the scythe away, sticky with Percy's blood.

I was still screaming when Malcolm woke me up.
After the night I'd had, I wasn't really in the mood to do cabin inspection. But if we all started
shirking duties because of bad dreams, nothing would have gotten done this summer.

Percy came with me like he'd promised. He had a stack of reports to sort out, and he read them out
loud as we went from cabin to cabin. Most were from our satyr scouts, but there was the occasional
note from camp creditors, or receipts for strawberry deliveries. (I hadn't realised until this summer
how much administration running the camp actually involved.)

Demeter and Aphrodite were the easiest cabins to check. Katie ran a tight ship with hers, and Silena
had pulled herself together enough to tidy the place. Or maybe that was Drew's handiwork. I would
probably have gone easy on them, given the circumstances, but it was an unquestionable five out of
five. Hopefully winning prime time shower privileges would help cheer her up. At least she showed
a little more life this morning. Her dad must have express-shipped her chocolates, because she had a
box open on her lap. Percy snagged one before we left.

I did give a pass to Hephaestus cabin, where the mood was just as dismal. Jake Mason seemed to be
at a loss in his new role. He watched us do the inspection with his hands pressed sheepishly against
the back of his head. I ignored the grease stains on the curtains and bed frames, but even the three I
gave them was overly generous.

Ares and Apollo I didn't even bother to inspect. Clarisse and Michael's argument had escalated into a
full-blown skirmish, as if all the tension brewing since the start of summer was a time bomb that had
finally exploded. Michael was screaming and waving a quiver of arrows at Sherman Yang. Through
the open door behind him, I could see more scattered arrows on the cabin floor, all turned to rubber.
That had to be Sherman's handiwork.

Two of Michael's siblings had taken their new chariot for a spin, 'accidentally' dropping fire bombs
over cabin five in the process. Ellis Wakefield sprinted across the green, chasing Kayla Knowles and
Austin Lake with his sword and yelling, 'Curse me, eh? I'll make you pay! I don't want to rhyme all
day!'

'Not that again,' I groaned. Another week of rhyming was the last thing anyone wanted to put up
with.

I didn't know where Clarisse was, but it was just as well she and her electric spear weren't around to
join the fight.

Percy frowned. 'What are they fighting about anyway?'

Was he really this obtuse? Surely he couldn't have missed the building tension between Ares and

Percy Goes MIA

Chapter Summary

After Beckendorf's funeral, Annabeth misses her chance to reconcile with Percy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
Apollo? But then, he had run off practically every week. And he could be pretty clueless about how people felt about things. Like ...

I ground my teeth. 'That flying chariot.'

'What?'

I looked up from the 'I' I was scrawling on my inspection scroll for both cabins. Percy was staring at me with a slightly dazed expression. How on earth had he gotten distracted so quickly from his own question?

'You asked what they were fighting about.'

'Oh.' He looked away, cheeks slightly pink, and ran his hand over his hair. 'Oh, right.'

As I explained about the raid in Philadelphia and the ensuing argument over the flying chariot, Michael got into the contentious vehicle and went after Ellis. Ellis shook his fist and screamed at him in perfect rhyming cuss-plets.

Percy looked ready to do some cussing himself, though presumably not in rhyme. 'We're fighting for our lives and they're bickering about some stupid chariot.'

I sighed. This was getting out of hand, but it wasn't just about the chariot. Maybe working off their rage would help them resolve things. Letting their issues simmer all summer certainly hadn't.

When we got to my cabin, I was pleased to see my siblings had tidied up nicely. The one sloppy bunk ... was mine. I'd been running late for breakfast by the time Malcolm shook me out of my nightmare, so I hadn't put my things away. Someone had attempted to fold my blankets, but my laptop and notes were still strewn across the bedclothes. No one would have touched them. After I'd taken my dagger to Travis Stoll for hiding my invisibility cap, everyone at camp knew better than to touch my things without permission.

I shuffled my papers together, cursing at myself under my breath. Malcolm gave me a half-smile and led the rest of my siblings outside.

'We'll wait outside while you finish inspection,' he said loudly.

I thought Percy would follow them out, but he stayed by my desk. I could feel his eyes on me as I put my notes in order and shut Daedalus's laptop.

'Get any good info from that thing?'

I smiled ruefully. 'Too much.' I bet hadn't even scratched the surface. Even if I worked constantly for fifty years, I probably wouldn't figure out everything he had in there.

Percy muttered something I couldn't quite catch. I looked up to see him shuffling his reports in his hands. When he saw me watching, he fumbled a few. He leant forward to catch them, bringing his face within inches of mine.

It hit me then that we were alone in my cabin, technically in contravention of camp rules, inspection duty or not. The last time we'd stood together like this—almost in this exact same spot—had been over a year ago, before we'd gone into the Labyrinth, before everything had changed. How terrified I'd been, after getting my quest prophecy. Percy had put his arms around me and for a moment everything had been okay ...
Everything I'd feared then seemed trivial compared to what we were facing now. Here we were, on the brink of war, and Beckendorf was dead, and Percy...

I wanted him to hug me and make everything okay again. To Hades with the prophecy. I wanted him to promise he'd do anything to survive.

I tucked a loose curl behind my ear and wet my lips. 'You know ... this whole thing with Beckendorf and Silena.' My eyes darted to his. There was a funny expression on his face, a mix of apprehension and awe that set my pulse racing. 'It kind of makes you think. About ... what's important. About losing people who are important.'

His Adam's apple bobbed up and down. We were almost nose to nose now. When had he become so tall? I'd never had to look up at him before.

'Um, yeah, like ...' Percy swallowed. 'Is everything cool with your family?'

The question blindsided me. With everything that had gone down in the past few weeks, I hadn't even thought about my dad. My birthday postcard lay half-covered by papers on my desk. Maybe Percy had spotted it.

'Yeah.' I told him how my dad had hoped to take me to Europe to see the Parthenon. Percy nodded sagely, and suggested there was always another summer.

I guess that was the closest he'd come to hoping about the future. But did he mean that we'd both see another summer ... or just that I would?

I put away my laptop and returned to my inspection scroll. 'Come on. Let's finish your reports and get back to Chiron.'

The last report was a message for Grover. Incognito or not, it was beginning to worry me how so many messages hadn't got through to him in the past month. The last we'd heard of him, he'd delivered Kayla to camp ... in June. Percy admitted that he hadn't heard anything either, not even on their empathy link.

He rubbed at his forehead like that might activate the link. Then he stopped abruptly. 'Annabeth.'

I turned around and nearly smacked into the ball swinging from a nearby tetherball post. 'What?'

'Listen, I had this dream about, um ...' I expected him to say Grover, but he finished, 'Rachel.'

My insides felt like the tetherball oscillating on the post. It crossed my mind that he might—horror of horrors—mean to confess his feelings for her or something, especially when he told me she'd been in her room in his dream (I guess Rachel wasn't the only one doing the visiting this summer). But it turned out to be something else completely.

'She was painting,' Percy said. 'And, um, chucking darts at a picture of me.'

Right now, I was seriously considering the same thing. My eye twitched. I wished I didn't feel a twinge of sympathy for the girl.

'Her dad came to ask her if I'd be going with them on vacation—'

My jaw dropped. 'Excuse me?'

Percy turned red, but forged on. 'She just—she asked me to go to St Thomas with her family. It's
nothing, just, she has a hard time with them, and she thought if I was there, maybe ... anyway, she
told him she'd been having dreams. Lots of them. Nightmares, I guess. Bad enough that he suggested
a shrink.

I didn't say anything. I was still reeling from the fact that Rachel had actually asked Percy on
vacation. With her family. And it didn't escape my notice that he hadn't exactly mentioned turning
her down.

'Then I saw these drawings she'd done. One of them was the Empire State Building. With a really
bad storm around it—kind of like what Chiron showed us, with Typhon. And all the people in the
picture had Greek weapons. Like they were fighting a battle at the doors.'

Was he suggesting that Rachel's dreams were like ours—demigod dreams? Impossible. She was a
mortal.

'And the other picture—she drew Luke.'

This got my full attention. 'What?'

Percy nodded. 'Not the way he is now. He was a kid in the picture—I don't know, nine or ten?'

A sharp pang pierced my chest like a thorn. How could Rachel possibly dream about Luke? She
didn't even know Luke, unless you counted her throwing a hairbrush at him in the Labyrinth last
year.

'I don't know what it means, but I'm really worried. I thought—I thought you could help figure it
out.'

Worried about the dream, or worried about Rachel? My fingers flexed so hard around the inspection
scroll, I tore it down the middle. Great. I'd have to rewrite it.

Percy was still waiting for an answer.

'What do you want me to say?'

Percy shifted his weight. 'I'm not sure. You're the best strategist I know. If you were Kronos
planning this war, what would you do next?'

'I'd use Typhon as a distraction,' I said flatly. 'Then I'd hit Olympus directly, while the gods were in
the west.'

'Just like in Rachel's picture.'

I had to slow my voice to keep it from shaking. 'Percy, Rachel is just a mortal.'

'But what if her dream is true?' he demanded. 'Those other Titans—they said Olympus would be
destroyed in a matter of days. They said they had plenty of other challenges. And what's with Luke
as a kid—'

'We'll just have to be ready,' I snapped. It was like the thorn in my chest had ripped open a seam,
spilling hot anger everywhere. This was the first time in years that Percy had spoken of Luke without
vitriol. Every time I brought him up, he got nasty about it, but now Rachel was dreaming about it, he
was suddenly okay with Luke? And why was Rachel even dreaming of Luke? It wasn't enough that
she'd captured Percy's attention, now she had to have answers about Luke as well?
'How?' Percy waved his hands towards the cabin green, where the flying chariot was visible above the roofs, peppering the Ares cabin with missiles. 'Look at our camp. We can't even stop fighting each other. And I'm supposed to get my stupid soul reaped.'

The bitter resignation in his voice stung. When it came to defying the gods or arguing with *me*, he had no problem fighting back, but give him a prophecy with some scary lines and he wasn't even trying to contest it?

'I knew we shouldn't have shown you the prophecy. All it did was scare you.' My eyes grew hot. It felt like every time he ran off home this summer again. 'You run away from things when you're scared.'

'Me?' Percy's voice cracked on the word. 'Run away?'

'Yes, you.' I dropped my scroll and stared him down. I had to stand on tiptoe to meet him at eye level, and it irked me. Just one more thing that had changed. As if he were running away from me physically as well as emotionally. 'You're a coward, Percy Jackson.'

Somewhere in the back of my head, I registered that this wasn't a fair, or an honest, comment. But the anger coursing through my veins kept me from backing down. 'If you don't like our chances, maybe you should go on that vacation with Rachel.'

Wasn't that what he wanted to do anyway? Run off for a nice mortal vacation with his new girlfriend? He could go talk about her dreams, or even about Luke. He'd made it pretty clear all summer that he didn't want to hang around with *me* any more.

'Annabeth—'

'If you don't like m—our company.'

'That's not fair!' he protested.

In response, I punched the tetherball. I didn't stay to watch it swing. With a throbbing head and stinging eyes, I stalked off towards the Big House.

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By the time we held Beckendorf's funeral that afternoon, my anger had fizzled into a dull heartburn. I watched the smoke curl off Beckendorf's shroud and wished I hadn't blown up at Percy. Looking at Silena's pale, devastated face, I remembered the guilt I'd felt when my last words to Percy before he left for the Trojan Bomb operation had been an accusation. And now I'd gone and done it again.

I meant to go to him straight after the funeral, but as soon as I got up, I saw Chiron beckoning to me from across the amphitheatre.

I'd speak to Percy later. It wasn't like he'd be going anywhere tonight.

I followed Chiron to his office. The photos that lined the wall caught my attention the moment we stepped through the door. They'd always been there—his personal memory board of heroes he'd trained. The ancient portraits hung on one end. I spotted Orpheus, the musician who'd snuck into the Underworld with just his lyre. Atalanta and Hippomenes of death-race fame. Jason of the Argonauts. And, with a tingle in my spine, my gaze landed on the young warrior Achilles. This was obviously long before his heel-pierced downfall. He stood proudly in Greek armour with his helmet under one arm. He wasn't looking at the camera—or the painter, I suppose—but his friend Patroclus, posed next to him with an arm slung around his shoulders, hand dangling over his heart.
Something about that picture tugged at my mind, but my attention was drawn to the end of the row, where the modern heroes were memorialised—Amelia Earhart, Walt Disney, and Marie Curie, to name a few. Chiron had added a new photo. It showed Beckendorf at the camp forge, grinning as he hammered away at the many weapons he'd made for us over the years.

A lump formed in my throat. Chiron saw where I was looking and sighed.

'A real shame,' he said. 'Beckendorf was a good, strong hero.'

He guided me to his desk, where a familiar green book lay at the top of his papers.

I ran a finger over its leather cover. 'The diary.'

'I am sorry it has taken me so long to address it. I was ... distracted by other matters.' His gaze danced over the piles of papers on his desk—more reports, schedules, and inventories; maps and plans. I guess even with our help, he still had an endless amount of camp paperwork.

'At any rate, after divulging the prophecy yesterday, I thought it prudent to finish reading.'

'Did you learn anything that can help us?'

Chiron looked at me strangely. 'Hal's story confirmed some things I suspected about his sister's fate, and that of the spirit of Delphi. As for how it may affect the Great Prophecy ... I do not believe it is connected. Not directly, anyway.'

'Kronos thought at first it might help him control the prophecy.' I thumbed through the book. 'Then our spy told him the Oracle was broken.'

'Yes,' Chiron said. 'I imagine he would be concerned if we had more hints about how the Great Prophecy would come to pass. But her story, her past ... I do not think it changes how the prophecy is meant to play out. No doubt Kronos reached the same conclusion. But had we known sooner about Hades's curse on the spirit of Delphi, perhaps things would have been very different. If I had only forbidden May Castellan from attempting—'

The book slipped from my hands and crashed to the floor. 'What?'

Chiron bent over to pick it up. 'About twenty years ago, we tried to fix up a new host for the Oracle. It was an unusual choice—a mortal woman, one who had just had a newborn baby. I should never have considered it, but the spirit had already languished in a dead body for thirty years and we couldn't figure out why. Drastic measures seemed appropriate. And May Castellan was the same age as Cath Green was when she died.'

'May Castellan,' I whispered. 'Luke's mom.'

Chiron nodded. 'Hermes brought her to camp himself. She said she'd glimpsed the future. She wanted to understand. She insisted on trying. Alas ...'

'It didn't work.' Something cold and sharp gnawed at my stomach. The distant memory of Luke's mom, pottering around her kitchen table dishing out burnt cookies and mouldy sandwiches, danced through my head.

'The spirit did not take. Worse than that, it might even have fractured her mind—I do not know. Hermes took her away, her and the baby. He said he would take care of them. I did not know what had become of them until Luke showed up at camp fourteen years later. And given the circumstances of his arrival ...'
I swallowed hard. My harrowing journey to camp with Luke and Thalia had lost some of its sting since she'd returned to us, but I still didn't like thinking about it.

'Perhaps I should have dug deeper, asked after his home life. But I'm afraid we were all distracted by the unfortunate, er, pine tree incident.' Chiron tapped the diary. 'If I had known about the experiences he recorded here, perhaps I could have guided him more carefully.'

A mini explosion went off in the pit of my stomach. 'Wait ... what?'

The creases in Chiron's forehead furrowed in deeper. 'Did you read all of this, Annabeth?'

'Just the parts about the Oracle. Was there—is there—did Luke—?'

Chiron started to reply, then seemed to change his mind. 'I think it would be better if you finished reading it yourself.'

He pressed the book into my hands. I took it with a pounding heart. The experiences he recorded here. So Luke had written in the book. That mysterious last entry ... was that his after all?

'I do not know if it is too late for him,' Chiron said. 'Regardless, it may help you to understand how things went wrong.'

*Relationships are like architecture.* If I wanted to understand why Luke had betrayed us ... betrayed me ... I had to go back to the foundations.

I didn't know how Hal Green's story connected with Luke's, but there was only one way to find out.

It took me some time to trace back to where I'd left off. It had been a while since I'd read Hal's entries, so I'd forgotten many details. I ended up rereading the entire section on his imprisonment in his childhood mansion before remembering that I'd already read that bit. I longed to skip ahead, to find what Luke had written, but it took me long enough with my dyslexia to work out the contents of one page. Thumbing randomly through entries would probably take me longer to piece them together than if I just read chronologically.

The entries following Hal's recap of his life story were annoyingly cryptic. He wrote in short bursts, detailing single incidents in the present—well, the present to him, in 1980. He described demigods who'd been lured to his house. Sometimes he recorded conversations with them. His entries grew shorter, his tone more bitter, more resigned, like Percy's response to the Great Prophecy. After a while, he stopped dating them, so I could no longer tell when the events had occurred, or how long had passed between entries.

My head ached. If I wasn't so motivated to discover what the diary had to do with Luke, I would probably have flung it aside in frustration.

Then, just as the conch horn rang for dinner, I came to a very different entry, started at the top of a clean page. It was still in Hal's handwriting, but more spaced out, with the letters less neatly formed. He seemed to have written it in a hurry.

*Luke,* it said, *I want you to take this diary.*

My head reeled. I flipped back a page, wondering if I'd missed something, an explanation of how Luke had come to be there, but Hal was infuriatingly silent on the matter. The previous entry simply stated: *Stale loaf of bread, bronze shield—cracked on impact with the leucrota,* of course. *Seems like that's all I'll remember of my victims, at this rate: what they left behind.* There was no indication of how long this had been before he'd written to Luke.
'Annabeth!' Malcolm yelled from outside the cabin. 'Are you leading us into dinner or what?'

I gritted my teeth. If only I had just five more minutes! I slid my dad's postcard carefully into the diary to mark my spot, and hurried out.

I was still deep in thought as we walked to the dining pavilion. So Luke had met this demigod son of Apollo. But when? And how, if Hal lived in an enchanted, deadly house of horrors that no demigod ever escaped?

And what did this have to do with May Castellan's tangle with the spirit of Delphi? I felt like I'd been handed a thousand-piece jigsaw. Percy had asked me for answers about Luke earlier. Was the diary the key? Would it tell me how all the pieces connected?

Percy. I'd meant to speak to him after the funeral. I glanced at the Poseidon table, but the stone benches for cabin three were empty. The nymphs bringing out the food platters paused, confused, then moved on to the Ares table.

My stomach did a little flip. Where was Percy?

It wasn't like him to miss dinner. For one, we weren't supposed to skip it. For another, he usually had a hearty appetite. Yet by the time the nymphs came to clear away the serving platters, Percy still hadn't shown up.

I wasn't the only one to notice his absence. Chiron clopped over to my table, his tail flicking back and forth in agitation. 'Have you seen Percy, Annabeth?'

I shook my head. 'Not since Beckendorf's funeral.'

Chiron raised his voice. 'Has anyone seen Percy Jackson?'

'Yeah.' Clarisse scowled ferociously. 'He made Silena cry after the funeral.'

Silena shook her head. 'It wasn't his fault. He was trying to be nice.'

'But where did he go after that?' I asked.

The others shrugged. Chris said he'd seen Percy headed for the sword-fighting arena, but no one else had seen him all afternoon. Except—

'Oh, he was in the woods.'

The nymph clearing our plates had green-tinted skin and leafy hair that had yellowed at the ends, like a plant that hadn't gotten enough water: Grover's dryad girlfriend, Juniper.

I caught her arm. 'You saw Percy?'

Juniper almost dropped her plates. She glared at me through dark green eyes.

'Sorry.' I released her. 'I mean, do you know where he is now?'

Juniper shrugged. 'I was just trying to press Leneus for information on Grover when those Underworld creatures showed up.'

'Underworld creatures?' Chiron said sharply.

Juniper nodded. 'That dog, and that kid.'
Everyone relaxed when she said *dog*. We'd all gotten used to Mrs O'Leary by now. One of Percy's chores was to walk her. Which I guess he'd done ... only, why wasn't he back?

'Juniper, when you say *kid*, do you mean—'

'That son of Hades, of course. How many Underworld kids do we have wandering around? And he couldn't help me either. He said he couldn't tell if Grover was alive or dead!' She produced a mossy handkerchief from her pocket and blew her nose loudly.

The pitiful amount of dinner I'd eaten turned over in my stomach. If he hadn't even been in touch with his girlfriend, Grover's prolonged lack of communication was a problem. But I could only deal with one crisis at a time. 'But what about Percy?'

'He tried to help.' Juniper sniffed. 'He even yelled at Leneus to go find Grover. Oh, Grover ...' She dabbed at her eyes.

'Juniper, we will address the matter of Grover in a second,' Chiron said gently. 'Do you know where Percy and young Nico di Angelo went?'

Juniper shook her head miserably. 'That dog tried to pee on me, so I split. Dogs are *such* a nuisance.'

We looked everywhere, but there was no sign of Percy, Nico, or Mrs O'Leary. Argus reported that no one had left the boundaries to his knowledge, which just made us more nervous. How could two kids and a hellhound simply vanish into thin air?

'Do you think he ran away?' Travis said uncertainly. 'After hearing about—you know.'

No. He wouldn't have. I might have accused him of it, but I knew in my heart he wouldn't *really* abandon camp. Unless ...

Unless he'd run off to do something insanely dangerous, something that would probably get him killed in the vain hope of saving the camp. That would be just like the infuriating kelp head. He never thought this stuff through before running off to act.

*And who goaded him into it?* whispered a nasty voice in my head.

A sick, twisted knot formed in my chest. Why, oh why, had I called him a coward?

'What about Nico di Angelo?' Will said. 'Where did he go?'

'I hate that kid,' Ellis Wakefield muttered. 'He gives me the heebie-jeebies.'

Will raised his eyebrows. 'You guys raise zombies to fight for you and you think *Nico's* creepy?'

I tuned out their argument. Will had reminded me of another frightening problem. Nico di Angelo was the only other person who could possibly claim the prophecy. If Percy was with him ... well, my mother had spotted it, hadn't she? Percy had always wanted to protect Nico from the prophecy. Would this propel him to take even bigger, more stupid risks?

And there was Nico himself. I remembered how he'd behaved when I'd spoken to him at Hestia's hearth last month. His nervousness, the way he'd blushed and wouldn't meet my eyes. His dark scowl when I'd mentioned Percy.

I thought of Clarisse attacking Kayla at the start of summer, after she'd batted her eyes at Chris. Of my own temper flaring up when Percy mentioned Rachel Dare.
Was Nico ... *jealous* of Percy?

The idea made me squirm. Nico was okay, I guess, in a moody-little-brother kind of way, but it was disconcerting to imagine him having a crush on me. And what if because of that, Nico had it in for Percy?

Chiron broke up Will and Ellis and sent them back to their cabins before their argument could shape up into another Apollo vs. Ares showdown. He patted my shoulder.

'It is unlike Percy to simply disappear. I am sure he has good reason, and will get in touch with us when he can.'

'But if he's *really* run away ...' Connor said dubiously.

'What if he's the spy?' his brother finished.

'Percy is not a traitor,' I snapped.

At the Aphrodite table, Silena put her head in her hands and started crying.

Drew Tanaka heaved a sigh. 'Great. You reminded her *again*.'

I crossed my arms. 'Whatever Percy's up to, he's doing it to help us. And Chiron's right. We just have to—we just have to wait for him to come back.'

I wished I could be as confident about this as I tried to sound.

Chapter End Notes

A lot of writing this series is getting the right information to Annabeth at the right time without doing it through Percy so that she can make the comments she does (particularly about the Oracle and May Castellan) despite never having been told this stuff on screen in canon! (And let's face it, I find it hard to believe that Percy was regularly filling her in off screen, because he hardly had a moment's peace.) I hope the version I've been building with the diary makes sense!

On Nico and the slight animosity, I believe that his perceptions in HoO of his reception at camp are not a complete exaggeration. My take is that some campers would have been suspicious, but others welcoming, and it is easy (and normal!) for the negativity to overshadow the acceptance. Which would mean neither Nico nor Will is completely right, but neither is completely wrong either, when they argue about whether Nico would be accepted at camp. Will, of course, has a positivity bias since he himself would accept Nico freely; Nico sees the other side of the coin, because he would be more sensitive to rejection.
Chapter Summary

Annabeth has a disturbing dream and an SOS comes from Manhattan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

For the fourth night in a row, I had trouble sleeping. Percy's absence was a thorn in my side, preventing me from nodding off no matter how tired I was. I tried to return to the diary, but I couldn't focus. I must have read the same two pages ten times without a single word registering in my brain. All the diary did was remind me that Luke had disappeared from camp the same way three years ago —vanishing into the woods.

I couldn't shut off the nagging voice in my head that taunted: Nobody stays. Everybody you love leaves you in the end.

Faint light was coming up on the horizon by the time I fell into a thin, troubled sleep.

I dreamt I was at the canoe lake, sitting on the docks while I watched Percy paddle about on the water's surface. He looked over his shoulder, throwing me that lopsided grin with the single dimple that made my heart do a cartwheel.

'I bet you ten drachmas I can pull it off,' he said.

'Uh-huh.'

Percy got to his feet carefully. With the perfect sea legs of a son of Poseidon—or lake legs in this case, I guess—he inched backwards to the edge of the canoe, tipping the opposite end out of the water. He obviously meant to flip it onto the dock to make an exit ramp, but I could see what he hadn't: a few naiads gathered in his blind spot, ready to send the canoe flipping backwards over him once he got close.

*SPLASH!

The naiads scattered, giggling madly. Percy hit the water with a surprised yell. He was tangled in some kind of safety cord, which was weird because our canoes didn't have safety cords.

He floundered like a drowning person, which was even more weird since Percy could swim perfectly well (and breathe underwater, for that matter).

I put my hands over my mouth and yelled, 'The cord! Remember your lifeline, dummy!'

Percy stopped struggling. He found the cord, a thin green and grey line that looped around his waist, and tossed the other end to me. I caught it and pulled.

The line was unexpectedly heavy, like reeling in twenty-pound catch on a fishing rod. Percy drifted towards me on his back, his body strangely still. I yanked harder on the cord, my heart racing.
'Hold on, Seaweed Brain,' I told him. 'You're not getting away from me that easily.'

His head bobbed up by my feet, that annoying grin back on his face, like he'd been having me on this whole time. The safety cord disappeared. Sunlight reflected off the pale green lake water, creating shadow lines over Percy's back.

'You are such an idiot sometimes.' Shaking my head, I reached over the edge of the dock. 'Come on, take my hand.'

The moment our palms touched, the sunbursts on the lake seemed to explode along my skin. The glow was so bright, my vision went white. The dock vanished. I flew towards a swirling cloud with the strangest feeling that I had done this before. I couldn't see Percy, but his fingers were still tight around mine, his grip so strong he was crushing my hand ... but I wouldn't have let go for anything.

My vision cleared and I saw him standing by the bank of a river. The waters were dark and malevolent, churning under a cavernous, obsidian sky. In front of him marched an army. They were like the zombie servants Clarisse could summon with the power of Ares, except these weren't just the losing side of a single battle. This was more like the reincarnation of every conquering army in the history of time. Phalanxes of Spartan hoplites. Leagues of Roman cavalry. Union soldiers with gleaming bayonets.

And in the centre, a team of demon horses with black fire for hair pulled a chariot bearing a twenty-foot-tall man. His flowing cape howled around his shoulders, like a million tortured faces were straining to escape from it. On his head sat a towering helmet that vibrated with black rage—the one and only helm of darkness.

There was no way Percy could take on even a tenth of this army. He wasn't even wearing armour. Yet he stepped forward with reckless boldness, seemingly unaffected by the waves of fear oozing from Hades's helm of darkness. The river behind him erupted in an avalanche of fury.

'No, Percy!'

Of course, he didn't hear me. He raised his sword and charged headlong into the army's front line.

He shouldn't have stood a chance. Not against that many, not against the Lord of the Dead himself. They should have spat him out dead.

Yet amazingly, he whirled through the skeleton army like a hurricane, moving so fast I could barely make him out. He slashed through Redcoat zombies and undead Huns like he was Achilles himself.

And then he was facing down Hades with a ferocity that chilled me to the bone. Was it just me, or did even the hellfire of Hades's eyes flicker with a hint of fear?

Something—someone—shook me hard.

'Annabeth, wake up!'

I didn't want to leave my dream. I had to see what would happen to Percy. But the scene was already fading.

I swung out in frustration—

'Ahh!'

Malcolm leapt back, out of the way of my flailing arm. I blinked, trying to shake the dizzy,
disorientating sensation. It was like when you fall from a great height and leave your stomach in the clouds.

Somehow, I'd grabbed my dagger in my sleep. My fingers were so tightly wrapped around the hilt, my knuckles had turned painfully white.

Malcolm cleared his throat. Slowly, I forced my fingers to unclench. 'Sorry. Am I late for breakfast?'

'Actually, you missed breakfast. We let you sleep because ...' Malcolm scratched behind his ear. 'Well, it looked like you were up until dawn again.'

'Oh.' It was slightly embarrassing to realise how attuned my siblings were to my sleeping patterns.

Malcolm's lips twitched. 'Yeah, well, I wouldn't have woken you, but Chiron's outside. He says you need to come.'

Chiron was waiting by Hestia's hearth. He took in my dishevelled hair and rumpled clothes, but didn't comment on them. 'Grover IM-ed Juniper,' he said. 'You should hear this.'

Chiron let me climb on his back so we could hurry out to the woods. We found Juniper perched on a rock near Zephyros Creek, looking decidedly less weepy as she beamed at a rainbow image of Grover hovering over the stream.

'Annabeth!' Grover said.

'Hey Goat Boy. Where have you been?'

Grover chewed on his lower lip. 'Um, asleep—long story. But the good news is, Percy woke me up. The bad news, though—we've got Morpheus on the loose in Manhattan.'

A lot about what he said was super wrong, but my brain could only focus on one little detail: 'Percy? You saw him?'

'Yeah, he called me on the empathy link. He and Nico were in Central Park. They needed me to open a door for them with my pipes.'

'He's okay, then.' I hadn't realised how hard it had been to breathe until the weight lifted off my chest.

'Uh, I hope so.' Grover tossed a tin can from hand to hand. 'The thing is, he was going to ...' He chewed off the tab.

'What? Spit it out, Goat Boy!'

He did—literally. 'The door he asked me to open, it was—'

Chiron frowned. 'Central Park, you said? And a door that opens to your pan-pipes—to music. This wouldn't be the Door of Orpheus, by any chance?'

Grover winced. The rest of his tin can disappeared with a crunch. The weight that had risen off my chest came crashing back down. 'You're kidding, right?'

Grover shook his head miserably. 'Percy's gone to the Underworld.'

I tried to concentrate on the rest of the Grover's tale—he'd run into Morpheus two months ago. The god of dreams had been scouting Central Park for a battle. (Something about this struck a chord, but
my frazzled mind couldn't piece together why.) Kronos was planning a 'main event' in Manhattan. Grover was going to rally the nature spirits to defend the city. It was all important information, but my brain kept wandering to the thought of Percy descending alone into the Underworld. Well, with Nico di Angelo, but that wasn't much comfort.

Grover finished his story and looked at me. 'I know you're worried about Percy.'

'I'm not—' The automatic protest died halfway out of my throat. Grover was giving me an insufferably knowing look. I didn't know if he was doing his annoying satyr emotion-sensing thing (did it even work over Iris-message?) but I guess there was no point denying that I was worried about that infuriating Seaweed Brain.

The Underworld. Gods, what had he been thinking? 'He'd better not die or I'll kill him.'

Glover bleated nervously. 'Yeah, well, he'll be fine. It's Percy. He keeps turning up okay, right? Didn't he crash his own funeral last year?'

A watery laugh escaped me. 'Yeah. Yeah, that's right.'

'Anyway, I gotta go. Juniper, I promise I'll be back soon, okay?'

We left Grover and Juniper to say goodbye in private. I went back to my cabin to straighten up before inspection, but when I got there, I noticed a blinking light next to my bunk. Silena had returned my cell phone. It sat on my bedside table with an alert scrolling across the screen. Frowning, I picked it up. One new voicemail.

The moment I heard Percy's voice, my heart leapt.

'Annabeth, I need your help. Something bad's gonna happen by tonight—a trap. You guys need to get to the Empire State Building, stat. Get every camper you can round up. I'll meet you there.'

After the first wave of relief passed, I nearly threw the phone across the room in frustration. What in Hades was going on? First he ran off without a word, then he went gallivanting into the Underworld, and all he could do was leave a cryptic message for everyone to assemble at the Empire State Building?

I played the message one more time to check I hadn't missed anything. (Definitely not because I needed to hear his voice again.) He sounded more serious than I'd ever heard him. His instructions were curt and direct, like a general marshalling troops for battle. I thought uneasily of him charging single-handedly into combat in my dream.

What had he done?

+++ 

It took a while to get everyone organised. For starters, well, have you ever tried to corral fifty ADHD kids on a field trip? Then there was the matter of transport. We didn't have enough pegasi for everyone, and there was only one flying chariot—which the Ares and Apollo cabins were still fighting over. Chiron suggested we use the strawberry delivery vans, but no one besides Argus had a driving licence. In the end, he managed to bribe two of the cleaning harpies into helping out by promising them extra hands for KP when we got back.

We loaded as many supplies as we could into the three vans. This in itself was another headache. Percy had given little to no information about what we'd be doing in Manhattan. I guessed it was the
'main event' Grover had mentioned, but it would have been helpful to know what kind of attack to anticipate. A trap, Percy had said. What was that even supposed to mean?

'We could plan for stealth or full-frontal combat,' Malcolm suggested. 'If half of us go in camouflage gear, and half in armour.'

'Good call.' I scanned Daedalus's laptop for a map of Manhattan. The plan twenty-three folder stared at me. Would we be desperate enough to use it?

I looked at Malcolm. 'You'd better take a look at this, just in case.'

While he went over Daedalus's instructions, I inspected our forces. The Athena, Hermes, and Apollos campers were in black camouflage; I'd told everyone else to put on Greek armour, in case we did need to jump straight into battle.

'Clarisse,' I said, 'you guys can lead if—'

I frowned. Clarisse stood at the bottom of the hill, watching us pile swords and shields into the van. She made no move to help. More alarmingly, she wasn't wearing her armour. With a sickening swoop of my stomach, I realised none of the Ares kids had turned up.

'What are you waiting for?' I demanded. 'We have to leave now.'

Clarisse crossed her arms. 'I told you. Until Ares gets the respect we deserve, none of us is lifting a finger to fight your battles.'

'Our battles?' I ground my teeth. 'Clarisse, this is all of our battle! You know that we need to hold Kronos off.'

She set her jaw stubbornly, turned on her heel, and marched back up the hill.

'Look who's the coward now,' Michael said in a loud voice. Maybe he meant to goad her into reacting, but she disappeared over the crest of the hill without a backward glance.

Katie punched his arm. 'Look what you've done! We can't go into battle without Ares. It'll be a total disaster!'

'It's not my fault she's such a pigheaded—' He called Clarisse a few names Percy had once told me he'd gotten suspended for repeating.

Silena gave him a reproachful look.

Michael sighed. 'Fine, I'll go talk to her.'

But by the time we were finally packed and ready to go, Clarisse showed no sign of relenting. Michael returned to the vans with Chris, both of their hair spiked up like they'd been prodded with an electric rod.

'Didn't go so well?' Connor guessed.

Michael grunted and climbed into the first van. Chris rubbed at the hairs standing up on his arm. 'I'll stay behind, try and reason with her. If I can get her to change her mind ...'

'Yeah, okay.' I was anxious to get moving. Clarisse or no Clarisse. We'd wasted enough time already. At least someone was here to defend the camp. If Percy was mistaken, if this was a ploy to lure us all away ... well, I really hoped he knew what he was doing.
My phone jangled just as we approached the Queens Midtown Tunnel. Twelve heads swung towards me as I dug it out of my pocket to answer the call.

'Hey, you get my message?'

My heart did another crazy cartwheel. 'Percy, where have you been? Your message said almost nothing at all! We were worried sick!'

'I'll fill you in later,' he said briskly. No apology, no reassurances, all business. 'Where are you?'

I gave him our location, but kept pressing. 'Percy, what are you planning? We've left camp virtually undefended, and there's no way the gods—'

I could almost see him running his hands through his hair, his expression grim. 'Trust me. I'll see you there.'

The line went dead. Either he'd hung up, or I'd lost reception as we plunged into the tunnel. As soon as I lowered the phone, I was peppered with questions.

'What did he say?'

'Is there an invasion?'

'What's he been doing?'

I held up my hands. 'He'll explain when we get there. Right now, we just need to get to the Empire State Building, pronto.'

Argus glanced at me in the rear view mirror—well, a few of his eyes did, anyway. The next moment, he squeezed us into a faster-moving lane, cutting off a red pick-up truck. The driver blared his horn. I heard more annoyed blasts as the harpies driving our other two vans followed suit.

Even with their aggressive driving, it took a while to weave through midtown traffic. Percy flagged us down at the Empire State Building.

'Dude, what happened to him?' Travis said.

He looked like he'd just emerged from a hurricane. His hair was windswept, his t-shirt and jeans practically ripped to shreds. Yet he didn't seem to be physically injured at all. His dark skin even glowed in the late afternoon sun, like he'd spent the day tanning at a spa rather than mutilating Underworld zombies. Mrs O'Leary sat on her heels at his feet, her tail thumping cracks into the sidewalk.

Percy studied me strangely as I hopped out of the van. First he stared as though he'd never seen me before, then his eyes narrowed into an expression of intense focus, like I was a particularly tricky puzzle he was trying to solve.

'What is it?' I asked.

He blinked. 'What is what?'

'You're looking at me funny.'

He ran his hand over the back of his head. 'It's, uh, nothing.'
He turned to the rest of the campers filing out of the vans. Chiron wheeled out last of all. I didn't know if Percy meant for him to come, too, but I guess it would be easier for Chiron to return to camp than for us to summon him later.

Percy raised his voice. 'Thanks for coming, everybody.' He gestured towards the entrance to the Empire State Building—the gateway to Olympus. 'Chiron, after you.'

I knew before Chiron declined that he wouldn't join us. He was bound by the rules of the immortals. Without express permission, he could not visit the home of the gods, war or no war.

Technically, we weren't supposed to just waltz up to Olympus either, but I guess as half-bloods, we had more leeway under the circumstances.

Percy looked aghast at Chiron's refusal to go in. 'But you're our leader!'

'I am your trainer,' Chiron said gently. He tapped his chin and considered what help he could give—reinforcements, allies ... but his stance was firm.

Percy was our leader. He'd called us here. He had the information, the plans. And I had to admit, even with his tattered clothes and unkempt hair, there was something commanding about his appearance.

He laid out his plan quickly: he'd learnt of a trap meant to happen by tonight, and we had to get to Olympus and convince Zeus to defend the city. For starters, anyway. I had a sinking suspicion that we were going to end up the defence force. After all, he couldn't have called us all here just to chat with the King of Heaven.

We'd definitely need the gods' help, though. Without Clarisse and her Ares warriors, there were only forty of us left to make up Percy's army.

I took a deep breath and followed Percy in.

Chapter End Notes

Percy's attempted canoe move was inspired by this YouTube video (the exact one is at 1:00 of the video).

Off-topic head-canon from a throwaway swearing reference in the chapter: Percy once got suspended for foul language because he repeated a bunch of things Gabe said to a kid that was bullying someone else. It's one of those I'll write it one day if I have time things. :P

Also, some exciting news for any Portuguese-speaking readers: this fic series is now being translated by JustAnotherGlowingUnicorn into Portuguese, and the first chapter is out here. So if that's your native language, you can check it out!
Percy led us into the Empire State Building. We marched past the security guard on duty and into the golden elevator. The guard tried to stop us, pretending he knew nothing about the secret six-hundredth floor, but a few well-chosen words from Percy and he changed his mind pretty quick.

I should have been relieved that Percy showed such a marked change from his resigned attitude yesterday. But all that silver-tongued confidence ... where had it come from? I didn't like not knowing.

Six hundred floors was a long time to ride. Twenty ADHD demigods crowded into a small space made for a lot of fidgeting. Jake Mason kept swinging his helmet from hand to hand, smacking it into Silena and Katie multiple times. Michael's foot tapped compulsively to the beat of the elevator music —stayin' alive, stayin' alive. My heartbeat pounded in time to it as I slid the beads of my camp necklace back and forth. The lyrics made an appropriate mantra.

For once, the only person who wasn't fidgeting was Percy. He kept his eyes on the flashing red button next to the number six hundred. There was something in his expression that I couldn't put my finger on, something I knew I should be worried about, but I couldn't work out what it was, or why it worried me.

For some reason, I thought of Luke. It was a very specific memory of him, seated in an arena of skulls, calmly leading his army of monsters ... well, he'd been calm until Percy had thwarted his plans. Then his rage had burst forth in a flood of unpredictable emotion.

The doors dinged open at last, spilling us out onto the sky bridge to Olympus. Percy's eyes narrowed as he took in the majestic city in the clouds, from the empty lower pastures to the white-capped mountain peaks and the grand palace at the summit. His fists clenched like he was ready to punch someone—possibly Zeus—in the face if he dared deny Percy's request to guard Manhattan.

I couldn't help thinking of him standing over Hades, actually threatening the Lord of the Underworld. The question circled my head again: what had Percy done?

He noticed me staring and raised his eyebrows, like, What?

'You look different,' I said. 'Where did you go?'

Would he tell me?

Percy pursed his lips. He seemed to be wondering where to begin. Then the elevator doors opened behind us, bearing the second load of campers. I swear, it hadn't gotten up here so fast when we were inside it.

'Tell you later.' Percy stepped out onto the sky bridge. 'Come on.'

I'd only ever seen Olympus this empty once before—on my very first visit here. We'd been on our
way out after Hypnos had played us all to sleep with his impromptu concert. Though I hadn't known
it then, Luke had snuck out in the midst of the concert to steal Zeus's lightning bolt.

That adventure seemed like a million years ago.

A few lone residents scuttled across the paths and disappeared into their homes, like they were
anxious to be out of the open. In the eerie quiet, every marble statue seemed to turn and watch us
pass.

Hera's in particular seemed to be smirking at me. I wrinkled my nose at her smug stone visage. Just
looking at it, I could practically smell the cowpats she'd sent after me all year. Same side or not, I
really hated her.

Percy looked at me questioningly. 'Has she been cursing you or something?'

I explained about Hera's little 'gifts'. Percy's lips twitched. Of course he would find it funny. He
wasn't the one dodging poop.

Pollux interrupted us, grabbing Percy's arm and pointing towards the west. 'Look! What is that?'

Jets of blue light shot across the sky like homing beacons, targeting the grand palace. They arched up
from the city below, their beams directed at the mountain, but seemed unable to reach the gates of
Olympus.

Michael shuddered. 'Like infrared scopes. We're being targeted.'

We sped up. The palace gates and doors lay wide open, as if the gods were expecting us. Yet no one
awaited us inside. The throne room was an echoing cavern of twelve enormous seats, each one twice
as tall as we were.

Then I saw her: one lone guardian, tiny next to the massive, gilded thrones, tending the hearth fire
that crackled in the centre of the room.

'Hello again, Percy Jackson.' She addressed him with a slight nod. 'You and your friends are
welcome.'

'Lady Hestia.'

Percy bowed low; the rest of us dropped hastily to our knees. Some of the others looked confused. If
Percy hadn't greeted her, I might not have connected her with the little girl who sometimes appeared
to stoke the camp's central hearth. The other campers probably didn't even know who Hestia was.

Here on Olympus, Hestia had taken the form of a matronly, middle-aged lady with soft eyes like
firelight. Only her short poker, with which she stoked the fire, remained the same. The flames licked
at the edges of her plain brown dress without setting them ablaze.

'I see you went through with your plan,' Hestia said to Percy. 'You bear the curse of Achilles.'

My brow furrowed. What did she mean? My mind fluttered to the picture of Achilles and Patroclus
on Chiron's wall. But what did that have to do with Percy?

Percy didn't look at all surprised. He knew what she meant. His mouth set in a grim line, neither
confirming nor denying Hestia's words. But I was sure that whatever he'd done between yesterday
and today, it had to do with this curse.
Hestia regarded Percy with eyes that smouldered like embers in a fireplace. 'You must be careful. You gained much on your journey. But you are still blind to the most important truth. Perhaps a glimpse is in order.'

I didn't like the sound of this. 'Um ... what is she talking about?'

Hestia gave the fire a sharp poke with her stick. The next moment, Percy collapsed.

'Percy!' I caught him around the waist. 'What happened?'

His face was the colour of whey. 'Did—did you see that?'

Ice trickled down my spine. 'See what?'

Our friends' eyes shifted nervously around the throne room. Hestia continued to stoke the fire, her face completely serene.

'How long was I out?' Percy asked.

'Percy ...' I shivered. Something was definitely wrong with him. 'You weren't out at all. You just looked at Hestia for like, one second and collapsed.'

Percy didn't pursue the matter. He detached himself from me and turned back to Hestia. He was about to explain our mission when a loud voice interrupted him.

'We know what you need.'

Hermes's voice filled the room seconds before he materialised, a young man in his mid-twenties, dressed as though for aerial combat (given my dad's line of research, I knew my pilot uniforms!) Instead of an aviator's helmet, he had a staff with two serpents tucked in the crook of his arm. His slanted, elvish eyes were exactly like Luke's, down to the bright blue ... well, they were exactly like Luke's had been. And they were glowering with annoyance.

Hestia, perhaps wisely, took her leave. Hermes scowled at us as he and Percy exchanged greetings. They'd met before; the time we'd gone after the Golden Fleece, Hermes had personally sent Percy to find Luke and changed his mind. Unfortunately, that hadn't exactly worked out. Luke had been too set on his path, too intent on getting back at his dad ...

Percy tried to ask for an audience with Zeus, but Hermes wouldn't have it. Percy glanced at the rest of us, forty demigods listening nervously to their conversation. He met my eyes, and I knew what he was thinking—we needed to talk to Hermes alone.

'You guys, why don't you do a sweep of the city?' He suggested the others do a defensive recon and meet us back at the throne room in half an hour.

I backed him up, cutting off the other counsellors' protests. 'That's a good idea. Connor and Travis, you two lead.'

It worked like a charm. The Stoll brothers brightened immediately, glancing at their father like they hoped he noticed. Connor puffed out his chest. Travis saluted. 'We're on it!'

As soon as the others filed out of the throne room, I addressed Hermes. 'My lord, Kronos is going to attack New York. You must suspect that. My mother must have foreseen it.'

Hermes slung his caduceus over his back, rubbing it up and down his skin. 'Your mother. Don't get
started on your mother, young lady.' He started grumbling about how she'd pestered Zeus into sending a messenger to us, wary that Typhon's attack could be a diversion, a trap for the gods. 'Naturally, he sent me to talk to you.'

'But it is a trap!' Pride in my mother mingled with annoyance at the king of the gods. What was the point of having a master strategist if you didn't listen to her advice? 'Is Zeus blind?'

Blind or not, Zeus clearly wasn't deaf. His answering roll of thunder crackled threateningly overhead. I didn't need Hermes' warning to recognise that I was treading a fine line with my impertinence.

I tried to state our case, citing the blue strobe lights, but Hermes brushed me off. The skies were protected, he asserted. The wind gods would knock out any unauthorised intruders into Olympus's restricted air space. The only way in was via the elevators—the way we'd come.

Given how we'd entered completely unimpeded, I wasn't sure this was the sure-fire defence Hermes made it out to be.

'Typhon is our greatest enemy,' Hermes avowed. Kronos had obviously succeeded in shifting their attention to this new threat. The gods were so focused on their past history with the giant father of all monster that their sights were narrowed on halting his progress across the country.

Not that they were having much success. Hermes tried to sound upbeat about the fight, but it seemed to me that they were just losing more ground each day. Typhon was already past Kentucky, more than halfway to New York. And Hermes himself admitted that they were missing a full battalion to combat the giant. Poseidon was tied up in battle under the ocean, and Hades and Demeter were sitting out the fight.

His secret weapon, Kronos had called Typhon. But it wasn't his only one. My mother had been certain of that.

*Remember all I have said,* she'd warned me. Except she'd told me so much. If only she'd left me a hint about which was most relevant *now!*

'Please, Hermes, you said my mother wanted to come. Did she give you any messages for us?'

Hermes grumbled under his breath for a few seconds. The snakes on his caduceus kept up a bizarre running commentary until he shut them up.

At last, he reported a warning from my mother: we were on our own. The gods were not coming to our aid.

We had to hold Manhattan ourselves.

My heart sank. 'Anything else?'

'She said you should try plan twenty-three. She said you would know what that meant.'

So it had come to that. I swallowed hard. 'Go on.'

But she had left no further instructions for me. Her last commands were for Percy—a cryptic message about remembering the rivers, and a more direct one: stay away from her daughter.

Percy glanced quickly at me and then at his feet, the tips of his ears glowing as brightly as Hestia's hearth. I felt my own face flame up, too. Every word of my last conversation with my mother
returned clearly now, including—especially—her warning about Percy's fatal flaw, and her admonition to harness mine.

I tucked my hair behind my ears and looked at Hermes. He was scratching agitatedly at his back with the caduceus. His snakes writhed in discomfort.

*Hermes is quite distraught. His son was his pride and joy.*

The source of his irritation made sense now. I thought of how he'd previously tried to send Percy to talk sense into Luke.

*He let his love for the boy blind him,* my mother had said.

'Thank you, Hermes,' I said softly. 'And I—I wanted to say ...' I forced my voice to remain steady, 'I'm sorry about Luke.'

Hermes went still, as if he'd become one of the many statues lining the mountain. His voice turned hard and cold, reminding me of the way Kronos took over Luke's body. All that was missing was the golden eyes. 'You should've left that subject alone.'

'S-sorry?' I stammered.

His explosion of rage was like lightning tearing across a clear summer's sky. 'Sorry doesn't cut it!' he bellowed. 'You should've saved him when you had the chance!'

His knuckles turned white around his caduceus. It had shifted into a two-pronged cattle prod, crackling with electricity. His accusation hit me with more force than any high-voltage instrument: 'You're the only one who could have.'

*We could run away ... Will you come with me?*

The memory stole my breath away. Hermes knew about Luke's visit. He knew I'd turned him down, sent him away, straight back into Kronos's arms. And—he blamed me.

I guess he had every right to.

Blood roared in my ears. I was dimly aware of Percy pushing me behind him, challenging Hermes, defending me—but he didn't know that I didn't deserve to be defended.

It wasn't until Hermes raised his cattle prod and pointed it straight at Percy, whose arms were outstretched in front of me, that I shook myself out of my stupor.

'No—' I began, but Hermes stopped just short of smiting Percy. He towered over us, as tall as the giant thrones.

'Percy Jackson, because you have taken on the curse of Achilles, I must spare you.'

The curse of Achilles again. But ... why did it seem to be protecting Percy? That went against the very nature of curses.

'You are in the hands of the Fates now,' Hermes growled. 'But you will never speak to me like that again. You have no idea how much I have sacrificed, how much—'

To my shock, Hermes put his face in his hands and returned to normal size. His rage was gone as quickly as it had come, leaving a broken shell. Somehow, this cut me even deeper than his angry accusations.
'My son, my greatest pride ... my poor May ...'

Percy's hand drifted forward as though he meant to clap Hermes on the shoulder. 'Look, Lord Hermes—I'm sorry, but ...' He dropped his hand, probably re-thinking the wisdom of laying hands on a god without permission. 'I need to know. What happened to May? She said something about Luke's fate and her eyes—'

Hermes rounded on him, eyes burning with torment. They could have been Luke's eyes, desperate and pleading as he stood on my doorstep, begging me to run away with him.

'I will leave you now. I have a war to fight,' he said stiffly.

Percy's hand touched my face and turned me carefully away from Hermes's glowing form. Through my tears, I couldn't pinpoint the moment Luke's dad vanished. Percy put his arms around me, but for once, I could take no comfort in his embrace.

*That's it, isn't it? You're choosing him.* The afterimage of Hermes's face swam into the memory of Luke's, accusing me of picking Percy over him. And it was true, wasn't it? Even though I knew I couldn't have done anything different, that didn't erase the guilt.

I pushed Percy away and curled my arms around my knees, sobbing.

'Annabeth, it's not your fault.' Percy squatted in front of me. He was trying to comfort me, to assure me that Hermes was just lashing out. He patted my knee gently. 'You didn't do anything to deserve that.'

I sniffled and swiped at my eyes. Hestia's flickering hearth came back into focus. Family is important, she'd told me before. *It anchors us to the world.*

Luke was my family. And I'd failed him. Everything I'd tried to do to make up for it was too little too late.

Percy seemed spooked by my lack of response. 'Um, you didn't, right?'

I couldn't answer him. I hadn't told anyone about Luke's visit, not even Chiron. And Percy ... he'd always been so antagonistic about Luke, so sure that Luke was responsible for his own fate. Would he really understand how I felt?

I plucked idly at the beads of my necklace. Percy seemed a lot more open now to the idea that Luke might be in real trouble, might have been before any of us had even met him. He'd just challenged Hermes on Luke's behalf ...

Something penetrated the haze of my misery. 'Percy, what did you mean about Luke's mother?' The conclusion that came to me was so incredible, I almost couldn't ask. 'Did you meet her?'

He drew back, clearly uncomfortable with the subject. 'Nico and I visited her. She was a little ... different.' His brow furrowed. 'I mean, she wasn't—all there, you know?'

I did know. I remembered her empty chatter, the way her sentences didn't string together logically. And her eyes, glowing green ...

'Half the time she thought we were Luke. Nico kept pushing, though. He insisted we had to know if Luke had come home.'

I thought this extremely unlikely. The one time Luke had ever been home since he'd run away ...
well, I remembered how alarming his behaviour had been afterwards. Thalia had told me not to ask about it.

'She told us he'd been back to ask for her blessing to—' His voice faltered. He ran his hand through his hair. 'Um, well, the thing is, after that her eyes went green. You know, like the Oracle, when she was still working and all. She said all this stuff about Luke's fate, and protecting him. She called on Hermes for help, but ...' He spread his arms helplessly.

None of this made sense. Why had Luke gone home? Why had Percy gone to see Ms Castellan? And Hermes—he'd sounded so broken up about her and Luke, like something had happened recently. Yet Chiron had said her disastrous tangle with the Oracle had happened years ago, before I was even born.

Another thing Hermes had said nagged at me. Hestia had mentioned it, too. The curse of Achilles ... a mother's blessing ... there was something else, too, something I'd seen in my dreams ...

The goddess Styx protects me. The gods themselves cannot touch me.

* I am invincible—an invincibility my mother sought for me, but won through pain and agony.

The pieces clicked.

'Did you—did you bathe in the River Styx?'

He looked down. 'Don't change the subject.'

'Percy!' I punched his arm. It didn't feel any different, not like he'd suddenly grown steel skin or anything, but then I had no idea how something like this worked. As far as I knew, Achilles was the only hero who had ever survived it. 'Did you or not?'

He shifted his weight from one leg to another, looking less invincible commander and more chagrinned high-schooler. 'Um, maybe a little?'

I wanted to smack him. How did one bathe in the Styx a little?

He saw my expression and continued in a hurry, 'Nico—he had the idea for a long time. I kept putting it off because—well, it's the Styx, right? Gotta be a real health hazard or something. But with the prophecy and all ...'

Icy fingers formed a straightjacket around my chest. So he had run off to do something utterly foolish after hearing the prophecy. Or maybe after I'd accused him of cowardice.

'Nico took me down to the Underworld—did you know there's an entrance in Central Park? After all that fuss getting to L.A. three years ago ... er, anyway, it got kind of, um, complicated. Uh, it's kind of a long story. But we went to the river and I—well, I jumped in.'

He said this with all the nonchalance of a pro diver recounting his last meet. *Oh, I just leapt into the most dangerous river in all of Greek mythology, the one that burns away people's souls, but you know, all in a day's work.* And then he described the exact scene I'd seen in my dream, where he'd charged an army of the dead and whittled them down just like Achilles had the Trojans.

Because he was like Achilles now. Invulnerable.
Except it could have killed him. And there must be a reason why they called it the curse of Achilles. *Divinity and mortality were never meant to mix.* Had he even thought about the long-term consequences?

'I had no choice,' Percy protested. 'It's the only way I can stand up to Luke.'

'You mean ...' I had momentarily forgotten about Luke. But now the other shoe came crashing down. Luke had gone home. He'd gotten his mother's blessing.

'Di immortales, of course!' *That* was how he'd done it. How he'd hosted Kronos in his body without burning to ashes. 'Oh no, Luke. What were you thinking!'

I stared at the hearth fire, aghast. *He'll use me, Annabeth.* This couldn't be happening. *Both* of them had taken on the curse of Achilles.

Percy muttered something under his breath.

'What?' My mind was still racing through the awful implications of what Percy had done; what Luke had done.

'Forget it.' Percy sounded annoyed. What he had to be annoyed about, I couldn't imagine. *He* was the one who'd made a dumb, reckless decision. 'The point is, he didn't die in the Styx. Neither did I.' His jaw tightened, making him look like the serious, hardened war commander again. 'Now I have to face him. We have to defend Olympus.'

A thousand questions still flooded my head. What did the curse of Achilles entail? What did this mean for Percy—and for Luke? If they were both invulnerable, how would that work when they met? Achilles had fallen ultimately to an arrow through the heel. Invulnerability wasn't immortality.

But I was sure Percy didn't have the answers to my questions. I doubted any of these details had even occurred to him. This was his pattern, after all—deal with things as they come. And he was right that we had more urgent issues to deal with. Like the impending attack on Manhattan.

'My mom mentioned—'

'Plan twenty-three,' Percy finished, raising his eyebrows questioningly.

I brought out Daedalus's laptop and found the right folder. I knew the outline of the plan, of course—it involved activating an army of automatons that Daedalus had strategically erected throughout the city over the years. But the details ...

Daedalus's map of the city marked the location of each statue with little blue dots. Fortunately, we wouldn't have to activate each statue individually, but there were at least two section commanders. Daedalus had divided the city into north and south. The statue activation sequence worked like a stack of dominoes, weaving back and forth in a zig-zag pattern within each section. The code was simple, but finding the right statue to set off the chain of command would have been impossible without Daedalus's notes. Probably so no one would accidentally activate plan twenty-three. Because once it started ... there was no stopping it.

'We have a lot of work to do,' I said grimly. Good thing I'd shared the plan with Malcolm earlier. It would take both of us to get it running.

Percy raised his eyebrows. 'One of Daedalus's inventions?'

That was one way to put it. 'A lot of inventions ... dangerous ones.' I rubbed my forehead. My
mother would never have advised this plan if the situation wasn't dire. But she'd said something else, too ... 'What about her message to you? "Remember the rivers"—what does that mean?'

'I don't know.' Percy mirrored my actions, pressing his thumbs into the crease in his own forehead. 'I —'

'Percy! Annabeth!'

Travis and Connor burst into the throne room, panting like they'd sprinted all the way from the sky bridge. Connor put a hand to his side and wheezed out, 'You need to see this, *now.*'
Our friends had found a lookout point in a hanging garden just off the palace courtyard. A golden railing ran along the edge, on which someone—probably Hephaestus—had mounted half a dozen bronze coin-slot binoculars. A faded sign next to one of them cried PAY-PER-VIEW: REAL MORTALS, REAL DRAMA! One drachma only. Our campers were clustered six to a binocular, but I had a feeling it wasn't the gods' reality channel they were glued to.

Connor dragged us over to Michael, who had control of one of the binos. We were too high up to spot individual pedestrians or cars without using them, but the overview of Manhattan was clear enough: a sea of skyscrapers shining in the late afternoon sun.

A tinny noise filled my head. At first, I couldn't figure out where it was coming from. Then I realised it wasn't a noise at all, but the hollowed out feeling that comes from expecting a sound that doesn't exist. Just pure, ringing silence.

'I don't ... hear anything,' I whispered.

A look of outrage crossed Percy's face. 'What did they do? What did they do to my city?'

Michael yielded the binoculars to him. As he peered through them, the muscle twitching in his jaw slackened. His mouth fell open.

'Are they dead?' Silena looked up from her own pair of binos, her eyes wide and shocked.

'Dead?' I pushed forward to look. The binoculars zoomed in on Fifth Avenue. Pedestrians lay all over the roads and sidewalks, as if they'd simply decided to lie down for a nap.

'Not dead.' Percy stepped away from his binoculars. His voice was a tightly strung bow. 'Morpheus has put the entire island of Manhattan to sleep.'

'Then ...' Like the binos zooming in on Fifth Avenue, my mind magnified the line of the Great Prophecy that I had never paid much attention to, the one that had always made the least sense: And see the world in endless sleep.

Percy nodded. 'The invasion has started.'

There was nowhere to go but back downstairs. Argus was waiting with Mrs O'Leary, but Chiron had left. I hoped he had indeed gone for back-up, though I didn't have a great feeling about it. The passed-out mortals on the sidewalk were a particularly ominous signal.

Argus's eyes roved the skies as Percy summed up our trip to Olympus. The blue strobe lights were gone, but I got the impression that they had simply been a precursor to the attack. The main event,
Grover had said. *Morpheus is on the loose in Manhattan.*

We retrieved our weapons before Argus drove back to camp (Percy assured him we'd defend Manhattan, though I was sure he wasn't as confident about it as he sounded). We emptied the vans of all the supplies I'd picked out ... including Beckendorf's video shield. I hadn't tried using it since Silena and I had failed to find him the night he died (I guess now we knew why it hadn't worked). Now, facing an attack that could come from any direction, it was prudent to try activating it again.

I took the shield from Argus and set it on the ground so we could all see its surface. It worked unexpectedly fast. At my touch, the shield activated and began its default scan of Manhattan.

Percy's jaw dropped. 'Whoa—a video shield.'

I'd forgotten he'd never had a chance to see it in action. 'One of Daedalus's ideas. I had Beckendorf make this before—' My voice faltered. Silena's face had gone rigid, like she was determined not to cry. I explained to Percy how the shield worked, then I tried to direct it as Beckendorf had, willing the images to pull in tighter. It worked perfectly, like it was now aligned to my mind.

Maybe it knew that its previous owner had passed on. Maybe Beckendorf had even programmed it for this possibility.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and focused.

The video footage circled the zoo in Central Park and ran down the main avenue at my merest thought. It reversed up the street when Connor asked me to back up (figures, he was only looking for a prime looting opportunity). I moved on through the rest of the city. There was nothing but sleeping pedestrians and stalled cars. All the world had simply paused. All except us.

I kept the video scrolling around the city limits, checking for approaching threats. We needed to strategise, maybe find a central headquarters. And I had to activate plan twenty-three. But before I could suggest this, the scene on the shield changed. There was a burst of movement, made sharper against the rest of the motionless city.

'Percy—you'd better see this.' I tipped the shield towards him, showing the dozen speedboats charging down the northeast coast. They were heading towards the city from the Sound, each filled with armed warriors united under Kronos's black and purple flag. The scythe on the banner seemed to cut through the air as it fluttered in the breeze.

'Scan the perimeter of the island, quick,' Percy said sharply.

Boatloads of Titan forces were closing in on Manhattan. We might have sunk the *Princess Andromeda*, but we obviously hadn't halted their approach by sea. They'd even commandeered a Staten Island ferry. It chugged past Ellis Island, with monsters crammed into every square inch of the vessel, ready to invade.

And that wasn't all. To the west of the city, an army of giants, Cyclopes, and I guess any monster too large to squeeze onto boats were marching in formation into the Lincoln Tunnel. A massive Sherman tank barrelled across the interstate, shoving cars aside.

Percy frowned at the image. 'What's happening with the mortals outside Manhattan? Is the whole state asleep?'

I zoomed out. It was strange. Manhattan had gone all Twilight Zone, but if you pushed further out, there was some movement. It just became slower the closer it got to the city. In Newark Airport, a plane was literally creeping at a snail's pace over the runway. I seriously hoped it wouldn't try taking
off at that speed.

'Kronos—he's slowing time,' Percy said.

Katie Gardner squinted at the shield. 'Hecate might be helping.' She pointed out the cars on the interstates, which all seemed to be missing the exits. Though with how slow they were going, it was hard to tell.

Kronos, Hecate, or Morpheus—I guess it didn't matter which of them was responsible. We were encased in impenetrable layers of magic, isolated from the world beyond.

'We shouldn't expect any help coming in,' I said with a sinking heart. That's what my mother had meant.

And she still expected us to stop the Titans. By ourselves.

I met Percy's eyes.

'We're going to hold Manhattan,' he said, even as Silena pointed out the infeasibility of this task. 'We are going to hold it. We have to.'

I forced down my doubts and stepped up next to him. 'He's right.' I ran over our options. If Hermes was right, we were safe from an air assault. That left land and sea—which was still plenty to worry about. Fortunately, Manhattan was an island. That made it easier to secure. 'We have to cut off the entrances.'

Michael pointed to the monster-filled Staten Island ferry. 'They have boats.'

A funny look came over Percy's face. 'I'll take care of the boats.'

'How?' Michael demanded.

'Just leave it to me.' Percy glanced at the shield, then at me. Somehow I knew what he needed. I zoomed out to a bird's-eye view of the island and all its major entrances. Percy took one look at it, then started giving orders, assigning cabins to guard specific bridges and tunnels: Apollo to the Williamsburg Bridge, Demeter to the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel, Hermes to the Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges.

His decisiveness gave me a moment's consternation. Surely I should be the one taking point on strategy. But I couldn't find fault with Percy's decisions. Although I wasn't so sure Kronos would go for a direct attack—it would be just like the Crooked One to pull a punch when we least expected it—Percy's plan was logical. And this was his city. He knew its details better than I did: the size of the tunnels, the width of the bridges, the defensive territories to cover. He didn't even need to consult the shield map to pick them out. Even if I'd taken charge, I would still have to defer to his assessment.

'Silena, take the Aphrodite crew to the Queens Midtown Tunnel.'

Drew Tanaka's eyes brightened. 'Oh, my gods, Fifth Avenue is so on our way!' She grinned at the idea of accessorising en route, though she asserted that it was just because designer perfume was a foolproof monster weapon.

'No delays,' Percy admonished. He thought for a second, then amended his statement to give the green light for Drew's perfume idea.

My nostrils flared as all six of the Aphrodite girls—minus Silena—planted kisses on Percy's cheek.
Mitchell, the sole brother among them, shrugged and gave me a small smile.

Percy shook them off, for once not even blushing at the attention. He closed his eyes and pinched his forehead. 'The Holland Tunnel. Jake—take Hephaestus cabin there. Use Greek fire, set traps, whatever you've got.'

Hephaestus cabin was only a few members strong, but their roar was hearty. With their engineering prowess, I had no doubt the monsters attempting to cross the Holland Tunnel were in for some nasty shocks.

Percy moved on to the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge, and there he made his first tactical mistake. 'Clarisse —'

'We'll take that,' I said quickly. It was the last bridge before the Upper East Side, the border of our defensive perimeter. That had to be why Percy wanted Ares there. If they'd been here, they'd have had the greatest strength and numbers. 'Malcolm—'

My second-in-command stepped up without hesitation. I told him to lead our cabin to hold the bridge. He'd have to pass the north side activation statue to get there. Grateful again that I'd shared plan twenty-three with him earlier, I told him to set it off along the way. I'd do the south side sequence with Percy. I'd make him come with me—I wasn't going to let him hare off to take a defensive front on his own, as I suspected he would if left to his own devices.

I told Malcolm we'd meet him later. 'Or we'll go wherever we're needed.'

'No detours, you two.' Drew smirked I resisted the urge to punch her. Or her three siblings giggling behind her.

Percy looked like he was trying not to smile. Whether that was because he found the idea ludicrous or inviting, I couldn't tell. 'Right. Keep in touch with cell phones,' he said.

Silena raised her hand. 'We don't have cell phones.'

Percy bent over the nearest sleeping mortal and plucked a phone from her pocket. He passed it to Silena and explained the plan: use a random phone, call me when needed, and drop it after. It was a good idea, though I guess it wouldn't matter if monsters traced the phone signals. We had an invasion on our hands. They already knew where we were.

'Hold it, Percy.' Jake Mason squinted at the map on the shield. 'You forgot the Lincoln Tunnel.'

Percy slapped his forehead. I suspected he'd meant to station my cabin there, before Clarisse's absence had taken the wind out of his strategic sails.

'How about you leave that to us?'

My head snapped up. I'd know that voice anywhere: strong and confident with an undercurrent of energy thrumming through it like the static of an electric storm.

Sure enough, Thalia was striding across Fifth Avenue, her band of Hunters right behind her. I recognised many of the usual suspects—Izzy, with a pack of sleek white wolves loping along at her feet; Phoebe, with her medical bag slung over her shoulder; Hunter (yes, that was her actual name, ironic—or apt—as it sounds), with a stern falcon perched on one arm. I didn't see my giant wolf friend Remy, but I guess he'd have a hard time making his way through the standstill traffic.

There were about thirty girls, at least ten more than they'd had when I'd travelled with them last. I
knew Thalia had been recruiting, but this was incredible. They would almost double our numbers.

It wasn't just the reinforcements that made my heart swell with relief. Thalia hadn't been caught by Kronos's dastardly traps after all. Though from the sound of it, she had some pretty harrowing stories to tell.

'After this is over, you, Annabeth, and me: cheeseburgers and fries at that hotel of West Fifty-sixth,' she promised Percy.

She sounded so confident that there would be an after. Sure, she was immortal and all, but her divinity didn't apply to combat. In joining the battle, the Hunters faced as much danger as the rest of us. Still, thinking about lunch with her and Percy at Le Parker Meridien helped me believe that we'd make it out of this war.

'Thank the gods,' I said, watching Thalia and her Hunters move north. But then, as if to remind me we had another pressing issue, my shield zoomed in on the Staten Island ferry, still heading doggedly towards the southern tip of Manhattan. 'If we don't blockade the rivers from those boats, guarding the bridges and tunnels will be pointless.'

'You're right.' But Percy didn't sound too concerned. What had he said earlier? Leave the rivers to him?

Remember the rivers.

Oh. Of course.

Percy turned to our assembled forces. They stood grouped by cabin, carrying their banners. All joking had died down, as though the seriousness of what we faced had finally sunken in. A vein throbbed on Malcolm's forehead. The colour was high on Silena's cheeks.

'You're the greatest heroes of this millennium.' Percy's voice rang with conviction as he entreated us to have courage. His words wound through us like an invigorating breeze.

When had he become this charismatic? I mean, he'd always been compelling when he stood up to bullies and stuff, and I guess this was the same thing, only on an Olympian scale. (I mentally winced at my own unfortunate pun.) Still, something about his confidence unnerved me. It was like someone had sharpened Percy's best qualities into frightening intensity.

Our friends marched off, their battle cries and the clang of their armour the only thing breaking the silence of the sleeping city.

Percy turned to me. 'Let's go.'

I strapped on my breastplate quickly. Percy didn't even bother with armour. He searched the sea of stationary cars and found a red scooter parked up against a brick wall, its rider slumped sideways in the seat. We dragged the guy off and laid him carefully on the sidewalk.

I didn't bother to ask if Percy even knew how to ride. I got on behind him and clung to his waist as he wove between the bumpers. Under different circumstances, it might have been awkward, being pressed up so close to him. As it was, I couldn't quell the little flutter in my chest as we wound through midtown New York. But the city's funereal atmosphere killed any romantic vibes. We had to stop practically every block to rescue pedestrians who'd passed out in dangerous or compromising positions. Putting out fires—literally—and rescuing wayward baby carriages weren't exactly features of a date.
I made Percy pull over when we reached Madison Square Park, where Daedalus had planted the leader of his south side statue brigade. I found the bronze statue easily, perched on an iron bench with a pile of metal books and papers strewn artistically around his feet. At the base of his red pedestal, etched so faintly into the marble that I would never had spotted it if I hadn't known to look, was Daedalus's symbol, the Greek letter Delta.

Percy studied the statue's inscription plaque. 'Why do we care about William H. Steward?'

'Seward.' I couldn't read the inscription any better, but I already knew what it said, thanks to Daedalus's notes. The ex-governor had been a son of Hebe. But it was the statue I was concerned about, not the man. It and its counterpart—the statue of the famous midwife Martha Ballard that I'd sent Malcolm to activate—were the key to setting off plan twenty-three.

Percy watched me climb up to get a closer look at Seward's feet. 'Don't tell me he's an automaton.'

I could tell from his wary tone that he understood the dangers of this plan. I explained how it worked—how Daedalus had carefully positioned all the statues in New York (and many other cities, for that matter) as a back-up army should he need them ... whether that was to attack or defend the city. Theoretically, they should follow the will of whoever activated them, but ... well, we'd had a memorable run-in with a rogue bronze dragon last month. Automatons didn't always work as intended.

'You're seriously thinking about activating it?' Percy asked.

'I have Daedalus's notes.' I raised myself higher. Percy's hand supported my back, steadying me as I leant closer to the statue. 'I think I can ... ah.' The command key was right where Daedalus had indicated, on the tip of Governor Seward's bronze boots: another Delta, but this one had the imprint of an owl inside the lines. 'Here we go.'

I made a circle around the owl and traced the three points of the triangle before pressing it hard in the centre. The statue jerked to life, throwing me backwards. I would have fallen on my butt if Percy hadn't caught me. Governor Seward sprung up and picked up a quill and paper.

'What's he going to do, take a memo?' Percy said.

I jabbed him in the ribs. 'Hello,' I said to the statue.

'Bill.'

'Bill?' I saw Percy's grin. 'Oh, shut up.'

The statue looked from me to him, unblinking. I guess Daedalus hadn't bothered to outfit him with eyelids.

'Ahem.' I drew Bill—William—argh, Governor Seward's attention back to me and gave Daedalus's command sequence. As soon as I finished, the statue leapt from the pedestal and marched off, leaving dents in the sidewalk where his shoes hit the concrete. 'He's probably going to wake up Confucius.'

Percy stared at Seward's retreating back. 'What?'

'Another statue—on Division.' I explained the activation chain.

'Then what?' Percy asked.
I shrugged. 'Hopefully they defend Manhattan.'

Percy scratched his head. 'Do they know we're not the enemy?'

'I think so.' It was too late if they didn't. Seward was on the way, and Malcolm was off activating Martha Bullard—a daughter of Eileithyia, if I recalled correctly. Two minor demigod statues holding the key to Daedalus's deadly defence sequence. Maybe Daedalus had thought that would make it harder to guess that they were his strategic lynchpins. Most enemies would have gone for the major statues, like Prometheus at Rockefeller Center, or Hermes at Grand Central Station. Not children of the goddesses of youth and childbirth.

In the distance, a beacon of light flared against the night sky, with the unmistakable green tinge of Greek fire. Someone had sent explosives shooting over East River. It was a sharp reminder that we needed to hurry.

Percy picked the southernmost point on Manhattan to tackle the rivers. It made sense, since this was where the East and Hudson met in one murky, polluted brown churn. I expected him to do something like his exploding toilets trick. It wasn't until he told me, 'Wait here,' that I realised he actually meant to go into the Bay.

'Percy, you shouldn't go alone.'

He raised his eyebrows. 'Well, unless you can breathe underwater ...'

I hated when he was right. 'You are so annoying sometimes.'

He gave me a cheeky grin. 'Like when I'm right? Trust me, I'll be fine. I've got the curse of Achilles. I'm all invincible and stuff.'

Invincible. Achilles must have thought he was, too ... until he wasn't. It occurred to me that maybe Percy had a weak spot, too. I wondered morbidly what it was. Though if he did have one, it probably wasn't a good idea to try and guess.

'Just be careful,' I said. 'I don't want anything to happen to you.'

The words just slipped from my mouth. Percy's grin was saucier than ever. I pushed my hair behind my ear. 'I mean, because we need you for the battle,' I clarified quickly.

'Back in a flash,' he promised.

All this newfound confidence ... it was like an extra-concentrated dose of his occasional cockiness—sharpened to the point of overconfidence. It made my gut twist uneasily as I watched him dive off the sea wall.

No sooner had Percy disappeared into the murky water did my phone start to ring.

The first to call was Malcolm, informing me that he'd activated Martha Ballard, and reached the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge. They'd spotted a fleet of speedboats racing in from the north, and weren't sure how to engage.

'We'll try with the long-range javelins, but if we miss—' He broke off suddenly and gasped.

'What?'

'The rivers just—never mind.' His voice was full of awe. 'The monsters just took a dive. We're good.'
Whatever Percy was up to down there, I guess it was working.

I hung up, but another call came through almost immediately.

'Annabeth?' Michael was on the other end, and he sounded close to panicking. 'We got a problem.'

Chapter End Notes

Martha Ballard is an American midwife who's apparently quite famous among historical nurses, which fits well with the 'you'd never guess what famous people are demigods' theme. I picked Eileithyia, goddess of childbirth, as her minor goddess mother to fit with Hebe: daughters of Hera.
I Literally Give Percy a Hand

Chapter Summary

Annabeth takes a bad hit.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

I could tell Michael was trying to stay calm, but he was having a hard time keeping his voice steady. The Apollo cabin was on the Williamsburg Bridge, where we'd seen the flare of Greek fire light up the sky. His report came in a rush: hundreds of monsters gathering on the Brooklyn shore, closing in on the bridge. And at the head of the invading army ...

He gulped. In the background, over the zip of arrows and snarling war cries, I heard the massive bellow of a ferocious beast.

'It's the Minotaur.'

I shivered. The Minotaur might have been half-man, but whatever humanity he'd once had, he'd lost it long ago. In ancient times, he had been the King of Crete's prized executioner, famed for tearing Athenian tributes to pieces in the Labyrinth. He'd reformed three years ago to chase Percy to camp, and gotten stabbed to Tartarus dust for his efforts. Now it looked like he was back for revenge.

Percy's head popped out of the water while I was trying to help Michael think of strategic traps that would help seven scared archers fend off a massive monster army led by one of the deadliest beasts in Greek mythology. The waters swirled around him, making a rapid current that swept the river southwards.

'We're coming,' I promised Michael. 'Just hang in there.'

Percy hoisted himself up with next to no effort. 'It worked. The rivers are safe.'

'Good.' At least it was one less thing to worry about. 'Because we've got other problems.'

I told him what Michael had said. Percy grimaced and wasted no time finding us a lift to the Lower East Side. With a sharp whistle, he summoned two camp pegasi. I had no idea how they managed to arrive so quickly, but soon we were aboard Blackjack and Pork Pie, racing above FDR Drive.

The entire Williamsburg Bridge was lit up like Times Square at Christmas, but these were no twinkle lights draped over the suspension cables. Fiery arrows blazed across the bridge, illuminating the spears flying in the opposite direction. Judging from the wreckage in the no-man's land between the East Village and Williamsburg, our archers had launched their explosive arrows.

Apollo cabin was in retreat. They'd gone in close to booby-trap the centre of the bridge and were now backing out of the blast zones. I spotted Michael and his sister Auriga darting between cars, ducking out every few paces to shoot like guerrilla snipers. Will Solace and Cynthia Lee were pulling mortals aside so that they could repurpose their vehicles as car bombs, but it was going too slow. The monsters marched in thick and fast. Even as our traps and arrows took out a handful, more stepped up to close the gaps in their phalanx formation.
Smack in the centre, pressing forward like an unstoppable tank, was the Minotaur.

It was hard to believe that once upon a time, the monster had had human traits. I knew that he'd been a brother and friend to his mortal half-sister, Ariadne, who was possibly the only person who'd grieved when Theseus slew him. But even she would have to admit that the innocent child he might once have been had warped into something hideous after years of eating people in the Labyrinth. And it was this monstrous archetype that we faced now. From his massive bull head down to his trunk-like legs, he was pure, rippling muscle. His face contorted like an ugly bulldog sniffing out his prey.

Us.

He looked up and honed in on Percy. The next moment, he single-handedly scooped up a limo and flung it at us with alarming velocity.

I urged Pork Pie into a side roll. For a second, it was like swooping in my dad's Sopwith Camel. Except now I wasn't safely strapped into a cockpit.

Percy shouted for us to land behind the defensive line. We were losing ground so fast, though, it wouldn't be long before that line was completely smashed through. We needed to grab everyone and regroup. I knew a hopeless tactical situation when I saw one. If only we'd deployed the Hunters here instead. I should have ...

I shook my head. There was no time for second-guessing. We'd sent the Hunters to Lincoln Tunnel because we'd seen the forces arrayed there. We couldn't have anticipated a rear guard to muster so quickly on this side of the island. I needed to focus on salvaging the situation. If we could get some back-up here quickly ...

'You still have your flying chariot?' I asked Michael.

'Nah, left it at camp,' Michael said. 'I told Clarisse she could have it. Whatever, you know? Not worth fighting for.'

Percy looked like he could have cheerfully strangled Clarisse if she'd been within reach. Then again, if she had, we might not be in this predicament. 'Least you tried.'

'Yeah well, I called her some names when she said she still wouldn't fight,' Michael said. (Why was I not surprised?)

A new wave of incoming dracaenae ploughed through the nearby traffic, cutting off our conversation. Michael loosed an arrow. It sailed through the air with a high-pitched whistle and landed with a supersonic boom in the monsters' midst. Several dracaenae exploded, guts flying from their orifices. Others fled from the ear-splitting bass. It left a hollow ringing in that deafened me for nearly a minute.

Michael checked his empty quiver with a grimace. 'We have to fall back. I've got Kayla and Austin setting traps further down the bridge.'

Percy kept his eyes fixed on the Minotaur. 'No. Bring your campers forward to this position and wait for my signal. We're going to drive the enemy back to Brooklyn.'

Michael gave a hollow laugh. 'How do you plan to do that?'

In response, Percy activated Riptide. My stomach swooped. I knew what he intended to do.
'Percy, let me come with you.'

'Too dangerous.'

Was he insane? The enemy was over two hundred strong. How could he possibly hope to hold them with no one watching his back? He wasn't even wearing armour—just the tattered t-shirt and jeans he'd shown up in at the Empire State Building.

'Besides,' he added, 'I need you to help Michael co-ordinate the defensive line. I'll distract the enemy.'

It was our usual strategy, escalated to ridiculous proportions. Percy would draw the monsters' attention in his stupid, heroic way, while I snuck round to take them out. He locked eyes with me. 'If anybody can do all that, you can.'

Michael snorted and muttered something I didn't register, because Percy was staring at me with an intensity that I hadn't seen since ... well, since last year, in the burning heart of a volcano.

The déjà-vu threatened to crack me in half. I hadn't wanted to leave him then, and I didn't want to leave him now. But always, always, we had no choice.

'All right,' I said, willing my voice not to shake. 'Get moving.'

He wet his lips. 'Don't I get a kiss for luck? It's kind of a tradition, right?'

The world shrank around us. It was the first time he'd ever mentioned our kiss in Mount St Helens. A whole year wondering if he even remembered it, and he chose to bring it up now?

My fingers clenched around the hilt of my dagger, as if that might squeeze out the awful twist in my stomach when I remembered what had happened after that kiss. The explosion, the pain, the heartbreak. Tradition, ha. If anything, I wanted to break this particular tradition.

If he really wanted a kiss, he could come back to me and get it. The idea that kissing me could make him fight harder to stay alive brought a giddy rush to my head. Not exactly the most helpful sensation right now.

'Come back alive, Seaweed Brain,' I said. 'Then we'll see.'

Percy shouldn't have stood a chance. But I had forgotten about the invincibility. Michael and I watched it all as we ordered the remaining Apollo campers into position, forming an interlocking line of archers on the overhanging steel cables.

Percy sidestepped the *dracaenae* and hellhounds as easily as if he were playing tag. They fell at his feet, Riptide slashing through their bodies like silly putty. He strode right up to the Minotaur, the way the ancient Greeks used to send in a champion for single combat to avoid a bloodbath. Even though the Minotaur was way out of his weight class, Percy didn't even flinch. Certainly he couldn't have been this calm the first time he'd faced the beast. Even though I was too far away to see clearly, I could sense the wave of anger that shuddered through him right before he engaged the bull-man.

It was a quick fight. Percy sliced and diced first the monster's weapons, then his horns (which I guess counted as weapons, too). When the Minotaur charged him, bellowing in rage, he simply raised the broken axe blade he'd just severed and let the monster run into it. The Minotaur toppled over the side of the bridge in a shower of disintegrating ash. All in a day's work.

The Minotaur's minions stared at Percy. There were about two hundred of them and one of him, but
they actually looked scared. Percy didn't give them a chance to consider the odds. He charged.

Just as he'd done in Hades's realm, Percy spun through the monster army like a whirlwind. He was so quick, all we could see of him was the flash of bronze as Riptide whittled down the monsters. We ran in, the Apollo kids with their arrows and me with my knife, but there wasn't much for us to do. Percy was doing a stellar job cutting down the army all on his own.

As the enemy thinned, I got a clear view of him, wielding Riptide like he and the sword were one. It was beautiful to watch, but also a bit scary. I'd been watching him fight since we were twelve, so I knew how good he was with the sword, but this was an almost inhuman level of skill.

And then he laughed, a sound that sent chills down my spine. It was high and giddy and made me think of Kronos taking over Luke's body, of Achilles revelling in the bloodlust of the Trojan War.

*With every battle we fight, I fear what this war will do to you.*

'Percy! You've already routed them!' I cried. 'Pull back! We're overextended!'

This wasn't untrue from a military standpoint. The remaining monsters were fleeing to the Brooklyn shore, into the arms of their reinforcements. But my real fear wasn't so much about being unable to hold a tactical position as it was that Percy himself was overextended.

I didn't know if he would be able to stop. In his pursuit of the fleeing monsters, he seemed to be caught in the frenzy of battle. I ran after him, determined to drag him back by the ear if I had to. But he skittered to a stop just past the crest of the bridge, eyes fixed on the base. A skeletal black stallion had just planted its hooves onto the bridge. Even before the rider pulled off his helm, I recognised Luke, sitting tall on the demon horse under a fluttering scythe banner.

Or rather, Kronos. Even in the darkness, a quarter mile away, those golden eyes were laser beams carving a path straight into my heart.

Percy held out his arms to hold us back, though it wasn't necessary. We had all noticed who was leading the back-up forces. 'Now we pull back.'

The tables had turned. At the fall of Luke's arm, cavalry stampeded onto the bridge. Michael and the others let their arrows fly, but there were too many enemy warriors.

'Retreat!' Percy yelled. 'I'll hold them!'

Apollo cabin ran for it, but I wasn't leaving Percy this time. He didn't argue. Maybe he just didn't have time to. The army was upon us, traversing the distance between us quicker than should have been possible. I guess Kronos was messing with time again.

We fell into our familiar fighting pattern, matching each other's movements shoulder to shoulder, back to back. Whatever awkwardness passed between us, this was something that would never change. Our bodies knew each other. I never had to worry about guarding my left when Percy was there; I seamlessly covered his right.

The enemy demigods descended on us, anonymised by their black helmets. At first, they tried to run us down with their horses, but Riptide made short work of the steeds. They disintegrated at the touch of Celestial bronze, sending the first wave of riders crashing to the ground. Luke's demigods changed tactics, surging forward on foot.

Our retreat was slow. Percy was reluctant to cut these warriors down as he had the monsters. I should have been frustrated by this, but after his near loss of control earlier, I was relieved to see the
resurgence of the boy who always valued mortal lives. He aimed his slashes low, wounding and kicking his enemies but not killing them.

As for me, I didn't have the luxury of kindness. Armed with only my knife, I fell back on Luke's old advice: find the chinks in your enemy's armour and exploit them.

Although I had both shield and armour to fend off attacks, Percy was still doing better than me at defending us. He barely let a single hit in. Occasionally I heard what sounded like the clang of a sword against his skin—but surely that couldn't be possible. He angled himself to take the front line of our attackers, but our progress was so slow, Luke's men started to inch behind us, trying to cut us off from our friends. Arrows zipped through the air, taking out some of the enemy. It wasn't enough.

One demigod wrenched my shield out of my hand. I retaliated with a ferocious slash. He jumped out of my way. When he looked up, I saw the eye patch running diagonally across his left eye.

Ethan Nakamura snarled at me. He held a long, crooked knife, the blade as black as his helm. I ducked his stab and spun around, ready to parry, but he had already lost interest in me. To my horror, my brief manoeuvre had left Percy's back momentarily unguarded.

Later, I would wonder how I'd known to act. Now, I didn't even have time to form the conscious thought, NO! Instinct carried me forward, an invisible current sweeping me towards Percy. As Nakamura raised his knife, I shoved myself between them.

It was too late to meet the attack with my dagger. I simply took the hit with my own body. Pain ripped through my arm as Nakamura's blade sliced through the unguarded flesh at my shoulder.

Percy spun around at my gasp. I had one glimpse of his stunned expression turning quickly to anger. Then my vision went blurry.

Something was wrong. The injury shouldn't have hurt this much. It was a bad hit, sure, but with all the adrenaline fuelling my body, I should have been able to keep going. I'd fought through worse before. The dizziness, the way my legs turned to spaghetti ... this wasn't normal.

Percy's voice ripped through the night, sounding all at once like it was coming from a distance, but also ringing inside me. 'Get back! No one touches her!'

The world came and went in sudden flashes. Percy seemed to have two swords swinging through the air to clear a two-foot radius around us. Luke bore down on us on a massive, skeletal horse. His voice seemed to come to me through water.


'Braavely fought, Percy Jackson. But it's time to surrender—or the girl dies.'

My fingers stretched out feebly. 'Percy, don't!' I wasn't even sure what I was asking—to hold his ground, or hand me over, or spare Luke ... I could not untangle my jumbled thoughts.

Strong fingers closed over mine. Percy yelled out, 'Blackjack!'

A dark shape swooped low over our heads. Percy let go of my hand. Teeth clamped down on my armour straps. I was lifted into the air with a sharp jerk that jarred my arm so badly, black spots danced before my eyes. As the earth fell away from me, I passed out.
A big thanks to Athenachild101 and CupcakeQueen816 for their advice on what to call fairy lights in US-lingo.
Percy Spills His Secret

Chapter Summary

Annabeth learns of Percy's only weakness, and starts wondering about Luke's.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I should have been used to the dreams by now. I mean, how many times had I blacked out straight into a strange dream? All the same, it was disconcerting to find myself looking down on a battlefield—and not the one I'd just been airlifted from.

I was on a fortified wall, watching thousands of warriors in Greek armour charge across a vast plain. Next to me, a handsome young hero knelt on the parapet, bow and arrow at the ready. He had a dark, tanned face, with long, almost feminine lashes.

Someone put a hand on his shoulder—a tall, chiselled someone, with golden hair that blazed like the sun itself. He radiated light in the way only a god could. Although the sun god had looked different when I'd met him in person last year, I guess Apollo picked his appearance to suit the times.

'Courage, Paris,' said Apollo. 'I will guide your arrow.' His voice seethed with rage, but it was directed at the attacking army and not the trembling hero next to him. 'The Greeks will pay for their arrogance—for Troilus, and for presuming to take my city. I will cut down their commander himself.'

'He is blessed by the gods,' Paris said. 'They say he bears the gift of immortality. I don't understand how any of us can possibly fell him.'

Apollo's face spoke of death. If he'd been looking at me like that, I'd have gotten out of the way, fast. 'Even the mightiest of heroes have a fatal flaw. A chink in the armour that links him to mortality. Achilles's pride will be his undoing. Today, Fate has come for him.'

It was an impossible hit. There was only one spot the arrow could pierce, and Achilles was a hurricane of motion. But not for nothing was Apollo the god of archery. Paris's arrow flew towards Achilles like it was magnetically drawn to the single weak point that would eventually (and ironically) become immortalised in language.

The arrow pierced his heel. He fell face down on the Trojan plain.

The army swarmed around their fallen commander, halted by their shock. A robed figure rode up on a white stallion: the priest, Calchas. He dismounted his horse and placed his fingers on the arrow in Achilles's heel.

'A sacrifice. I warned you.' His tone was not angry or haughty like before. He just sounded regretful, even helpless.

Achilles's face was pale and sweaty. Blood sprouted from the arrow wound in his heel. It seemed to drain from the rest of Achilles's body, as though his life force had sprung a leak. It hardly seemed possible that an arrow through the heel could kill a man. But I knew how this story ended.
'You spoke of sacrifice,' Achilles said. 'Then let this be it—as surely as my blood waters the fields of Troy, so shall my army fell the Trojans that took Patroclus and my pride.'

His breathing grew shallow and ragged. A glassy haze crept over his eyes. Slowly, he stilled.

Calchas reached up to close his eyelids. As he did so, invisible fingers pulled mine shut. The Trojan battlefield vanished.

*A final sacrifice,* whispered the rasping voice of the Oracle.

*I told you,* said a softer, quieter voice. I had never heard it before, but somehow I knew it belonged to the Oracle's mortal host. Cath, the mysterious girl from Hal Green's diary.

Everything faded into blackness.

+++ I came to on a bed of soft, thin netting. It took a moment to realise it was a lounge chair, the kind used for sunbathing by a swimming pool or reclining on a balcony. The right side of my body throbbed. Someone had removed my breastplate and wrapped several layers of cloth around my arm. The bandages were soaked with blood.

Silena's face flickered into view, drawn tight with worry. She reached out to dab at my forehead with a wet towel. It was monogrammed with a double P.

'You're awake.' The cloth trembled in her hands, trickling beads of water down my temple.

I turned to take in my surroundings. I was on an open-air terrace, probably on the top floor of some hotel. It provided an incredible view of the sunrise, something I might have appreciated if I hadn't been shivering in the cool dawn air. My siblings gathered behind Silena, their faces fifty shades of anxious. Through a glass door, I could see our friends moving around indoors, a bustle of activity that made my head ache. Across the terrace, a rainbow flickered across the mist from a decorative fountain. The bubbling of the water reminded me immediately of—

'Percy!' I tried to sit up, but Silena kept a restraining hand on my shoulder.

'Don't. You're not strong enough.'

'Where are we? What—'

'The Plaza Hotel,' she said. 'We regrouped here an hour ago. The enemy withdrew at first light; I don't know why. Malcolm said we needed a base, so ...' She spread her arms as if to say, *here we are.*

What strategic significance did the Plaza have? I screwed up my forehead, trying to assess Malcolm's decision, but immediately regretted it when a sharp burst of pain throbbed in my temples.

'Vere all here, except the Apollo cabin and Percy. Blackjack dropped your shield off with you, but it showed us ...' Silena's voice trembled. 'Were you with them?'

I told her everything I remembered about the battle on Williamsburg Bridge. As I related the tale, I found myself shivering even harder. Someone—probably Silena—had wrapped a fuzzy blanket around me, but it was useless against the ice creeping through my veins.

Silena noticed my chattering teeth. She called for another blanket. My youngest sibling, Holly,
brought it. They tucked it around me, but it could have been a piece of cling wrap, for all the good it
did.

'We need a healer,' Silena fretted. She put her hand to my forehead. 'You're burning up.'

Holly looked at me with wide, scared eyes. 'But we bandaged her arm and gave her nectar!
Shouldn't she be—'

Silena carefully unwrapped the top of my bandages. I craned my head to see. Nakamura's knife had
dug into my shoulder joint, giving my wound an awkward angle. I couldn't see the cut itself, but
vivid red streaks ran down my shoulder. My skin was a sickly shade of green.

This was more than a bad cut. It was like the inflammation in Beckendorf's wound when the
Stymphalian birds had pooped in it.

Nakamura's knife must have been poisoned.

Another shiver ran through me. This time, it wasn't from cold. I'd gotten a sudden image of Zoë
Nightshade, Artermis's previous lieutenant, lying at the top of Mount Tam. The wound she'd died of
had looked alarmingly like this.

'I'm going to die.'

The blood drained from Silena's face. 'No. No, Annabeth, we'll—' She turned to my siblings. 'What
about Thalia? Don't those Hunters have healers?'

'They stayed with their wounded at the Lincoln Tunnel,' Malcolm said. 'Thalia's still out there. We
can send a runner ... Celia?'

Our sister Celia darted out immediately. Tears rolled down Silena's face. A surprising calm settled
over me. Maybe this was it. I thought of Nakamura's poisoned knife arching towards Percy's
exposed back, and couldn't really regret intercepting it.

'Percy,' I whispered. Where was he? Had he made it off the bridge?

'We'll find him,' Silena promised. 'Holly, can you—'

'Jake Mason has the shield,' Holly said. 'Should I tell him to bring it here?'

'Try calling,' I said. 'My phone—'

I dug into my pocket with my good arm, but found it empty. My cell phone must have dropped out
when Blackjack had flown me over.

Holly brought Silena a borrowed phone. I didn't know where I pulled the numbers from, but Sally
Jackson's cell number must have crept its way into my memory at some point. Silena punched them
in.

Thank the gods, the line connected. 'Percy?' she said.

Another shiver wracked my body, but it was accompanied by a flood of relief. He was alive.

It took less time than I would have thought possible for Percy to arrive. He was a mini hurricane
bursting through the terrace doors, Will Solace trailing in his wake. Without a word, he took Silena's
place at my side. His eyebrows were drawn so tightly together, the deep crease in his forehead
looked like a permanent scar. The rest of his skin was smooth, without a single scratch. It was a
surreal contrast to everyone else's battered appearance.

Of course. The curse of Achilles. Would Nakamura's blade have even penetrated his skin?

A low hiss escaped my mouth when Will peeled off my bandage. Percy let out his breath in a ragged half-sob when he saw the wound. 'Annabeth ...'

I tried to smile. 'Poison on the dagger. Pretty stupid of me, huh?'

It was dawning on me just how silly my move had been. Granted, I didn't know exactly how his Styx bath worked, but I should have realised Percy could hold his own.

'It's not so bad, Annabeth,' Will said, relief evident in his tone. 'A few more minutes and we would've been in trouble, but the venom hasn't gotten past the shoulder yet.'

He told me to lie still, and called for nectar. I didn't see who brought the flask. Percy snatched it up and handed it to Will, still looking grim. He took my hand.

The nectar burned worse than the poison. My fingers clenched involuntarily around Percy's. My nails dug into his skin, but he didn't complain, even though his mouth twisted in a painful grimace. I guess his invulnerability was no panacea for pain.

Will finished dressing my wound. His fingers fluttered over my shoulder as he sang a soft hymn that seemed to flow straight into my bloodstream. Warmth trickled through my veins. Breathing came easier. I sighed. My grip on Percy's hand slackened, but he didn't let go.

'That should do it.' Will got up, looking a lot paler. 'But we're going to need some mortal supplies.'

He wrote out a shopping list and sent Malcolm off to the nearest pharmacy. The crowd gathering around my bedside—well, chair-side—dispersed. Will followed them, either to get some rest or find some campers to treat (I hoped it was the former). The thin streak of dawn drew a rosy curtain across the sky. We'd been up all night.

Silena laid her cloth against my forehead. Her fingers were still trembling. 'This is all my fault.'

I shook my head. 'No, Silena, how is it your fault?'

She hesitated. 'I've ... I've never been any good at camp. Not like you or Percy. If—' She sounded strangely like she was trying to find a reason to blame herself. 'If I were a better fighter ...'

It was absurd. Even if she'd been on the Williamsburg Bridge, she couldn't have prevented me taking that knife for Percy. I felt like I hadn't even been able to stop myself. But shadows flitted across her face, and I suspected she was thinking of Beckendorf. Maybe the circumstances of my injury reminded her that she hadn't been with him at the very end.

Percy took the cloth from her shaking hands. 'You're a great camper.' He listed her strengths: her skill with the pegasi, her good-natured friendliness—'Believe me, anyone who can make friends with Clarisse has talent.'

Silena's mouth fell open. 'That's it!' She balled her fist. 'We need the Ares cabin. I can talk to Clarisse.' The idea seemed to fill her with renewed energy. She paced the terrace in excitement, convinced she could bring Clarisse to the battlefront, even when Percy pointed out the flaws in this plan—the most obvious being the Titan blockade of Manhattan.

'Please! I can take a pegasus. I know I can make it back to camp.' She gave us both a beseeching
look. 'Let me try.'

Percy glanced at me. It was a long shot. Who knew if the Ares cabin would even provide sufficient reinforcement? But it was the only thing that seemed to raise Silena from her growing despair. We let her go.

That left Percy and me alone on the terrace. He wrung out the cloth and touched my forehead, cool fingers against my skin. His eyebrows were still knitted together. The tenderness in his eyes made my heart flutter. When was the last time he'd looked at me like this?

'You're cute when you're worried,' I told him. 'Your eyebrows get all scrunched together.' I wanted to lift my hand to smooth out the crease on his brow, but my arms were too heavy.

Percy brushed a lock of hair off my forehead. 'You are not going to die while I owe you a favour.' He frowned. 'Why did you take that knife?'

The compulsion to save him had been completely automatic. I guess it was just like how I'd once dived off a cliff to take out the manitcore threatening him. Or how he'd put himself between me and the Stymphalian birds in Philadelphia. It was what we did. 'You would've done the same for me.'

'How did you know?' he whispered.

I blinked, confused. 'Know what?'

Percy's eyes did a sweep of the terrace, as though checking for eavesdroppers. He leant in so close that his breath tickled my ears. 'My Achilles spot. If you hadn't taken that knife, I would've died.'

The scene replayed itself in my head in slow motion. The arc of Nakamura's blade towards Percy's back, the desperate pull to get myself between him and the blow, the calm relief that had washed over me when I realised the deadliness of the strike I'd intercepted ... even though logically, I should have reasoned that he was protected against it. Had I known, some part of me? But how was that possible?

'I don't know, Percy. I just had this feeling you were in danger.' I shouldn't ask, but I couldn't help myself. 'Where—where is the spot?'

'The small of my back,' he said.

I raised my good hand to touch the back of his tattered shirt. 'Where? Here?'

Percy moved my hand under the hem of his shirt, over the bare skin of his back. My fingers tingled, as if his Achilles spot was a socket sparking with electricity.

This was it. The one tiny point that kept him from being truly invincible.

A chink in the armour that links him to mortality.

The point that kept him human.

I had the profound, dizzy sense that I'd been given a road map straight to his soul.

'Thanks.' Percy swallowed hard. 'You saved me.'

The moment was charged with something so weighty, it terrified and excited me at the same time. My heart raced. I pulled my hand away from his back, but Percy wouldn't let go. He continued to cradle my hand in his even as I brought it to my side.
'So you owe me, what else is new?' It wasn't true, of course. We'd saved each other so many times, there was no point keeping a tally.

We fell silent. The sun rose steadily higher, setting the tops of the skyscrapers ablaze. It was another moment that might have been romantic if I hadn't been swaddled in bandages and doped up on nectar following a near-death experience.

Besides, the concept of romance paled next to the connection we'd just shared. The secret he'd just shared.

Percy had told me exactly where his weak spot was. He'd put the power to destroy him in my hands.

I thought of everything I hadn't told him. The idea of holding back any secret from him was suddenly unbearable. And there was one that I'd kept for so long.

'You asked why Hermes was mad at me,' I said softly.

'Hey.' Percy squeezed my hand. 'You need to rest—'

'No.' I tugged my hand away. It went automatically to my necklace, worrying at the beads. 'I want to tell you. It's been bothering me for a long time.'

I told him about Luke's visit, the secret I'd kept all this time because I was terrified of Percy's reaction. And maybe because I simply couldn't face the possibility that Hermes was right—that all of this was my fault. Everything we faced now, all the horrors that had come since I'd turned Luke down ... what if it all stemmed from one wrong choice I'd made?

'Maybe if I'd gone with him, I could've changed his mind,' I said miserably. 'Or—or ... I had a knife. Luke was unarmed. I could've—'

'Killed him?' Percy said sharply. A tingle of terror ran down my spine. Did he agree? Did he think I should have done it? But then he shook his head. 'You know that wouldn't have been right.'

Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes. 'Luke said ...' I could hear the words as vividly as if it had been just yesterday. *He's going to take over the world. He's going to use me as a stepping stone to do it.*

And Kronos had done exactly that—taken Luke's body so he could rise out of Tartarus. But there was more to it. He'd made Luke bathe in the Styx so that Luke's body could host him. So that Luke could raise him into something more than mortal.

*Divinity and mortality were never meant to mix ...* With a shiver, I remembered a dream from the start of summer. *The last mortal coil, Phoebe the Titan had said. Some things, once done, are irreversible.*

'What if Luke's body is only a transition? What if Kronos has a plan to become more powerful?'

Could he burn Luke away completely and attain true immortality?

The full weight of my failures bore down like an anvil, crushing my chest. 'I could've stopped him. The war is my fault.'

Percy took my hand again and murmured something comforting. I barely heard him. I got the feeling he didn't really *have* a reassuring answer. He didn't even broach the argument he'd always made before, that Luke had made his own choices.
It was ironic. All those times we'd blown up at each other over this very issue, and now I wished he would tell me Luke's choices were on him, not me.

'Percy.' The terrace door opened and Connor's head popped through. He studied us for a moment, then came over. 'Mrs O'Leary just came back with Grover. I think you should talk to him.'

I started to sit up, but Percy held me back. 'You need to rest.' His hand brushed my cheek as he stood. 'I'll get Will to check on you.'

Thalia accompanied Will when he came out to the terrace. Her spiky hair was wilder than ever, sticking up like she'd been caught in an electric storm (quite possibly, she had—one of her own making). She had a band-aid across her cheek and something had clawed her leather jacket pretty good. The quiver on her back was nearly empty.

'Heard you took a bad hit,' she said.

'I'm fine. Did something stupid.'

Thalia's laugh was tense. 'Isn't that usually Percy's job?'

While Will checked my wound, I recounted our encounter with Ethan Nakamura. I carefully left out why I'd taken the knife for Percy, but Thalia didn't seem to find it odd. I guess she wouldn't—she'd watched me jump the manticore for them two years ago.

'Was the fighting bad where you were?'

Thalia shrugged. 'The usual horde. Bunch of monsters, couple of tanks. But not as many as we expected.'

'Luke showed up where we were,' I said.

A shadowed darkened Thalia's face. 'Kronos, you mean.'

'This is going to sting a bit,' Will warned. He gave my cut another washing out. 'Just alcohol this time,' he promised, but it hurt as bad as the nectar. I crushed Thalia's fingers this time. She didn't take it as well as Percy.

'Ow.' She extracted her hand from my grip. 'I'm going to hear Grover's report. Got a few things to update Percy on. I'll be back.'

'How's everyone else?' I asked Will.

He grimaced. 'As well as can be expected. Kronos and his army retreated, but they'll be back. He said they'd return in the evening.'

I turned this over. Why was he giving us a reprieve? 'What happened on the bridge after I passed out?'

Will's hands stilled over the fresh bandages he was applying to my shoulder. My heart sank.

'We lost someone else, didn't we?'

It was a while before Will answered. 'Michael.'

Part of me didn't want to ask, but I owed it to him to find out. 'How?'
'He hung back to cover Percy. Kronos did something to the bridge, nearly blasted it in half. Percy—' Will gulped. 'Well, Michael told him to do it.'

'Do what?'

'Finish the job.'

My stomach turned over. 'He destroyed the bridge?'

Will nodded. 'He just—cracked it right open, like there was a geyser underneath.'

I was struck by an image from an old story: Poseidon striking the ground in the acropolis of Athens to bring forth a salt spring in his battle with Athena for the city's patronage. I imagined Percy driving Riptide into the ground, like his dad with a trident.

Like a god.

'It blew the bridge apart. Kronos's army couldn't get across. That's why they retreated. But Michael, he—' Will's voice faltered and died. I didn't need him to finish the sentence. Michael had plunged to his death during Percy's destruction of the Williamsburg Bridge.

My heart ached, as much for Percy as for Michael. He must be beating himself up over this. Or he would, once the emergencies paused long enough for our losses to sink in.

Unless he's too far gone by then. The sinister whisper in my head sounded vaguely like the ancient priest Calchas.

I pictured Percy laughing on the bridge, half-crazed with battle lust, and shuddered. His newfound power had saved us, but at what cost?

Will finished changing my bandages. His hands shook as he tied off the new ones.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

He closed his eyes for a few seconds. When he opened them, they were shining with tears. 'Kayla and Austin got back half an hour ago. They said they searched all over, but ... I—I'm head counsellor now.' The idea seemed to make him sick. 'It went Lee, then Michael, then me, and I—' He blinked rapidly. 'I don't know how to—I'm a healer, Annabeth.' He twisted my old bandages in his hands. 'I'm no good leading a combat mission. How can I possibly ...?'

I put my uninjured hand on his arm. 'So be a healer. You're the best combat medic we've got. At the rate we're going, we'll need that more than an army general.'

The door opened and Thalia returned. 'Grover's got the northern lines covered,' she announced. 'Though the nature spirits got hit pretty bad. My Hunters took care of the underground tunnels, so we've only got the bridges to worry about. Unless Percy can blow up the rest of those?'

'Don't even think about it,' I muttered.

She raised her eyebrows quizzically, but went on. 'I think Kronos is biding his time so he can regenerate.' She sounded like she was biting her tongue to keep from using his name. 'So we probably have until sundown. We're working out a rotation for the watches.'

'I could do that,' I said.

'Annabeth, you should rest,' Will admonished.
I am resting. I gestured to my lounge chair. Besides, it'd keep my mind off the pain.

Thalia smiled faintly. We'll handle it. I'm glad you're okay.

Me too. I glanced at the terrace door. How's Percy?

Told him to go sleep. He's gonna need it, before tonight.

Will gave a shaky laugh. You think? Apollo's arrows, he just routed Kronos himself.

Thalia's head snapped up. You said he showed up. What happened?

Will and I exchanged a look. I filled Thalia in. Her eyes went wide.

But—two hundred monsters. And Kronos himself. How—

He bathed in the Styx. There was no point keeping that a secret. Luke must have figured it out by now. Besides, Hestia had practically announced it to us earlier.

Like Achilles, Thalia murmured, sounding awed. He's invincible.

Will blanched. That's why his energy's all weird. I couldn't figure out ... well, it explains a lot. He folded up my old bandages. I'd better go see if anyone else needs me.

When he had gone, I looked Thalia in the eye. She was still marvelling at what Percy had done, testing the point of an arrow against her fingertips as though contemplating if Percy could withstand it.


Thalia stopped playing with her arrow. She stuck it back in her quiver and swallowed hard. The other way.

The what?

On Mount Othrys. When we were there, before I joined the Hunters. He wanted me to join him.

My stomach flipped. I'd almost forgotten that Luke had turned to Thalia first. Please, he'd begged. He'll use the other way if you don't.

What if we could have saved him?

Thalia's eyes hardened. Save him? Annabeth, he was the one who betrayed us.

I know, but ... don't you ever wonder why he went over to Kronos?

It was one of those rare moments when Thalia went completely still, like she was rooting herself into the ground. Her face shuttered down into an icy mask.

I wouldn't have believed it before, she admitted. Even when that old man told us Luke would betray—well, I thought I knew him better than that. Her mouth twisted like she'd bitten into a lemon. I was wrong about a lot of things, Annabeth.

What old man?

Thalia shook her head. It was a long time ago. The point is—the signs were there. Even when we
were travelling together. All those snide remarks he'd make about the gods. I always thought he was joking. I mean, our lives were rough. It was either snark or sob about it, right? But you know our parents did care, in their weird way. Luke—I think he always had a warped view of Hermes. You remember that time he took us home.' She frowned. 'Or maybe you don't. I keep forgetting how little you were.'

'I remember.'

She looked like she didn't really believe me. 'You always did think he was perfect. But he's not.'

'I know that. He made mistakes, Thalia. But maybe—'

'You need to stop holding on to who he was, Annabeth. Luke went too far. There's a point and ... you can't come back after it. Luke ... he chose his way, and I—' She looked at her hands. 'I chose mine.' Her mouth set in a grim line. Without another word, she got up and left me alone.

I traced the edge of the blanket Silena had tucked around me, deep in thought. Thalia's words echoed in my head, along with my mother's advice: _Relationships are like architecture. The key to building a permanent one is a strong foundation._

Where were the cracks in the groundwork of Luke's relationships? The trials of his childhood? The anger that had kindled like a forest fire, slow to catch, but impossible to put out once started? The mysterious incident Thalia spoke of, that had contributed to the souring of their friendship—or anything else that might have grown between them—years later? Who was the old man, and what had he told them?

An epiphany pierced my brain. Thalia had told me about that incident, shortly after she'd been de-arborified. While trying to make sense of Luke's betrayal, she'd admitted that a man had prophesied it. And the man's name ... _Halcyon Green._

_That_ was why Hal's name had been so familiar.

My bag lay at the foot of the lounge chair, next to my bronze dagger. I reached for it, digging past Daedalus's laptop and my Yankee's cap until I found the green leather diary Chiron had returned to me. I opened the book to the page marked by my dad's postcard. Hal's scribble jumped out at me right away: _Luke, I want you to take this diary._

The rest of the page was a weird, one-sided conversation, as if Hal had been writing in response to Luke. I guess that made sense, given the curse on his voice. By the time Luke had met him, he would only have been able to speak through the _leucoctae_. I wouldn't have wanted to hold a conversation through a pair of slavering beasts either.

In his note to Luke, Hal explained the contents of his diary and expressed a hope that it would help him.

_You have an important future. Your choices will change the world. You can learn from my mistakes, continue the diary. It might help you with your decisions._

The words left a bitter taste on my tongue. _An important future_ ... Had Hal really seen what was in store for Luke? And if so, couldn't his warning have been more specific?

_Oracles._ Honestly.

As if to answer my question, the next line said:
I think I finally understand why I was cursed. Apollo was right. Sometimes the future really is better left a mystery.

If I could, I would have reached through the diary and throttled its old owner. Easy for him to say, when it wasn't his fate hanging in the balance.

Then I thought of his predicament and the fate he had suffered. Maybe he did know what he was talking about.

I read on as Hal entreated Luke to continue the diary. A few paragraphs down, another note made my heart skip.

_That blade was a gift from the girl I saved. She promised me it would always protect its owner._

I reached automatically for my dagger. There was no description of the knife in the diary, but I knew it was the same one. Thalia had even told me before where Luke had gotten it. I hadn't thought then to ask more about the circumstances of the gift. Now it seemed like an unforgivable oversight.

_It would always protect its owner._

I fought well with my dagger, but I'd always thought that to be my own skill, the years of training I'd had with it. It hadn't kept me from being stabbed by Ethan Nakamura. But ... I hadn't died. And it had saved Percy.

The next paragraphs were Hal's advice about the benefits of a dagger, almost exactly what Luke had told me years ago. And then, their conversation shifted. Hal told Luke he’d talk to the _leucrotae_, set himself up as bait. I was getting a bad feeling about how Luke and Thalia had escaped the deadly mansion.

Then, set off on its own at the bottom of the page was a word that resonated in my bones:

_Promise._

How could one small word be so powerful?

It must have been the last word Hal ever penned. The opposite page was blank.

I flipped the page. The start of the next entry made my breath catch painfully.

_My name is Luke._

It looked like Luke had kept his promise to Hal.

Chapter End Notes

Points to those of you who can remember the bit from _The Golden Fleece_ where Thalia told Annabeth that Hal Green had predicted Luke's betrayal!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Luke's writing wasn't easy to follow. Like most demigods, his handwriting was a messy scrawl interjected with many scratched-out misspellings. He also seemed to have written with a shaking hand. I imagined him sitting on guard duty, watching me and Thalia sleep. How soon he'd started writing after their escape from Hal's mansion, I wasn't certain, but he went into so much detail about their adventure, it couldn't have been long after.

He started with a goat—a magical sign from Thalia's dad that she'd insisted they follow. I remembered her doing the same thing years later, after she'd emerged from her pine prison. She'd told me Amaltheia guided her to things she needed to find. Then, she'd sought answers about her family and she'd found this diary in the place where she and Luke had met. Had the goat led her there?

Anyway, in Luke's story, Amaltheia led them to the mansion in Richmond, opposite the statue of Robert E. Lee. I tried to picture it in my head, but my mind conjured instead the image of Kronos in Luke's body, staring at the empty lot across the traffic circle. I shivered.

Luke described Hal's mansion in full, creepy detail. He was a good storyteller. When I'd been on the run with him and Thalia, we'd often sit around a campfire at the end of a long day. He'd told me stories to get my mind off our miserable, bedraggled state. I hadn't noticed then, but his tales always focused on the heroes who'd overcome the terrible injustices the gods threw at them.

In his diary, a bitter undertone wove through his description of the gods. When he called his dad a 'divine jerk' who'd left his mom ... well, knowing what his mom was like, I could sort of understand his resentment. But hadn't Hermes been there, the time we'd gone to his house? If the god had indeed abandoned them, why had he come in person to meet Luke?

*He always had a warped view of his father. Was Thalia right?*

I read on. Luke and Thalia entered the mansion. Their terror practically steamed off the page as Luke related their race through the hallways, away from the thumps and clacks of the *leucrotae*. When they realised the trap, my heart plummeted with theirs.

Hal introduced himself and gave them the elevator pitch version of his story. He explained the hopelessness of the situation, his unwilling role in the trap. I had to hand it to Luke and Thalia. They didn't give up easily. They scoured Hal's room for anything that might help, considering every course of action from braining Hal with Luke's weapon to sending out an email for help. Luke fantasised offhand about smashing Apollo and the other 'deadbeat parent Olympian gods' in the head. His bitterness was definitely a recurrent theme here.

Thalia wondered why Amaltheia had led them into Hal's trap. That was when Hal revealed the safe
—a minor detail of his curse that I'd completely forgotten. It had been too long ago that I'd read about Apollo's promise that the curse would end when the hidden treasure inside was claimed.

Thalia practically pounced on the safe, insisting that Zeus must have wanted her to find it. Luke didn't understand her faith in the gods, but I did. It was the only way our parents could look out for us. They were forbidden from interfering directly, but they sent signs and gifts. Like my Yankees cap. Or Athena's guidance, leading me to friends who could help me survive when I ran away.

Luke had really never realised that.

But he gave in to Thalia anyway. The way he wrote about her, his insecurities about whether he was good enough for her, his determination to follow her anywhere ... I'd been way too young to notice anything special about their interaction when I met them, but it was obvious that Luke cared about Thalia almost like I did Percy. She was the only person in the world who got him. The only one he felt he could count on.

My heart ached for him.

Luke cracked the safe with his Hermes-inherited skills—the other way our parents looked out for us: by passing on gifts that could help us in the world. But again, Luke didn't see it that way. Every time he nailed something in his dad's domain, he briefly wondered if Hermes was looking out for him, then chalked it down to pure luck, like the idea his dad could care was ludicrous.

The safe yielded a deadly vial of poison ... and a simple silver bracelet. Thalia didn't recognise it yet, but it was her trademark shield, the one she still carried today. At the time of the story, they couldn't figure out its magical properties. It provided no answer to their predicament. The leucrotae were going to eat Luke and Thalia at sunset.

They went back to searching for a plan. Luke tried Googling for ideas (my mind wondered off-task how Hal had gotten himself a computer if he'd been shut away in 1958. Wasn't that, like, when mail was sent in envelopes and Morse code?) Thalia tried to activate her new bracelet. Luke didn't describe Hal's actions, but I imagined the old guy pacing the room, maybe wringing his hands and giving the pair of them sorrowful looks.

Or maybe he'd taken inventory of their supplies to gauge how long he'd last until the next demigods arrived.

Then Hal made them a startling offer. He would read their futures.

I was riveted now, barely even impeded by the misspellings and shaky handwriting. This was it—the prophecies Thalia and Luke had received. The ones she'd told me about.

You will change once, and then change again, Hal wrote to her, and I realised he probably hadn't just meant into a tree and back. Her arborification was the first change, but the second ... that had to be her transformation into a Hunter. Her new family.

Luke was next. Trusting now the deadly accuracy of Hal's prophetic skill, I was almost reluctant to read what was in store. From the old man's reaction, as Luke described it—sudden terror, the inability to look Luke in the eye—he'd seen something, and it wasn't good. Yet he wouldn't specify what it was that had scared him so badly.

Could it have been the image of Luke emerging from the black palace on Mount Othrys with hard golden eyes? Even after all the scary stuff I'd seen over the years (and believe me, I've seen a lot of terrible things), I still considered that to be the most terrifying.
Hal told them he'd seen fire, and that would help with their current problem. But it wasn't the only thing.

'Luke, I also saw a sacrifice in your future. A choice. But also a betrayal.'

Thalia was livid at this. She wouldn't let Hal continue. I guess I couldn't blame her. None of us had believed Luke capable of treachery. But I couldn't help wondering ... if she'd let Hal finish, if he'd warned Luke just what the nature of this prophesied betrayal was ... would Luke have been better prepared when years later, Kronos came knocking?

Instead, Luke pushed Hal's predictions out of his mind and focused on the problem at hand: their immediate survival. Hal's talk of fire had given him an idea.

It was a plan worthy of Hephaestus. They spent the rest of the afternoon gathering the ingredients needed for Greek fire. I was beginning to get why Thalia had been fated to open the safe. No one but a child of Zeus could have provided the critical component for an impromptu concoction of Greek fire. It had taken Beckendorf so many trials at the forge this summer (and one unfortunate explosion in cabin nine) to get the electric catalyst working right. The one drawback to Luke and Thalia's plan was the same catch that had killed Beckendorf on the Princess Andromeda—how would they get clear of the blast once they detonated their bomb?

I kept coming back to what Hal had said about sacrifice, Luke wrote. I couldn't escape the feeling there was no way all three of us could get out alive.

And I knew what would happen. If anything, Thalia had mentioned it before. I'd asked her if we could track down the demigod who'd predicted Luke's betrayal and ask him to explain himself. She'd said no, because he was dead.

Luke recorded his responses to the one-sided conversation Hal had held earlier in the diary. His reluctance to take the book. Hal's insistence on handing it over, along with the dagger—the gift from Jenny, an eternal protection for its owner.

My dagger.

The irony of it wasn't lost on Luke. The dagger certainly hadn't helped Hal thwart his curse. But Hal seemed to believe in its power. Maybe he thought it would protect Luke.

Hal penned his final word, and Luke promised to take the diary, to remember.

And then they were out of time. Thalia finished the fire bomb; the bars of the leucrotae's cage rose. Hal lured the monsters away and they dashed out of the room as the mansion exploded.

They almost didn't make it out. One of the leucrotae escaped the initial blast and chased them down. In the tussle that followed, Luke guessed the code to Thalia's bracelet. It sprung into Thalia's iconic shield—the bronze disc with Medusa's face in the centre. It had once been my mother's, but was now passed along to a new child of Zeus. The Aegis saved their butts. They made it out of the mansion just before it became a fiery inferno.

My chest was tight, as if the leucrota was still standing on it. I'd criticised Hal for being a coward, but in the end, he'd been braver than me. The gods had cursed him. He'd spent most of his life imprisoned with monsters. It would've been easy for him to let us die like all the other demigods before us. Yet he'd chosen to go out a hero.

These thoughts plagued Luke as he and Thalia retreated from the ruins of the mansion. They stumbled through Richmond, not speaking. Hal's sacrifice haunted Luke, along with the old
demigod's parting words.

**Promise,** Halcyon Green had written.

*I promise, Hal, I thought. I will learn from your mistakes. If the gods ever treat me that badly, I will fight back.*

A cold fist gripped my insides. I didn't think this was the lesson Hal had wanted Luke to take away. Obviously Luke had been jaded before going into Hal's mansion, but it seemed he'd come away even angrier than before.

Their next stop was an old warehouse by an abandoned brick building that read RICHMOND IRON WORKS. My heart drummed up a staccato beat as I turned the page, certain of what came next. Sure enough, Luke led Thalia down the alley into the same loading dock where we’d found the caged demigods this summer. The loading dock where, under a sheet of corrugated metal, I was hiding, convinced that the footsteps belonged to the monsters I'd been fleeing all day.

It was surreal to read about Luke's perception of our first meeting. The way he saw me—*a blur of flannel and blond hair*—struggling against him when he caught me ... it was so weird to read an account of myself.

Then he described my eyes: *They were startling grey, beautiful and intelligent.*

The words blurred. I blinked rapidly. It was a few minutes before I could continue reading.

I didn't really need Luke's writing to remember this part of the story. Even though I'd been only seven, it was one of those moments, a turning point in my life that was seared into my brain. Even if I lived to be a hundred (ha, fat chance), I doubt I'd ever forget the way Luke had welcomed me and given me his dagger. Hal's dagger.

I whispered the words he'd said to me as much from memory as from reading off the page: *Knives are only for the bravest and quickest of fighters. They don't have the reach or power of a sword, but they're easy to conceal and they can find weak spots in your enemy's armour. It takes a clever warrior to use a knife.*

It made sense that it had been Hal's advice all along. Luke had never been a knife guy. It hadn't occurred to me before to wonder how he'd picked up this knowledge. When I was little, I'd believed Luke knew everything.

Annabeth beamed at me, and for that instant, all my problems seemed to melt. I felt as if I'd done one thing right. I swore to myself I would never let this girl come to harm.

I choked up. This was the Luke I'd known, the one I'd trusted. The proof that he had existed was immortalised in these pages. Yet a few lines down came a reminder that he hadn't been the perfect saviour, either. The promise he'd given me, which I had to admit I still held close to my heart—*you're a part of our family now. And I promise I'm not going to fail you like our families did us ...* Luke's promise was born in his bitter vitriol towards the gods. They were harsh, cruel, and aloof, and they had failed us all.

*He* wouldn't.

My mother had told me last year that I needed to accept the truth about Luke. That he'd never been the perfect hero I'd made him out to be. I'd gotten a quest prophecy that had promised I'd lose a love to worse than death, and on the surface, it seemed to mean losing Luke to Kronos. But beneath that lay the idea that the Luke I'd wholeheartedly adored had been an illusion.
His diary hammered it all home: how scared and uncertain and bitter he'd been—he was. And how he'd struggled to find his way through all of that. Maybe he was still searching for answers even now.

Looking at Thalia and Annabeth asleep by the fire, I'm amazed at how peaceful their faces are. If I'm going to be the 'dad' of this bunch, I've got to be worthy of their trust. None of us has had good luck with our dads. I have to be better than that. I may be only fourteen, but that's no excuse. I have to keep my new family together.

My eyes misted over again. My hands shook as I turned the page, and I was pretty sure it had nothing to do with my injury.

The next entry must have been a week or so later. Luke didn't bother to date it, but we'd obviously been travelling together for some time. His writing was as shaky as it'd been at the start of his previous entry, but there was an added forcefulness to the letters, like he'd practically stabbed his pen into the page.

I don't know why I'm bothering to write about this. Maybe because I promised Hal. Maybe because I'll go crazy otherwise, just sitting here thinking about it. Either way, I need to get it out of my system. I can tell Annabeth is scared, and I could kick myself for that.

I knew I shouldn't have gone home.

He started with the dragons that had burned down our safe house. I remembered this vaguely. After days camping along highway rest stops, we'd made our way north to the network of hideouts Luke and Thalia had set up along the East Coast. 'We never stay put at one, because the monsters will find us,' they'd warned me. 'That's why we need a bunch of them.'

Thalia and I had been on guard duty when the spurt of flames had lit up the roof of vines covering our shelter. We'd barely made it out before the place caught. Thalia had taken a spike to her leg during the subsequent battle with the dragons. It was Luke who'd saved us. He'd acquired a new sword by then. I never found out who had trained him—maybe, like Percy, he just had a ton of natural talent—but that was the first time I really saw him fight, attacking the dragon that had hurt Thalia with rage-fuelled energy.

I don't remember exactly how we escaped, just Luke leading us through the woods, up a hill. Eventually, the monster must have given up the chase. But we'd been in bad shape—our supplies gone, Thalia's leg almost buckling beneath her. We'd been out of options. I guess that was why Luke had chosen to take us to his house.

_I didn't want to_, he wrote, and his indecision almost rolled off the page. _I hadn't been back in five years. I'll admit I think about my mom from time to time, but all the crazy talk and the warnings of doom ... what would Thalia think? And Annabeth—I didn't want to terrify her. But what choice did we have?_

Luke led us to his house in Westport and bade us to wait. He was on edge, snapping at me for the first time ever. Just as he was about to sneak in and get the food and supplies we needed, Hermes showed up. The way Luke described him was pretty close to the way he'd looked in the Olympus throne room (only in a track suit as opposed to a pilot's uniform). He scrutinised Luke like his son was a code he needed to crack, which only fuelled Luke's anger.

_When I was younger, I used to imagine what it might be like to meet the guy. I'd think about all the things I'd say, like what his deal was, leaving my mom and me when we_
needed him the most. Or why he'd never even dropped us a line all these years. I was the one he'd totally let down. So where did he get off, staring at me like I'd messed everything up?

Hal's stupid prophecy ran through my head. I pushed it aside. That had nothing to do with the gods.

Hermes led us up to the house. Luke's mom answered the door. He didn't describe her much in his diary, beyond hoping that she wouldn't have one of her fits in front of Thalia and me. Despite what Luke had said about Hermes abandoning them, Ms Castellan didn't act as though the god had been absent in her life. She welcomed him readily, and smothered Luke in a hug. She seemed like a normal mom ... up until she started talking to invisible people.

I remembered how none of her sentences had made any sense, and the kitchen had been full of mouldy food. Luke told us to go with her, assuring us he'd be fine alone with Hermes. Father and son stared at each other, sizing each other up. Finally, Luke demanded answers. Why hadn't he shown up before? Why hadn't he ever answered Luke's prayers? Why had he left Luke with his crackpot mom? Luke's voice rose as he confronted his father, growing loud enough for the conversation to carry into the kitchen where we were dealing with crazy May Castellan.

I lowered my voice, but the words spilt out fast and furious, as if now that I'd started, I simply couldn't stop. 'When she was having one of her fits, shaking me and saying crazy things about my fate. When I used to hide in the closet so she wouldn't find me with those ... those glowing eyes. Did you even care that I was scared? Did you even know when I finally ran away?'

I couldn't look at him. Annabeth stared at me through the kitchen door. She had a charred black cookie in her hands. Her mouth formed the words, Can we go now?

'Luke, I care very much,' Hermes said, 'but gods must not interfere directly in mortal affairs. It is one of our Ancient Laws. Especially when your destiny ...'

It was as if all the candles had been extinguished, plunging me into cold darkness. Your choices will change the world, Hal had said.

'What? What about my destiny?'

Hermes dodged the question. I couldn't tell from Luke's writing if he actually knew the answer. He told Luke he'd get Chiron to send a satyr for us. Luke scorned this and tried to bring the subject back to his mysterious destiny.

'We're doing fine without your help,' I snapped. 'Now what were you saying about my destiny?'

Hermes scrutinised me, as if he were trying to read my future in the contours of my face. 'My son. I'm the god of travellers, the god of roads. If I know anything, I know that you must walk your own path, even though it tears my heart.'

My son. Maybe once, like when I'd stood in this room watching my mom light the candles and chant crazy shit with green smoke pouring out of her mouth, I'd have been grateful for him to show up and say those two words to me. Now, it just left a bitter taste in my mouth.

'You don't love me.'
'I promise I ... I do love you.'

It might be more convincing if he hadn't hesitated. Maybe.

'Go to camp,' he said. 'I will see that you get a quest soon. Perhaps you can defeat the hydra, or steal the apples of Hesperides. You will get a chance to be a great hero before ...'

There it was again. That hesitation, that hint that something dark and dangerous lurked in my future. My photo on the mantle suddenly seemed like a bad omen. Why had my mom put it there? Did it have anything to do with her fits, and that ominous 'fate' she always talked about seeing?

'Before what?' I demanded. 'What did my mom see that made her like this? What's going to happen to me? If you love me, tell me.'

'I cannot.'

'Then you don't care!'

There was silence. The candle nearest to me fluttered out.

'Luke? Is that you?' My mom's voice wavered. 'Is my boy all right?'

My vision went blurry. I looked down. The wings of Hermes's Reeboks were still, hovering inches above the ground.

I cleared my throat. 'I'm fine. I have a new family. I don't need either of you.'

'T'm your father.'

'A father is supposed to be around,' I hissed. 'I've never even met you.' Anger spilled tight and hot into my stomach. I couldn't stay here any longer, not with Hermes pretending he gave a shit, while dangling those awful hints about my future.

'Thalia, Annabeth, come on!' I yelled. 'We're leaving.'

The following pages were fragile and thin. They were the ones that had initially been stuck together. Chiron must have peeled them carefully apart. The lines were barely legible, but it helped that I remembered this bit. Thalia and I had run into the woods after Luke, struggling to keep up with his long strides. At last, I'd cried out, terrified that he would leave us behind. My voice had made him hesitate. He'd returned, apologised, and we'd continued together. We'd walked for hours, Luke piggybacking me once my seven-year-old legs gave out. It was clear now why he'd been so adamant about leaving Connecticut.

Luke described our trek through the woods after leaving Westport, and a conversation with Thalia that I'd overheard faintly. He was obviously struggling to reconcile his encounter with his father, and what it meant for him. He kept returning to the family unit he'd created with the two of us.

All I know is that this is my family, and I need to keep them safe. I won't be like my dad.

He finished his entry with the very first words I'd read from the diary:

'It's my job to take care of them. I'm gonna hunt down every monster I can find. That's
what the gods should have done for us.

There was only one entry after that, and it was short and chilling.

I know I promised Hal, but I can't write any more. It's too painful to describe what happened. The Furies, the hellhounds ... Thalia ...

How could he? How could Hermes send us here and let this happen? How could Zeus do this to his own daughter?

I don't need to write it down to remember it. I could never forget this.

Hal was right about her sacrifice. So what did he see about me?

You know what? It doesn't matter. I don't care if I betray anyone else. I promise I will never betray Thalia. I will make the gods pay for what they did to her. And I'm going to make sure Annabeth never suffers the same fate.

I stared at that last line for a long time. It was clear now why Luke's story had upset Chiron. Luke had locked all this resentment and bitterness inside him, never sharing it with anyone. I could only guess at why he'd taken up Hermes's quest three years later. Maybe he'd thought it would be good training. Maybe he wanted to prove he was the hero he'd promised to be for Thalia and me.

Maybe a small part of him still yearned for his father's love.

But it had opened the door for Kronos to slide under his skin, whisper to him and turn all that seething rage into something twisted and dangerous.

Yet he'd left Thalia the diary. Was it because he'd wanted us to understand his choices? Why he'd done what he had? Did he think it would convert us to Kronos's side? Or had it simply been a last, desperate attempt to reach out to us as the family he'd cherished?

The sound of the terrace door banging open startled me. I slammed the book shut.

It was Thalia, looking over her shoulder as she came through, barking orders to her Hunters. One of them followed behind her, a girl who vaguely resembled Thalia with her choppy brown hair and bright blue eyes, except her aquiline features fit the profile of the Apollo cabin more. She wasn't one of the new recruits—I remembered her from our travels together—but her name eluded me for the moment. It was something long and complicated.

I put the book away and stretched. I hadn't noticed the time passing, but of course it had taken me hours to work through the diary. The sun was already beginning its steady descent towards the horizon and our next battle. My arm felt loads better, thank the gods, though it was stiff and sore.

'The Apollo kids are all sleeping, so I brought Iphigenia to check on your shoulder,' Thalia said.

So that was her name. Something about it struck a chord in my head. Iphigenia nodded to me. 'I'm not as good at healing as Phoebe, but I am a descendent of Apollo. I've got some skills.'

She started unravelling my bandages.

'What's been happening?' I asked. 'Any news from the lookouts?'

'Nothing in the city,' Thalia said. 'But ... we got a visitor.'

'A visitor?'
Thalia flexed her fingers. 'A Titan. He came to speak to Percy under a flag of truce.'

I sat up so fast, I pulled my half-unwrapped arm out of Iphigenia's hands. She glared and shifted so she could keep working.

'Sorry. What happened? Is he—'

'He's fine,' Thalia said. 'Prometheus only came to parley. Asked Percy to give up Olympus, surrender, and all that Gryphon dung. Like Percy would even buy it. And then he—' She hesitated, rubbing her temple.

'What?'

'He gave Percy a jar.' I got the sense this wasn't what Thalia had meant to say at first. 'A pithos. He said it was Pandora's.'

'Like Pandora's box? The one with all the evil spirits?'

Thalia nodded. 'And Elpis—the Spirit of Hope. She was—she is the only one left in it. And Prometheus said that if we wanted to surrender, Percy just had to open the pithos. Let Hope out. He promised that Kronos would spare the survivors if Percy did.'

My heart fluttered like Elpis had danced right in. Thalia must have seen the change in my expression. Her mouth tightened. 'It's a trap, Annabeth. You can't possibly believe Kronos would go easy on us.'

I knew that. Leniency was not at all Kronos's style. But ... 'Maybe Luke ...'

Thalia's eyes hardened. 'Luke's gone, Annabeth. If you don't get over that, you can't ...' She swallowed. The same hesitation I'd noticed earlier was back. There was definitely something she wasn't telling me.

'Where is the pithos now?'

'Percy told me to lock it in a hotel vault. I guess he didn't want to be tempted.' She balled her fists. 'It's better this way. If we give up Hope, the Titans win. And the gods will be gone. Forever.'

*I will make the gods pay for what they did to her.* How ironic was it that Luke's promise of vengeance had ended up placing them on opposite sides of a cataclysmic war?

I toyed with the idea of asking Thalia about the diary, but before I could make up my mind, she turned to leave. She went to get some sleep, telling us to wake her if there was an emergency, or at sundown, whichever came first.

Iphigenia finished stripping my bandages. She prodded me gently around the wound, which had closed by now. I was relieved that no more nectar or alcohol washes would be forthcoming. That stuff was nasty.

'Good as new?' I asked.

'I'd be careful not to over-exert,' Iphigenia said. 'But it's definitely on the mend. You can get up if you want.'

I flexed my arm, trying to work the stiffness out of it. 'Good. I want to see what's going on.'

I followed Iphigenia back into the hotel, which had been completely repurposed by our army. The top floor lobby looked like a woodland glade, with the Hunters' pets roaming around, treating the
furniture and plumbing like trees and streams. Campers and Hunters alike occupied the sofas, snoring loudly.

Athena cabin had turned a penthouse suite into a command centre, with weapons and armour arranged in neat rows for easy access. Maps of Manhattan were spread over the tables and pinned to the walls. My video shield hung over a flat screen television. Malcolm studied the roving images, scanning the bridges into Manhattan. It was quiet all over, which worried me. Even if Kronos had said he intended to hold off until dark, I wouldn't put it past him to invade while we were recuperating. But the south side, the most direct route to Olympus, showed nothing but sleeping mortals.

'Thalia posted scouts in Upper Manhattan,' Iphigenia said. 'It would be the longest way to march into the city, but ...'

'But we have to cover all bases,' I agreed. The penthouse windows overlooked Central Park. Unfortunately, the Plaza wasn't high enough to see over the skyscrapers beyond the park.

Malcolm pointed to the northern edge of Central Park on the map. 'Grover's out there, too, keeping an eye on things with the nature spirits. He said he'd send word if he saw anything.'

I ran the edge of my shirt over my knife blade while I tried to imagine how I'd attack if I were the enemy. The Hunters had sealed off the Jersey tunnels, cutting off the Titans from the west. Their direct assault from Brooklyn had failed, thanks to Percy. Luke probably wouldn't attack with split forces. Either he'd use a decoy where we expected him, and deploy his main forces from a different angle. Or if he thought he could overwhelm us with numbers, he was probably regrouping to send an entire barrage after us, from an approach where Percy couldn't explode a bridge on them or sweep them down a river.

Iphigenia made a funny noise in the back of her throat. I looked up in surprise. She was staring at my dagger with a strange expression on her face. Suddenly, it hit me why her name sounded so familiar. It was the same as the princess Achilles had meant to marry, the one he'd saved from being sacrificed to raise winds for the ancient Greek army. It wouldn't be the first time a mortal girl from ancient times had run off to join the Hunters. My friend Izzy was a prime example. But this Iphigenia bore nothing but a passing resemblance to the girl from my dreams.

And she was a descendent of Apollo—presumably not a demigod, but with demigod heritage. With the long, slender fingers of a musician’s.

'Iphigenia,' I said. 'Jenny?'

She froze. 'No one's called me that in years.'

'I—uh, I know about Hal.' It seemed too invasive to say I'd read his diary. Did Jenny—Iphigenia—even know what had happened to him after they'd parted ways? 'You gave him this dagger.'

I held it up for her to see. Iphigenia studied the blade carefully. 'I thought it was the one,' she murmured.

'You said—you said it would always protect its owner.'

A faraway look came into her eyes. 'That was what my mother told me. Story goes, it belonged to the first Iphigenia—yeah, family name—and got passed down generation after generation. I don't know if I believe it. I mean, that's a really long time for something to pass along. But it was supposed to be a gift from Athena herself.'
'Athena? Not Achilles?'

Iphigenia's brow furrowed. 'There's a lot of versions of the story,' she admitted. 'Some say Athena rescued Iphigenia from the sacrificial altar; some say it was Achilles, and the dagger was an earlier gift from Athena to *him*; still others say Iphigenia—the first one, that is—died and the whole thing is bunk. I don't know what really happened, but I *do* know that dagger is special.'

'How does it work?'

Iphigenia shrugged. 'It was always in the right place at the right time for me. Almost like a guide.' Her gaze drew distant again. I guessed she was thinking about Hal. 'Haven't you noticed that?'

There *had* been a strange incident two years ago, when Luke had tricked me into taking Atlas's burden. Trapped under the sky for a day, I should have died. But I'd held on, in part thanks to my dagger, which had mysteriously returned to me and showed me everyone who loved me, giving me strength to hold on. Was that part of its magic?

Magic like that had to draw power from somewhere, though. And if Iphigenia was right, its power had lasted since ancient times. The most powerful magic items got their power from an important event. Like a sacrifice.

I thought of Izzy, stabbing the Necklace of Harmonia with her own dagger when she pledged it to Athena to break the curse. Was it possible ...?

I guess it didn't really matter. Whatever power my dagger had, however it had obtained those powers, the important question was how I could use it to keep my friends and me alive.

Chapter End Notes

The paraphrasing of Luke and Thalia's adventures in Hal's mansion come, of course, from *The Diary of Luke Castellan* in *The Demigod Diaries*. It's my favourite short story of the lot, and I'm thrilled to get to bring it into the overall plot here!

Iphigenia is an actual Hunter (first—and only—appearance in *The Dark Prophecy* of the ToA series; at time of writing, I'm hoping the fourth ToA doesn't utterly canon-ball her role in this fic). Her backstory and connection to the girl who gave Hal the dagger is of course my fictional interpretation. Having already used the ancient-Greek-heroine-joined-the-Hunters plotline on Izzy/Ismene in *Necklace of Harmonia*, I elected not to repeat that here. There is little actually on the historical Iphigenia herself (though Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* made a decent starting point), so (very much like Izzy), the fleshing out of her character—and her descendants—is my pure invention. I was inspired in part by the book *House of Names* by Colm Tóibín for ideas on what the mythological Iphigenia's story could have been (though fair warning, that book is less on Iphigenia than it is her family).

A bit of time now on my soapbox to talk about Luke: I was fascinated by his backstory and the complexity of what brought him to serve Kronos. I do believe that up until it was too late, Luke believed that he was acting in Thalia's name—Kronos promised, after all, to bring Thalia back, and he delivered. That Thalia would have a completely different perspective of what it meant to betray her—or rather, what she stood for—is one of the heartbreaking moments of relationship breakdowns in the story. I have
enjoyed exploring this idea of what it actually means to stay true to someone—does it mean vengeance for the hurts they suffered, or does it mean forwarding the things they valued, even if those things hurt them? It's a question that doesn't have an easy answer (or indeed one at all) and I hope that considering this helps to make Luke more understandable as a character, and a person.
Grover Plants A Tree In A Hurricane

Chapter Summary

The next wave of attacks arrives from the north.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is brought to you by Google Maps, which was indispensable in working out the logistics of the Battle of Manhattan.

Grover's signal came at sunset. The dryads near Yankee Stadium had spotted a disturbance in the north. Sure enough, the video shield showed a massive army stampeding through the Bronx. A blazing golden ball preceded them, a bright star heralding their approach. Iphigenia ran for Thalia at once.

'They're coming,' I told her. 'An attack from the north.'

Thalia let out a sharp whistle. Every single timber wolf, falcon, and Hunter in the lobby sprang to attention. Our campers were slower to react. They yawned and rubbed at their eyes as they were shaken out of sleep.

I studied the nearest map, looking for the best place to position our forces. 'The Central Park Reservoir,' I decided. 'We could use the nature spirits' help.'

Thalia glanced around the lobby, at her Hunters, ready and alert, and our campers, who were mostly half-in, half-out of their armour. 'We'll meet you there.'

'Guess this is it,' Jake Mason said, checking his supply of explosives. 'Where do you want us?'

'We'll rendez-vous at the reservoir,' I said, 'but we shouldn't concentrate our forces. If Luke held any monsters in reserve—not to mention any of the other Titans ... I'll need to talk to Percy, but be ready for each of your cabins to take a flank.' I nodded to Will. 'We may need you guys to split up, so each group has a combat medic on hand.'

Will glanced at my arm. 'Are you going out there, too?'

I strapped on my breastplate and bronze greaves. 'I'm fine. We need every hand we can get.'

I found Percy asleep in a bed one floor down. A line of drool trickled from the side of his mouth. A smile tugged at the corner of my mouth. Some things never changed.

before I could rouse him, he sat bolt upright, smacking straight into my shield. I winced and moved it aside. 'Sorry, Percy! I was just about to wake you.'

He didn't answer. He seemed dazed, but surely he hadn't hit his head that hard?
'Percy?' I waved my hand in front of his face. 'What's wrong?'

He shook his head, clearing it. His eyes focused on me. 'Nothing. What—what are you doing in armour? You should be resting.'

Was everyone going to give me grief about my arm? 'I'm fine,' I said crossly. 'That nectar and ambrosia fixed me right up.'

'Uh-huh.' Percy raised his eyebrows. 'You can't seriously go out and fight.'

I pulled him out of bed with my good arm. 'You're going to need every person you have.' I told him what I'd seen in my shield.

'Yeah, I know,' Percy said. 'I had—'

'A dream.' Of course.

'A couple of them, actually. I saw Tyson leading a peanut butter charge.'

My face must have revealed my confusion, because he said, 'Uh, never mind. That's not important. I also saw Kronos at Medusa's place. You know, that garden gnome—'

'Emporium,' I finished. 'He regrouped his army, then,'

'Yeah. He was with Prometheus, and Ethan Nakamura. He ...' Like Thalia, he hesitated before continuing. I wondered if it was the same thing about Prometheus that Thalia hadn't wanted to talk about. 'He said to move their main forces into Central Park. And to unleash a "surprise."'

'A surprise. Oh, goody.'

Percy smiled faintly. 'Yeah, we don't get enough of those. And he wanted to know about our fight on the Williamsburg Bridge. You know, when you ...' He gestured guiltily at my right arm.

I shook my head to indicate that it was nothing. 'Go on.'

'He wanted to know where Ethan was aiming when you stepped in.'

My eyes drifted immediately to the small of Percy's back, to the spot that left him vulnerable. I could identify its precise location, which was weird since I couldn't see through his shirt, and it wasn't like his skin had a mark to indicate it anyway. But I could still feel that jolt of electricity that had run up my arm when he'd laid my fingers on it.

'Do you think Ethan suspects about your weak spot?'

'I don't know. He didn't tell Kronos anything, but if he figures it out—'

'We can't let him,' I said firmly. A fierce protectiveness rose in me. If I had to slit Nakamura's throat myself to shut him up, I would. After all Percy had done for the kid last year, sparing his life in the Labyrinth, his treachery was unspeakably vile.

Percy shrugged. 'I'll bonk him on the head harder next time. Any idea what surprise Kronos was talking about?'

If it had been in the shield, I hadn't noticed. 'I don't like surprises.'

'Agreed,' he said.
I helped him strap on his armour. "So are you going to argue about me coming along?"

His lips quirked. "Nah. You'd just beat me up."

It wasn't even all that funny a joke, but Percy just had that way of pulling a laugh out of me. I bumped him on the shoulder. "As long as you know it."

+++ 

We sent each cabin out to the bridges and tunnels on the southeast, letting them choose which to defend. There was no longer any tactical advantage to matching cabins to entrances now. Thalia's scouts had reported on the size of the army marching in from the north. Any forces that tried to slide through elsewhere would be small.

Percy and my cabin joined the Hunters and Grover's nature army, dividing up Central Park among us. Thalia and the Hunters booby-trapped the roads east and west of the reservoir so that the Titan army would be forced to march through the park. Mrs O'Leary trotted by Percy's heels, sniffing the air and growling at the distant scent of the monsters.

'The reservoir was a good call,' Percy said. 'I can use the water if we need it.'

I hadn't consciously thought about this when I'd sent Thalia out here, but I guess some part of me must have made this allowance for him naturally. Between Percy and Grover's knowledge of the park and its routes, we managed to identify the key defensive positions. We staked out a bunch of narrow trails where the monsters would have to pass through in compacted lines in order to move south.

It wasn't long before they appeared, shattering the silence of the sleeping city. In the lead, glowing like a sunburst in the middle of the park, was the golden Titan I'd seen days ago, the one who'd sacrificed Delphyne to wake Typhon. He was the bright star I'd seen in my shield.

Our defences took out most of the front line of attack. My siblings launched their Greek fire bombs and grappling hooks, bringing down the first wave of Laistrygonians. Thalia and her Hunters wiped out at least thirty *dracaenae* with their arrows. At Grover's signal, the earth itself began to pelt the monsters with rocks.

But the enemy had the might of sheer numbers. They continued forward relentlessly. And none of our defences even slowed the golden Titan. While the monsters had to split around the sides of the reservoir, he just walked straight onto the water's surface. Malcolm hurled a Greek fire bomb at him, but the deadly fire only fuelled his blinding light.

'Hyperion, the Lord of the Light,' I said. 'Titan of the east.'

Percy grimaced. 'Bad?'

I explained what I knew of Hyperion from my mythology books. Percy set his jaw. 'I'll keep him busy.'

What did he think he was going to do, duel him? This wasn't like facing Luke, with his invincible but mortal body. Hyperion was an actual Titan. I had a feeling invulnerability wouldn't apply if you actually combusted.

'Percy, even you can't—'

He had that stubborn look on his face that always preceded one of his crazy, reckless acts. 'Just keep
our forces together.'

Off he went, sprinting over the water's surface as easily as the golden Titan. There was nothing I could do. I led Athena cabin around the right flank of the reservoir to meet the incoming monsters. The narrow paths worked like a charm. There was only room for two giants, or three *dracaenae*, to march forward at a time without getting tripped up by tree roots and wild grass at the sides (courtesy of Grover's nature spirits). We cut them down as they advanced.

I kept an eye on the reservoir as we fought. Percy was battling Hyperion one on one, meeting every strike of the Titan's blazing sword with Riptide. He used the water as effectively as his sword, raising himself to strike at Hyperion's head, or attacking the Titan with hard jets and five-foot-tall waves. It stunned me how strong his powers had become—greater and more terrible than I'd ever seen. Practically on par with an immortal.

His earlier joke about me beating him up suddenly seemed less funny. It was a stupid thought to have in the middle of battle, but a small corner of my brain fumed that I could never keep up with him again. He was a one-man show.

Then a wave of bright energy rippled through the air. I screamed as Percy was flung backwards across the reservoir. He smashed to the ground near Grover, so hard I was sure it had killed him. But he got up without a scratch.

Hyperion charged at him.

It was the Williamsburg Bridge all over again, only more impressive. Water churned up from the reservoir, surrounding Percy in a swirling hurricane that repelled every attack levied at him. Every monster on Grover's flank was swept away by its howling wind. Hyperion couldn't get close enough to strike. The Lord of Light had lost his glow. The constant barrage of water had put out his flames.

Was this all Percy's newfound invulnerability? That had to help, but I remembered watching Percy call up a storm of ice and fire in the heart of Mount St Helens. Some of this had to be his own raw power. Even without the curse of Achilles, he was amazing.

On my side of the reservoir, campers and monsters alike had stopped to watch the incredible sight of Percy flinging a full-grown Titan to the ground. He tossed Hyperion across the path to Grover, who began a frantic melody on his reed pipes. A fresh breeze blew across the park, scented like new foliage. It had an energy I'd only sensed once before, deep in the unexplored caves of Carlsbad Caverns. Every satyr in the park joined in. Their music called forth a joyful song inside my heart—the power of Pan himself.

Grover had clearly embraced that power. He brought it forth, growing roots and branches around Hyperion. The Titan's protests were soon silenced as tree bark encased his body, his arms, his head.

'You are a very nice maple tree,' Grover said, and the transformation was complete.

The monsters, seeing their leader arborified, turned and fled. Thalia stared at the maple Titan with her jaw hanging open. My siblings cheered.

I took off around the edge of the reservoir, running to Percy. He was clapping Grover on the back when I got to them, congratulating him as though Hyperion's defeat had been all Grover's doing. But I hadn't forgotten the crazy stunt he'd pulled.

'Percy, that was the craziest, most reckless—'

My scold was interrupted by a high-pitched squeal. It was even higher than Will Solace's worst
taxicab whistle, and ten times as loud.

Grover gulped. 'Why does that sound like—it can't be!'

I didn't know what he was talking about, but I didn't like the sound of it. A surprise, Percy had said. It looked like we were about to find out what that was.

It appeared in the air, a bright pink pig with matching wings. If the wings weren't a clue that this was no ordinary pig, its size would have been a dead giveaway—it easily dwarfed a hot air balloon. It could be one of several crazed pigs in Greek mythology, most of which had been slain by one hero or another, except ...

Of course. Kronos would send the one creature that had never been defeated before.

'A sow!' I yelled, as the thing came swooping in for an attack. 'Take cover!' She landed on the right side of the reservoir, nearly crushing my brother Arthur on impact. Her hoof kicked him out of the way, straight across the reservoir. He landed with a splash near our side of the park. Two satyrs pulled him out by his grappling hook.

The narrow paths didn't bother this porcine terror. She simply tore up the trees, clearing a corridor twenty feet wide, and launched herself into the air again.

Percy wrinkled his nose at the cloud of pig gas that came wafting over the water. 'Don't tell me that thing is from Greek mythology.'

'Afraid so—the Clazmonian Sow.' I told him what I knew about it ... including its special status in the history books as the one pig no hero had ever dispatched.

The Titan army stopped retreating. They had been fleeing back towards the north, but with the arrival of their Clazmonian reinforcement, they turned around and marched forward with renewed vigour.

Percy grabbed Arthur's grappling hook. 'That pig has to go. I'll take care of it.' He jerked his head towards the advancing monsters. 'You guys hold the rest of the enemy. Push them back!'

Grover eyed them nervously. 'But, Percy, what if we can't?'

I squared my shoulders, wincing at the sharp stab of pain in my right one. I was probably way past the point of overexertion. But I didn't have a choice. We had to hold back the enemy.

Percy clapped Grover on the back. 'Retreat if you need to. Just slow them down. I'll be back as soon as I can.'

He flung Arthur's grappling hook into the air, straight at the sow. The moment it connected, the pig jerked and changed direction, dragging Percy skyward.

'Come on,' I said to Grover. I was desperately tired and my stupid shoulder wound was hurting more than I wanted to admit, but there was nothing for it. I raised my good arm and shouted, 'Athena cabin, to me!'

Holding back the enemy was harder than ever. The Clazmonian Sow had trampled a path straight out of either side of the park, which meant that the invading monsters were no longer confined to the narrow trails. They fanned out all the way to Broadway and Park Avenue. Grover and Thalia spread left to defend west Manhattan, while I took my cabin east.
It was pandemonium. No longer confined to Central Park, the monsters swarmed the streets. *Dracaeae* and hellhounds stampeded over sleeping mortals. Giants trampled cars in the road. Some of them met with Daedalus's statues, but our automaton army were too scattered to form a tight line of defence. Mrs O'Leary weaved among them, almost indistinguishable from the enemy hounds. I just hoped she hadn't gone native.

'Retreat!' I yelled. We couldn't fight them off from our current position. We'd have to give up several blocks to form a more cohesive barricade.

Jake Mason met us on East Fifty-ninth, where his cabin had been guarding the bridge.

'We can try to use the tram line on Fifty-third Street,' Nyssa Barrera suggested. 'Rig it like a trap wire.'

'Go,' I said. Nyssa and two of her siblings ran off. I led the rest of them further south, sprinting through side streets and back alleys to stay ahead of the monsters. Above us, the Clazmonian Sow shrieked. Percy was no longer dangling from his rope. He'd been replaced by a large bronze statue. I didn't have time to wonder what he'd done. We ran to Grand Central Station, where a line of Daedalus's statues clanked back and forth.

'Statues!' I shouted. 'Command sequence: Daedalus Twenty-three. Engage monster army! Begin activation!'

I nodded to Jake, who ran to the front of the statues to lead them into battle. Meanwhile, Malcolm and I spread the rest of our forces along East Forty-second.

I can't even begin to describe everything I saw in battle. Some were too quick, like Percy flying past on Blackjack, chasing down the pig and its passenger. Some were too painful, like the two Laistrygonians who broke through our defensive line and clubbed my sister Celia on the head at once. Some were simply bizarre, like the statue of Hermes that came charging out of nowhere down Park Avenue with a fleet of metal lions behind him.

We got pushed relentlessly back, block by block. Judging from the smoke and shouting on the west side, Grover and Thalia weren't doing much better. Mrs O'Leary reappeared, shaking a telkhine in her mouth like a rag doll. A pack of hellhounds set upon her and she bounded off again. Demeter cabin and Pollux ran up from the Queens Midtown Tunnel. I sent them across to Sixth Avenue, where Grover was under siege from a legion of enemy demigods. The Hunters fell back to form a line of traps on Thirty-seventh Street, but the monsters were wising up to it. A line of Hyperboreans marched into the Park Avenue viaduct on Thirty-ninth, bypassing Thalia's defences completely.

'We've got to cut them off at the exit!' I yelled. Malcolm and our sister Holly sprinted after me. She was clinging to our battle standard as if this were capture the flag.

We got there just as the first Hyperborean emerged. Holly got right in his face, shoving the Athena flag up his nose. He sneezed out a storm of snow flurries. When I looked up, Holly was encased in a block of ice. I ran to her, trying to chip it away with my dagger.

Malcolm yelled in rage and stabbed at the giant with his javelin. The Hyperborean grabbed the weapon by its point and snapped it in half. He raised his arms to bash Malcolm in the head.

Then out of nowhere, Percy leapt onto the giant, yanking his head back. He jabbed the Hyperborean in the nose on his way down. Flecks of blue blood spattered the pavement, turning to ice the moment it hit the concrete. Percy landed in a shower of frost that turned his hair snow white.
Hyperborean took a deep breath, preparing to turn Percy into an ice sculpture.

'Hey, Ugly!' I waved my arms to get his attention, ignoring the complaint from my right shoulder. It wasn't my best insult, but it did the trick. The giant roared and turned. Immediately, Percy plunged Riptide into the back of his knee. The Hyperborean crumpled from the leg up, like a mirror splintering into a million shards of glass.

I locked eyes with Percy. 'Thanks. The pig?'

'Pork chops.'

'Good,' I said. My shoulder gave another twinge of pain, like *can we rest now?* I willed it to shut up.

Percy's gaze darted to my injury, his forehead wrinkling in concern.

'I'm fine, Percy!' I insisted before he could get on my case. 'Come on! We've got plenty of enemies left.'

With Percy by my side, we got through more monsters than before. He fought like a demon, sweeping Riptide through the enemy ranks like, well, like an actual riptide. Before the monsters knew what was happening, their legs were cut off beneath them. I tried to keep up as best as I could. With my arm hampering me more than I cared to admit, I resorted to craftier tactics. I put on my invisibility hat and waded out unseen into the monster lines, delivering as many stealth kills as I could.

Even with all this, our front lines were pushed back. Percy was good, but he couldn't be everywhere at once. The campers at the southern bridges made their way back, but they had to fight through enemy lines that had crept around the outsides of our defences and swung back to come at us from downtown. We lost so much ground that we were only a few blocks from the Empire State Building. I didn't even know how many of us were left fighting.

And to the east, Kronos himself was advancing on a chariot as bright as Hyperion. Even though he was still two blocks away, I swear I could see the slow, smug smile that didn't belong to Luke spread across his face.

'We have to fall back to the doorway,' I said desperately. 'Hold it at all costs!' There were too few of us left fighting. The more we spread out, the likelier that Kronos would find a way through when we were busy with his monsters.

Percy ground his teeth. I could tell he agreed, even if he didn't like the idea. He started to shout to the others, but his voice was drowned out by the loud, clear note of a hunting horn.

We looked at Thalia.

'Not the Hunters,' she said, puzzled. 'We're all here.'

'Then who?' Percy asked.

More horns followed, echoing through the city. The encroaching army paused, looking back at Kronos as if to ask, *was that a signal?* Kronos himself seemed mystified. He turned his head back and forth, searching for the source of the sound.

Then the cavalry arrived.
Chapter Summary

Two new arrivals make it through the Morpheus enchantment.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Two years ago, Luke had cornered Percy, Grover, and me on the *Princess Andromeda* in Miami. We'd only escaped because a herd of Party Ponies had ridden to our rescue.

This was almost exactly like that.

The centaurs barrelled through the northern flank of the monster army, sweeping them straight into their own lines on the south. Like a crazy, multi-coloured clown convention, they stampeded into the block, shooting off fart arrows and spiked pinwheels, and shafts with boxing gloves that delivered continuous sucker punches to the monsters' faces.

'Percy!' Chiron was the only one of his brethren dressed in armour. He carried a proper recursive bow and a quiver of pointed arrows that he shot into the enemy lines with deadly accuracy. 'Sorry we're late!'

'WASTE MONSTERS!' bellowed a centaur. He aimed a massive paintball gun at a line of hellhounds and sprayed a double round of pink balls through them. 'PARTY PONIES! SOUTH FLORIDA CHAPTER!'

This raised an echo of responding cries from the various centaur affiliations. The Titan army panicked. They turned and fled, ignoring Kronos's orders to stand their ground. One of the Hyperboreans tripped up in his haste to retreat and smashed the golden chariot flat. I got a glimpse of Luke's face before he was squashed under the big blue butt. His expression was almost comical—a mix of surprise and disgust, exactly like the time I'd slugged him with a mud bomb during capture the flag.

Then his giants dragged his banged-up chariot away, towards the East River. We surged forward with the centaurs, exhilarated by this turn of the tide, until Chiron cried, 'HOLD! On your promise, *hold*!'

The centaurs kept going for a few more blocks, Percy sprinting alongside them.

'Percy!' For a moment, I wondered if he *could* pull back. Just like on the Williamsburg Bridge, the thirst for the fight was taking over. Was it all part of the curse of Achilles?

But then he stopped. He stood for a few seconds with his sword raised and pointed at Luke's retreating back. Then he turned around and came back to me.

'Chiron's smart,' I told him. It was a wise strategic decision. Even with the centaurs' back-up, we couldn't afford to spread ourselves too thin. 'We need to regroup.'

His fingers flexed around Riptide. 'But the enemy—'
'They're not defeated. But the dawn is coming. At least we've bought some time.'

Percy glared eastward, where the last of the monsters were disappearing around the NYU Medical Center. I wrapped my fingers gently around his elbow. At my touch, he seemed to relax.

'Come on,' I said, and led him back to the foot of the Empire State Building.

Chiron sent his brethren off to get breakfast and root beer, an idea that excited them as much as the thrill of wasting monsters. Once they'd gone, I hugged him tight. 'Thank you.'

Mrs O'Leary bounded up to join the group hug, which felt like getting a hug from Tyson—exuberant and rib-crushing. Chiron patted her, then pushed her away. 'Enough of that, dog. Yes, I'm glad to see you, too.'

Percy shook his hand. 'Chiron, thanks. Talk about saving the day.'

'I'm sorry it took so long.' He winced as he described the task of organising the Party Ponies to ride in.

I shook my head. As far as I was concerned, he'd turned up just in time. We hadn't even expected help to come through, what with Morpheus's enchantments. 'How'd you get through the magic defences around the city?'

'They slowed us down a bit, but I think they're intended mostly to keep mortals out,' Chiron said. 'Kronos doesn't want puny humans getting in the way of his great victory.'

'So maybe other reinforcements can get through,' Percy suggested. I didn't know who else he was hoping for. Did we even have more reinforcements on the outside? Besides the gods, of course, but they were all busy with Typhon. Chiron gave us a quick status update on that battle: last he'd heard, the storm giant had crossed the Appalachians, throwing down Dionysus and Hephaestus in the process. The other Olympians were still fighting.

It became clear why Kronos had waited all summer to launch his attack, despite his eagerness to kill Percy. He'd been biding his time, making sure his army was at full strength. He wasn't going to risk the slightest oversight thwarting his goal. And now he had Typhon, the worst monster of all, as his ultimate back-up ...

'He will arrive in New York by this time tomorrow,' Chiron predicted. 'Once he and Kronos combine forces—'

Percy's foot tapped nervously against the pavement. 'Then what chance do we have? We can't hold out another day.'

Thalia emerged from the lobby of the Empire State Building, covered in monster guts from head to toe. 'We'll have to,' she said. 'I'll see about some new traps around the perimeter.'

Chiron went off to help her. I sighed and began polishing off my knife blade.

Percy watched me for a few minutes. 'At least your mom is okay,' he said at last.

'If you call fighting Typhon okay.' My relief at Chiron's timely save was fading into dread for what the next day—well, tonight, to be precise—might bring. 'Percy, even with the centaurs' help, I'm starting to think—'

'I know,' he said. His eyes were a swirl of emotions that were hard to pick out. Apprehension,
maybe, and ... was that regret? 'Listen, there were some ... some visions Hestia showed me.'

I remembered the strange way he'd acted after greeting Hestia on Mount Olympus, like he'd just woken from a trance. Shortly after that, he'd accused Hermes of abandoning Luke's mom. And when I'd told him about Luke coming to find me, for once, he hadn't condemned Luke. It was as if he'd finally seen things from Luke's perspective.

'You mean about Luke?' I guessed.

'Yeah.' He looked at my knife. 'You and Thalia and Luke. The first time you met. And the time you met Hermes.'

The scenes Luke had recorded in his diary played through my head. *All I know is that this is my family, and I need to keep them safe. I won't be like my dad.*

I closed my eyes, focusing on the feel of my dagger against my palm. Then I sheathed it and exhaled slowly. 'Luke promised he'd never let me get hurt. He said ... he said we'd be a new family, and it would turn out better than his.'

Percy's hand moved forward like he meant to touch my arm, but didn't quite dare. 'Thalia talked to me earlier. She's afraid—'

'That I can't face Luke,' I finished. This must have been what she hadn't wanted to say to me earlier.

'But there's something else you should know.' Percy's hand fell back to his side. 'Ethan Nakamura seemed to think Luke was still alive inside his body. Maybe even fighting Kronos for control.'

Hope fluttered in my chest, a bird spreading its wings to take flight. After so many months of Percy's insistence that Luke was Kronos, that my friend no longer existed, to hear proof that I might have been right all along ...

'I didn't want to tell you.'

I thought of the repeated arguments we'd had over this issue. How I'd hid Luke's visit from him. Why he'd hid *this* from me. I thought of him holding my hand when Will healed my shoulder and my fingers brushing over his Achilles spot, and it finally occurred to me why he might have been so furious all those times I'd defended Luke.

I wanted him to understand what I felt—why I wanted Luke back, but also why it shouldn't matter to Percy that I did.

I bit my lip and gazed up at the Empire State Building. It rose before us in its permanent, enduring glory. The cloud that was Mount Olympus shimmered faintly above its needle spire.

Hestia had once asked me why I wanted to be an architect. The truth was, it wasn't just buildings I wanted to create. I wanted to build a *world* that would never change—including the people in it.

*Relationships are like architecture.*

I looked back at Percy, at the unmarred perfection of his skin, courtesy of the curse of Achilles. At the faint grey streak running through his hair, testament of his loyalty to me.

I had to believe I could keep the people I loved from being taken away from me.

I swallowed hard. 'Percy, for so much of my life, I felt like everything was changing, all the time. I
didn't have anyone I could rely on. I ran away when I was seven. Then with Luke and Thalia I thought I'd found a family, but it fell apart almost immediately. I tucked my hair behind my ears. 'What I'm saying ... I hate it when people let me down, when things are temporary. I think that's why I want to be an architect.'

I held his gaze. His face was carefully neutral. Did he understand what I was trying to get at?

'To build something permanent. A monument to last a thousand years.'

I couldn't believe he remembered. I'd told him that years ago, after he'd seen the visions the Sirens had shown me in the Sea of Monsters. 'I guess that sounds like my fatal flaw again.'

'I guess I understand how you feel.' My heart leapt, but Percy continued, 'But Thalia's right. Luke has already betrayed you so many times.'

I resisted the urge to shake him. He was missing the point completely. I wasn't just trying to talk about Luke.

But Percy remained as obtuse as ever. 'He was evil even before Kronos. I don't want him to hurt you any more.'

It was such a mixed statement—concern and condemnation in the same breath. *Evil.* It was a word that left no room for argument. It eclipsed the complexity of Luke's struggles. If Hestia had shown Percy Luke's side of the story, if Percy had stood up to Hermes on Luke's behalf, how could he fail to see that Luke was a complete person, bad *and* good?

I pressed my lips tightly together. 'And you'll understand if I keep hoping there's a chance you're wrong.'

Percy glanced towards the medical station Will had set up across the street. A constant flow of the wounded kept tripping in. His face hardened into his brooding look, the one that always got him in trouble with adults who assumed he was plotting mischief. There was something darker about it now. When he turned his stare on me, it was like being put through a radioactive scanner.

'What?' I asked, unnerved.

He blinked, his expression clearing. 'Um ... nothing, I guess.'

Then without warning, he took off down Fifth Avenue.

'Percy! Where are you going?' My heart sped up. What had just gone through his mind? Did he mean to race off to challenge Luke by himself?

When he stopped next to a blue Prius with a bashed-in hood, I was almost relieved. Then I saw who was inside. I didn't recognise the driver until I saw his unconscious companion in the passenger seat.

'Your mom,' I whispered.

Percy shook the door handles. 'They—they must've seen those blue lights in the sky.' The car doors refused to budge. 'I need to get them out.'

'Percy.' I put my hand on his arm.

He hit the windshield. I don't know if he was actually trying to punch straight through it. Thankfully, it didn't shatter. 'I can't leave them here! I have to move them. I have to—'
My heart softened at his panic. Though he sounded like he was losing his mind, I understood this. He was terrified for his mom. This was the Percy I knew, the one to whom family meant everything.

'Percy, just—just hold on.' I spotted Chiron just around the corner and waved him over. 'We can push the car to a side street, all right? They're going to be fine.'

Even when Chiron reassured him that his family wouldn't be hurt by the Morpheus enchantment and we should focus on fighting the Titans, Percy wasn't convinced. He rubbed his hands distractedly over his face. It was obvious he couldn't think straight when his mom was in danger.

'I—' He stopped abruptly and pressed his hands to the backseat window. 'No way.'

I looked inside the car. Strapped into the back seat was a large ceramic vase the size of a small child, with zebra stripes of geometric patterns. Although Thalia hadn't described the pithos Prometheus had handed over, I knew instantly this had to be it. But ...

'That's impossible!' I said. 'I thought you left that at the Plaza.'

'Locked in a vault,' Percy said grimly.

Chiron stared at the pithos. 'That isn't—'

Percy nodded. 'Pandora's jar. Prometheus came to find us earlier.' He repeated what Thalia had told me, but in more detail. 'He ... showed me a bunch of visions. About—about how the gods failed their kids.' He didn't meet my eyes when he said this, and I guessed it was more stuff to do with Luke. 'He wanted me to surrender to Kronos. Obviously I didn't. That's why he left me the jar. He said to open it when I was ready to surrender. If I'd seen enough destruction.'

'Then the jar is yours,' Chiron surmised. 'It will follow you and tempt you to open it, no matter where you leave it. It will appear when you are weakest.'

I stared at the jar. When you are weakest. Was it the danger to his parents that crippled Percy? Or our previous conversation about Luke?

I don't want him to hurt you any more.

A sudden chill settled over me. My mind dredged up the dream I'd had the night after Percy returned from Operation Trojan Bomb: yet another interpretation my subconscious had dredged up of the Great Prophecy. Percy had chosen to take a fatal blow for me, the way I'd jumped in front of Nakamura's knife for him. Only in the dream, there had been no miraculous save.

It goes beyond personal loyalty, my mother had warned. What will he choose when his need to play the hero conflicts with the wisest course of action?

If he took a deadly hit for me now ... it'd be like sacrificing a queen for a pawn. Percy was the one with the power, with the invulnerability (aside from that one secret spot). Only he had a hope of defeating Kronos. In the defence of Olympus, I was expendable. Percy was not.

Percy nudged me aside and sliced a hole in the backseat window. 'We'll put the car in neutral, push them out of the way. And take that stupid jar to Olympus.'

Chiron handed the pithos to Thalia, who disappeared with it into the building. 'A good plan. But Percy ...'

The whirr of helicopter blades startled us. I scanned the skies. It wasn't hard to spot the source of the
disturbance: a dark red chopper wobbled over the apartment blocks in the east and made its way unevenly towards us, pitching from side to side. Splashed across its side in bright green letters was a logo that sent an irrational spurt of irritation throbbing through my veins.

*DE.* I'd only seen it once before, monogrammed onto notebook paper, but the logo was scarred into my brain alongside the image of Rachel Dare lounging on Percy's couch.

But how was this possible? 'What is she doing here? How did she get through the barrier?' Why wasn't she asleep like the rest of Manhattan?

Chiron seemed mystified. 'Who? What mortal would be insane enough—'

Insane was right. Two blocks from us, the helicopter did a sudden forward roll, plunging towards the roofs of the towers.

Chiron clucked his tongue. 'The Morpheus enchantment! The foolish mortal pilot is asleep.'

I glared at Percy, waiting for him to make a call, but he seemed crippled with indecision, just like with his parents. Anger resurfaced through me. What had possessed Rachel Dare to come charging in? Now we had to figure out how to help her. As if we had time or energy to spare. Percy was already losing his mind over his parents.

The helicopter fell faster. We didn't have much time. I knew what Percy would have done if he hadn't been so stricken with worry. (Over Rachel. A knife twisted sharply in my stomach.) I put my fingers in my mouth and whistled. A second later, the pegasus Guido landed in front of us.

'Come on, Percy,' I said, trying to hide the ire in my voice. 'We have to save your friend.'

*Chapter End Notes*

The exchange between Percy and Annabeth about Luke in this chapter has long struck me as a perfect example of two people completely missing the point of what the other is trying to convey, and getting utterly frustrated because of it. If you just look at the lines of dialogue in turn, it reads a little oddly. But that's where perspective and context come in, and it's amazing what we can infer about their respective states of mind without explicitly being told.
I Make An Emergency Landing

Chapter Summary

Annabeth pulls Rachel out of a bad situation.

Chapter Notes

This chapter refers a bit to the plot of Necklace of Harmonia. It's not absolutely necessary to have read that story to follow this story on the whole, but parts of this chapter may be confusing if you haven't read that fic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was Percy's turn to ride behind me, clinging to my waist. When we neared the helicopter, we could hear Rachel screaming at the top of her lungs, a high, terrified sound that was marginally more annoying than her regular voice.

Getting to her was tricky. Every time Guido tried to fly us closer, the helicopter lurched, turning its spinning blades towards us, and we had to abort, fast. One time the blades came so close, if I hadn't forced us down, our heads would have gone plummeting to earth without the rest of us.

'Ideas?' Percy asked hopelessly.

I guess it wouldn't do any good to ask Rachel to open the door and jump. Besides the fact that she probably wouldn't even hear us over her desperate screeching, there was the mortal pilot to consider. We couldn't leave him to plunge to his own death. Which left only one option.

'You're going to have to take Guido and get out.'

His arm tightened around me. 'What are you going to do?'

I focused on the helicopter. I'd never flown one before, but it couldn't be that different from a Camel. Plus, the theory section on my student pilot test had included a small bit on other aviation craft. And I'd read all of Daedalus's notes on flying machines. The physics of flight couldn't change that much.

I detached myself from Percy and urged Guido into a dive. 'Duck!'

Percy ducked. I sprang off Guido's back. My fingers closed around the side rail just under the helicopter's door. I'd intended for Guido to swoop beneath the chopper, but I'd miscalculated its rate of descent. Guido's wing hit the side of the helicopter and he veered off course. I hoped it hadn't done any damage.

'Hang in there!' Percy shouted, sounding terrified. I couldn't see him. I had to focus on pulling myself up into the helicopter.

Rachel had finally stopped screaming. She flung open the helicopter door and grabbed my hand. For a non-athletic mortal, she had a pretty strong grip. With her help, I heaved myself into the cockpit.
'Are you crazy?' we yelled at the same time.

I shoved her away and pushed the sleeping pilot out of his seat. The helicopter's controls weren't completely different from a plane's, thank the gods. There was no yoke, but the pedals for directional control were in the same place, and so was the central joystick. Unfortunately, neither of these seemed responsible for generating lift from the blades. We nearly slammed into the university building on East Thirty-fourth before I found the lever on the left side of the seat. The pilot had fallen on it when he passed out, sending the chopper into an uncontrolled descent. I yanked it back into position and urged us back into a hover.

'Oh my god,' Rachel said. 'That was the craziest thing ever.'

For the first time, I noticed how she was dressed. A loose t-shirt hung over her artfully distressed shorts, paired with designer sandals. It was similar to the outfit she'd worn to the beach with Percy. What did she think this was, some fun holiday excursion?

'Crazy is flying a helicopter straight into a warzone,' I said waspishly.

Rachel pursed her lips and made no further comment while I landed the helicopter on Fifth Avenue. Percy ran up to us as soon as I cut the engine. He helped Rachel pull her sleeping pilot onto the sidewalk, but then he returned to me, looking impressed. That made me feel slightly better.

'I didn't know you could fly a helicopter.'

'Neither did I,' I admitted. I explained how I'd managed to guess at the controls.

'You saved my life,' Rachel said in a small voice.

My bad shoulder twitched in annoyance. 'Yeah, well ... Let's not make a habit of it.' Pulling myself into a helicopter from mid-air hadn't done my knife wound any favours, but I refused to let on how much it hurt. 'What are you doing here, Dare? Don't you know better than to fly into a warzone?'

'I—I had to be here.' Rachel looked at Percy, as though hoping he'd back her up. 'I knew Percy was in trouble.'

Like it was her job to look after Percy. My fingers itched to strangle her with her jaunty red ponytail. What difference did she think she could make in a demigod war?

Or maybe ... maybe it did make a difference to Percy. He looked calmer now that she was safely on the ground. His consternation over Pandora's pithos and Prometheus's offer had faded.

Either way, here was one more person Percy could potentially play the hero for.

'Got that right,' I muttered. To my horror, angry tears were pricking at my eyes. Quickly, I made up some excuse and stalked off towards the Empire State Building. I heard Percy calling after me, but I didn't turn.

He didn't follow me.

Chiron and the campers were pushing cars out of the main road when I stormed up.

'What are you doing?' I snapped. 'Those could make a defensive barrier!'

'But—the mortals inside ...' Jake stammered.

I looked through the windshield. The peaceful faces of Percy's mom and stepdad made me
backtrack. 'Oh. Um. Yeah, carry on.'

Chiron guided me away. 'We're taking care of them. Are you okay, Annabeth?'

I gritted my teeth. 'I'm fine. So's Percy and his friend, if you were wondering.'

Chiron sighed. 'I will go talk to them.' He glanced at my shoulder. 'You should get that looked at.'

My blood was still boiling when I walked up to the entrance of the Empire State Building. Injured campers milled around in the streets. What sort of idiots were they? We had a building right there that we would defend.

'Can't you guys move operations indoors?' I barked.

Will looked taken aback. 'We're about to. We just haven't had time—'

'And what's the status on our defences? Do we have scouts on the perimeter? Did someone schedule rotations for watches? Has—'

'Annabeth.' Thalia put a hand on my right shoulder, then winced and changed shoulders when I flinched. 'Sorry. We've got it under control. You need to calm down.'

'I—'

'Come on. We're setting things up inside the lobby. You should let Will check your shoulder.'

Under Thalia's gentle reassurance, my anger fizzled out. I let her guide me into the building. Just as Will had said, the Apollo kids were slowly moving their med bay inside. The Hunters had set up neat rows of bunks along the lobby walls. They were silver, triple-decked beds with deer-patterned sheets tucked into hospital corners. Half of them were already occupied by exhausted warriors.

Will came over with a bottle of nectar and a stack of bandages. 'Let's take a look at that shoulder.'

'So what happened out there?' Thalia asked as Will prodded at my shoulder. 'Something about a rogue helicopter?'

'Someone flew in. A—a friend of Percy's.' How did I even begin to explain Rachel?

'She came to help?'

'Yes, but—'

'Someone flew in. A—a friend of Percy's.' How did I even begin to explain Rachel?

'She came to help?'

'I don't know. Percy's talking to her now. I guess we'll find out.'

Will cleared his throat. 'Good news, Annabeth—you haven't re-opened the wound. But there's a really bad sprain in the surrounding ligaments. You've got to stop over-working it.'

'Yeah, well, if monsters would kindly stop attacking.'

Will smiled faintly. 'Try and rest for now, okay?'

I sat cross-legged next to Thalia on one of the bunks. Despite the activity around us, the lobby seemed way too empty.

'Is this all of us?' I asked. There were maybe thirty kids still in fighting shape. Plus however many satyrs Grover still had. And five hundred temperamental Party Ponies. I had no idea how many fighters the Titans still had in reserve.
'I have Hunters looking for anyone who's not accounted for,' Thalia said. 'I hope they're just missing. But ...' She couldn't finish the sentence. I thought of Michael, lost on the Williamsburg Bridge, and Celia, bludgeoned by the Laistrygonians. A lump came into my throat.

Did Luke realise what was happening? Was he despairing as Kronos marshalled the Titans' forces through his body? Percy had said he seemed to be fighting back. Did that mean he regretted what had happened?

'Thalia,' I said, 'do you remember when we went to Luke's home?'

Thalia picked at the edge of the deer-patterned sheet. 'Percy told you about Prometheus?'

'Sort of. But I remember ... well, after we left, Luke was so determined to take care of us. Do you think we could still reach him?'

She was silent for such a long time, I wondered if she'd fallen asleep. Finally, she said, very softly, 'Annabeth, I don't know how well you remember this, but we ran into a lot of monsters after we left Connecticut. And half of them—well, we could have avoided them easily, but Luke insisted on fighting them.'

'To keep us safe.'

Thalia shook her head. 'Because he needed something to fight.' She twisted the corner of the sheet around her finger. 'I've thought a lot about this, Annabeth. I kept wondering how he could have done what he did. And I realised—he cared more about being angry at Hermes than anything else. I think if he'd actually stopped to think things through instead of charging off after every monster he could stick his sword in, he'd have realised his dad did care about him. But he never wanted to believe that. It was his way or no way. And if he's taken on the curse of Achilles, like you said ... well, I've learnt a bit since becoming a Hunter about how these things work.'

'What, you guys have to bathe in enchanted rivers, too?'

Thalia's smile didn't quite reach her eyes. 'Do you know why we remain mortal in combat?'

'Because it's incentive to fight better?'

'Because it's virtually impossible to build a community of immortals. Total immortality strips away your connection to people. It's why the gods never stay with just one person. They don't have a concept of personal loyalty to ground them—especially when mortals are so different.'

'But our parents—'

Thalia pre-empted my question. 'It doesn't mean they don't care. But stuff like love and loss ... at least the way we feel it ... those things matter more when your life can end. So bathing in the River Styx, becoming invincible ... well, I don't know for sure, but I think it's like trying to make yourself immortal. You practically have to give up your soul—the part that cares about anything at all.'

I thought of something Hestia had told me earlier this summer: *Without that anchor, it is too easy to lose sight of who we are, to be cast adrift.*

'Is that why there's an Achilles spot? To anchor them to mortality?'

Thalia looked stunned. 'I—I hadn't thought about that.'

'What do you think Luke's anchor was?'
Thalia flinched. 'I don't know.' There was a queer catch in her voice. 'Do you think ...' I turned over the first bead on my camp necklace, the one with Thalia's pine tree. Kronos must have targeted her at the start of summer because he thought she was his Achilles heel. 'Could it be you?'

Thalia's face was expressionless. She inhaled slowly, then let her breath out in one long whoosh. 'I hope not. Because if it was ... then it's too late for him.'

She got up and went to join the Hunters on their side of the lobby. Izzy was among them. She looked over and gave me a small wave.

I lay down and fell into a thin sleep.

In my dreams, I sank through pitch-black waters. I tried to hold my breath, but my lungs were ready to burst. Tangled around my arms and legs were thin threads that dragged me into the deep, like a spider reeling in its prey.

*Help,* I thought, struggling to free myself.

*You need an anchor.* Hestia's voice drifted to me through the rippling water. *Look down.*

It was the wrong direction. I needed to go up to the surface! Surely I'd drown if I sank any deeper. But when I looked, I saw a faint light below me, like sun on a far-off surface.

The silky threads around my limbs glowed. Their loose ends shone blue and green, like light sticks in the dark water. As soon as I stopped resisting them, a bubble of air formed around my head, allowing me to breathe again. The strings re-oriented me, turning me towards the real surface of the pool.

Bright patches appeared in the water as I drifted along, showing moving pictures like in my video shield. There was my mother, dressed in full combat armour, running on the wind towards Typhon. There was Rachel Dare in her beach shorts, riding on Chiron's back, her green eyes extraordinarily bright. Her face flickered, and for a moment she seemed to be someone else, a woman with sad eyes. There was Luke, pacing an open-air plaza under a line of international flags, swinging Backbiter—was it sword or scythe?—and cursing, 'I will slice Percy Jackson into a thousand pieces!'

And there was Percy, laughing on the Williamsburg Bridge as he drove back the enemy, the expression on his face a mirror image of Luke's.

Ten feet from the surface, I stopped drifting upwards. My anchor lines tugged me in two different directions. The blue line looped over my shoulders and pulled me left. The green line hooked around my waist and pulled me right.

Janus's faces hovered just above me. *Choose, Annabeth. Which will you anchor?*

I looked up and saw the problem. Each of my lines connected to a different man on either side of my bottomless pool. They were staring at each other with expressions of loathing so intense, they radiated dark energy across the water's surface.

Luke and Percy glowered at each other, then peered down at me. When I turned to Luke, the surface of the pool magnified his face, streaked with tears and contorted with pain. I saw him carrying me across Half-Blood Hill, stumbling away from the tree that was Thalia. He looked down and whispered, 'You still have me. I'm your family. Promise. I won't let anything happen to you.'

On Percy's side, the image wavered and became *his* face, peering at me from a dark zoo transport.
lorry. His arms were wrapped around his knees as he cocked his head to one side and said, 'We're a team, remember?'

I heard my own voice say, 'I don't know what my mom will do. I just know I'll fight next to you.'

'Why?'

'Because you're my friend, Seaweed Brain.'

His face split into a hopeful grin. 'And we always help each other.'

The threads tore relentlessly at me, intensifying the simultaneous, bidirectional pull towards both Percy and Luke. My bad shoulder screamed from the pressure. It was slowly ripping me apart.

The bubble of air protecting me vanished. Water swirled into my mouth and nose, filling my lungs. I had to make a choice. Either string could pull me to safety ... but only if I cut the other.

I found my dagger. Cut the string.

But which one?

They were glowing so brightly now, I could no longer tell which was which. I swung out ...

'Annabeth!'

My dagger connected with the mattress of my bunk bed. Down feathers exploded out of it, covering me and the girl standing by my side.

Izzy brushed feathers from her hair and gently extracted my dagger from my hand. 'You probably shouldn't sleep holding a knife.'

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. 'I didn't exactly plan it.'

Izzy turned the dagger over in her hands, examining it. 'I never got a good look at this.'

'Well, I didn't exactly flaunt it at St Catherine's,' I said.

She smiled. 'And I was more worried about that necklace you picked up. I heard you destroyed it in the end.'

'Yeah.' I thought of the junkyard in Arizona where I'd eliminated both the Necklace of Harmonia and its evil fox-spirit bearer. Hephaestus had agreed to remove the curse, but he'd warned me that curses didn't just reside in objects. They grew from the actions of their owners.

'I talked to Iphigenia,' Izzy said. 'I never realised—well, when I sacrificed my dagger to Athena, I didn't think about how she might repurpose it. And I'm not absolutely certain—it was such a long time ago—but it does seem to be the same one.' She held the hilt up to the light. The etchings were faint and worn from regular use, but she seemed to recognise their patterns. 'It makes sense. I did wonder how you managed to overcome the necklace's curse.'

My eyes widened. 'Iphigenia said the dagger protects its owner.' Last year, my mother had observed that I'd had some mysterious protection against the curse of Harmonia. Kitsune, the evil fox spirit, had hinted that this protection had somehow come from Luke. I'd never figured out how any of this was possible, but now it made sense.

My chest tightened. I'd hoped that Luke had been looking out for me, maybe even interfering with
Kronos's plans all along. But if it had simply been because he'd given me my dagger long ago, never knowing that its protection would extend so far ...

'I'd still be careful.' Izzy handed the dagger back to me. 'Magic objects—well, they're not that different from curses. They get their power from what people do with them.'

'You made a sacrifice to save your family,' I said. 'And Achilles saved Iphigenia—well, the first one —from becoming a sacrifice.'

Izzy got a faraway look in her eyes. 'Like I said, curses, protections—they're dangerous things to mess with. They rely on oaths, and ... well, it can get really messy if those are broken.'

I turned this over in my head. 'Izzy, what happened to your family?'

Her expression turned soft and sad. 'They all died. My parents—well, you know that story, don't you?'

I nodded. The tragedy of Oedipus and Jocasta was one of those famous tales meant to warn people that you could never thwart prophecy.

'The necklace incited my brothers to war over the kingdom. They killed each other in battle. Then my sister went crazy from the visions the necklace showed her. We had to shut her up for her own safety, while I went on pilgrimage to Delphi to break the curse. I succeed, but it was too late. When I returned, she'd already killed herself. But I don't regret my sacrifice.' She patted my hand. 'It kept other families safe. And I found a new family with the Hunters.'

She smiled fondly at the Hunters across the room. 'We always find the people we're meant to be with. And when we do, we have to stick with them. I wish you'd joined us, but I guess ... well, I can't say I approve, but I know why you chose not to.' She glanced a few beds down. Percy must have come in when I was sleeping, because he was currently crashed on the bottom bunk, still dressed in full armour. Rachel was nowhere to be seen.

'He—he's my friend,' I said stupidly.

Izzy rolled her eyes. 'Well, I suppose I can't argue with standing by your friends.'

I sheathed my dagger and looked around the lobby. I had no clue how long I'd been out. Time was starting to lose meaning. Whether this was thanks to the Lord of Time's machinations or simply the fog of battle, I couldn't say. How long had we been fighting? A day? Two? The more pertinent, ominous question was: how long could we continue to fight?

Our command station was set up near the guard desk. The bored doorman that usually manned it was gone. Either he was asleep with the other mortals, or, if he was actually an immortal as I'd often suspected, he'd fled up to Olympus to hide. Our city maps lay on his desk's polished marble surface, next to his perpetually present book. I laid my bronze shield over them and brought up the scrolling images of the city perimeter. They weren't comforting. Monsters had taken over Midtown completely. Hellhounds slobbered over the tiles in Grand Central Station. Laistrygonians ripped into the wax figurines at Madame Tussauds. Luke himself was pacing the top of UN Headquarters, swinging his scythe erratically at the line of flagpoles.

Our forces were only enough to man a two-block radius around the Empire State Building. We'd lost half our fighters. I counted roughly thirty-five campers, satyrs, and Hunters still in fighting shape. Out of these, even fewer were fully alert. Our five hundred Party Ponies had already lost interest in guarding the empty streets. Katie Gardner reported that they'd wandered off to raid the Korean
BBQs on Thirty-second Street. I had no idea where Chiron was.

'Perfect,' Thalia muttered in disgust. She immediately ordered Hunters out to cover their abandoned posts.

Jake Mason was taking inventory of our weaponry. 'We're out of Greek fire.'

'And low on arrows,' Thalia added. 'I sent scouts to scavenge some, but I'm seriously running out of womanpower.'

I rubbed my fingers against my temples. 'Okay—the centaurs. They must have arrows. And those BBQ restaurants, they've got skewers and gas stoves and stuff. Can we set some traps there?'

The Stoll brothers exchanged a contemplative look. 'We're on it,' Travis said.

The elevator doors dinged open. Will stumbled out, looking exhausted. 'We've got everyone who's out of commission up to Olympus,' he said. 'It seemed safer.'

'Good,' I said, flexing my shoulder. 'You should—'

A roar thundered through the air. The walls of the building vibrated.

It looked like our recess was up.

Chapter End Notes

The stories of Izzy's family (i.e., the premise of Antigone) is factually accurate as to the deaths of her brothers and sister, but I've taken some liberty in spinning out the adventures of Ismene, and the reasoning behind her sister Antigone's imprisonment.

I'd like to say a big thank you to Hello for our discussions (way back!) on the nature of immortality and how that affects the gods' outlook. It contributed strongly to the reasoning behind how the curse of Achilles works, and why the anchor is so important.
Chapter Summary

The spy of Camp Half-Blood is revealed, along with the extent of Luke's treachery.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

We formed ranks a block away from the Empire State Building. It took a while to drag the Party Ponies away from the delights of root beer and Korean BBQ, but Drew Tanaka finally managed it by promising them cool new glitter arrows from the Fashion District once everything was over. She must have had some Charmspeak in her words, because I was actually convinced for a second that this was the best bribe ever. Her persuasive trick made me wonder how Silena was getting on in her quest to lift Clarisse out of her stubborn funk.

Chiron finally showed up with Rachel on his back. They looked like they'd been having a disconcertingly serious conversation. Could Chiron actually have found what she—a mortal—had to say worthwhile? Sure, she'd been useful in the Labyrinth, but this was completely different. It wasn't like her uncanny ability to see weird glowing arrows in the maze would help us strategise against a massive army that, by the sound of it, had acquired a fearsome new beast.

Yet Chiron acted like she'd given him information that could turn the tide of this battle.

'Just something I saw in my head,' Rachel hedged, acting all modest.

The beast gave another tremendous roar. Its echo blended into the thunderous footsteps of a thousand monsters pounding the pavements.

Chiron raised his eyes to the eastern skies. 'A drakon. A Lydian drakon, to be exact. The oldest and most dangerous kind.'

'How did you know that?' Percy asked Rachel.

'I'm not sure, but ...' Rachel wet her lips nervously. 'This drakon has a particular fate. It will be killed by a child of Ares.'

'How can you possibly know that?' I demanded.

'I just saw it,' she said. 'I can't explain.' She'd sounded like this in the Labyrinth, too. It had been the most annoying thing ever, her assertion that she could see the way, inexplicably but certainly.

Percy ran his hand over the top of his helmet. 'Well, I hope you're wrong. Because we're a little short on children of Ares now—' He broke off and started cursing.

I put my hand on his arm. 'What?'

'The spy,' he said tightly. 'Kronos said, "We know they cannot beat this drakon."'

I wasn't sure what he was talking about, but I guess he must have had some dream or other. This
deep in battle, I couldn't be the only one dealing with nightmares.

'The spy has been keeping him updated,' Percy said. 'Kronos knows the Ares cabin isn't with us. He intentionally picked a monster we can't kill.'

Thalia pounded her fist against her palm. 'If I ever catch your spy, he's going to be very sorry.' She closed her eyes. It looked like she was mentally running through how many Hunters she had left. 'Maybe we could send another messenger to camp—'

Chiron cut in. 'I've already done that. Blackjack is on his way.' He seemed dubious that the pegasus would succeed, and I had to agree. Silena had already been gone for over a day. Assuming she'd made the trip, if she hadn't managed to persuade Clarisse to change her mind, it was unlikely that anyone, mortal or animal, would.

The drakon's roar came again. Windows rattled. Cracks appeared in the sidewalk. A line of Laistrygonians appeared at the top of Fifth Avenue.

'Rachel.' With a strained look, Percy ordered her into the Empire State Building.

Rachel started to protest. I had a sudden flashback to the arena trap we'd run into in the Labyrinth. Percy had promised Rachel first that he'd get her out alive then.

A stupid thing to think about when an army with a drakon was descending on us, but my eyes stung at the memory nonetheless.

Rachel gulped at the sight of the drakon, perched on the side of an apartment block like a meaner, uglier King Kong. She stopped arguing with Percy and disappeared into the building.

'I'll take the drakon,' Percy announced. 'Everyone else, hold the line against the army!'

I pulled my helmet firmly over my head and readied my dagger. If he thought he was going to take on that thing alone ...

Percy looked at me, but to my surprise, it wasn't to insist I stay back as well. He looked almost like the vision of him in my dream, innocently asking why I would fight with him when my mother was against it. 'Will you help me?'

You're my friend, Seaweed Brain. My voice caught on my reply. 'That's what I do. I help my friends.'

He studied me. 'Go invisible,' he decided. 'Look for weak links in its armour while I keep it busy. Just be careful.'

There was no time for further discussion. The army was upon us. Their opening volley scattered our front line of Party Ponies like dominoes. The campers and Hunters charged forwards as one. I saw Thalia and Chiron at their head, shooting arrows with the speed of bullets, before they disappeared into the fray.

Meanwhile Percy and I had bigger problems. One gargantuan problem, to be exact. The drakon slithered down the Demarest Building, so long that it spanned nearly half the skyscraper. I had no idea how it had even gotten up there, as it didn't seem to have any wings. The gleaming copper scales that covered every inch of its sickly yellow body looked frustratingly impervious to attack. When it opened its mouth, it displayed gleaming rows of teeth the size of broadswords and every bit as sharp. Glass from the building's windows showered down on us when it roared.
I donned my cap and scaled the wall opposite the drakon's, looking for a good angle to leap. Percy engaged it straight on, along with Mrs O'Leary, who knocked it off the side of the building. Its head was at least three storeys above us, but when its tongue darted out, it easily plucked three Party Ponies out of their line-up. The remaining centaurs fled, screaming in terror.

I never thought I'd see the creature that could make a hellhound look like a cuddly kitten. Mrs O'Leary was little more than a particularly resistant ink splotch on the serpent's massive body. Her claws scrabbled uselessly against its bronze scales.

Percy yelled and plunged Riptide into the drakon's globe-sized eyes. Wisely, he'd gone for the only weak spot. A thick, radioactive-looking slime oozed from the socket.

The drakon reared, more from annoyance than actual pain. Its head slammed a crater in the sidewalk. Percy hit the ground and rolled, dodging its cavernous teeth by inches. The strike brought its thrashing body right under my window. With a war cry, I leapt onto its back.

The drakon probably couldn't even sense my weight, but it was bucking like a bronco trying to dislodge Mrs O'Leary. I struggled for a grip on its slippery scales. Finally, I found a chink and drove my dagger into it.

The jerk as the drakon twisted from the stab jarred my bad shoulder again. My cap flew off. I switched arms and ripped my dagger out, searching for another weak chink, but my bad arm had gone numb. I lost my grip and fell, landing with a thud next to my cap.

The drakon's tail thudded on the sidewalk. Hands grabbed me and yanked me aside, saving me from becoming a pavement pancake.

'Thanks!' I gasped.

'I told you to be careful!' Percy scolded.

'Yeah, well—' The serpent was coming in for another strike. 'DUCK!'

I didn't wait for him to listen. I threw myself on him and pushed him to the ground. Teeth clanged inches above our heads.

He wrapped his arms around me and rolled us across the sidewalk. I sat up, dizzy.

The drakon flung Mrs O'Leary off at last. Its body made a tight, dangerous coil, its head rearing back like a cobra ready to spit. One of its eyes was a black hole where Riptide had pierced it. The other gleamed with malice. Percy and I exchanged a desperate look. Despite our best efforts, we were merely a distraction to the serpent.

And the fight had taken us a full block south of the Empire State Building. Through a gap in the invading army, we could see our friends backed up to the doors on Fifth Avenue. The monsters swarmed into the street between us.

I tugged on Percy's arm. 'We need to get back. Before we're cut off.'

With another helpless look at the rearing drakon, he nodded. He took my hand and we ran for the gap in the battle lines.

Then from behind us, a very different roar rumbled through the air: the rattling of axles as chariot wheels thundered down the carriageway.
'No ...' Percy rubbed his ears like he couldn't believe what they were hearing.

'YES!' I pumped our joint fists in the air. 'She did it! Silena did it!'

'ARES!' The red banner of cabin five fluttered from a dozen war chariots, each packed with armoured warriors. Half of them were demigods from the Ares cabin; the others were skeletal soldiers with glowing eyes—Clarisse's undead battalion.

They charged straight at us with their lances extended. Clarisse's electric spear crackled in her left hand. The drakon turned to face them. For the first time, its single yellow eye actually held a glimmer of fear.

*This drakon has a particular fate. It is destined to be destroyed by ...*

'The children of Ares,' I gasped. Just like it had been prophesied. But—'How did Rachel know?'

Say what you like about the Ares campers, they were ferocious in battle. Half the chariots ploughed through the *dracaenae* and *telkhines* like they were skittles. The other six tackled the drakon. Javelins flew at its open mouth, piercing the roof of its jaw. Campers leapt out of their capsizing chariots and thrust their spears at its body, searching for the same chinks I'd found with my dagger.

'We have to help!' I yelled.

Percy and I ran back to join the fight. With the drakon distracted by Ares's renewed assault, we were able to swing ourselves onto its back. We clambered along its scales towards its head. The drakon let out a hideous spray of poison that made a boiling, foul-smelling cloud in the air. When it cleared, Clarisse stood right in its face, clutching her electric spear with both hands. Her whole body was shaking with unsuppressed rage ... or was it fear?

'You can do it!' Percy hollered. 'A child of Ares is destined to kill it!'

Clarisse hesitated. She seemed uncharacteristically stunned by the ferocity of the drakon. She drew herself up as though gathering her courage.

I had never, ever, seen Clarisse needing to draw on her courage.

She shifted her spear into her left hand.

I inhaled sharply. Something was about to go deadly wrong, I just knew it. Clarisse's terror, her hesitation, the way she favoured her non-dominant hand ...

'No,' I whispered.

'Wait!' Percy had sensed it, too.

But it was too late. Clarisse—or whoever she was (and I had a sinking suspicion)—charged.

A jet of poison blew from the drakon's nostrils and met her head-on.

'Clarisse!' I leapt to the ground, running to get between her and the drakon.

Percy somersaulted through the air but stuck his landing. 'C'mon, you stupid worm!' he bellowed, waving Riptide like a bronze beacon. The drakon rounded on him.
Clarisse's helmet was practically melted to her head. As we worked to get it off, a golden chariot circled over our heads, pulled by Blackjack the pegasus. One of its passengers hopped out even before the wheels hit the ground.

'NO! Curse you, why?'

It was Clarisse—the real Clarisse, still in her camp t-shirt and jeans. She pushed through her siblings to kneel beside her imposter. I had never heard her this stricken, even when Chris had been wasting away in the basement after his sojourn in the Labyrinth.

Clarisse gathered up the fallen warrior in her arms while Sherman Yang and Ellis Wakefield levered off her helmet with a spear and lance. I felt like the poison sizzling from the surface of the metal was seeping into my skin. Even before we got the helmet off, I knew who had led Ares to our rescue.

Clarisse obviously knew who it was, too. Her tears splattered the girl's stolen armour. 'Why?'

Chris landed the flying chariot and ran over to us, waving his arms. 'Look out!'

The drakon had lost interest in Percy. It lurched towards us, fangs gleaming with blood and poison.

'YOU WANT DEATH?' Clarisse got to her feet. Her face was twisted into the ugliest expression I'd ever seen her wear. 'WELL, COME ON!'

She snatched up her electric spear and leapt into battle. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Percy sprinting over, ready to help, but before he could get to us, Clarisse took a flying leap onto the drakon's head and jammed her spear into its bulbous eye. The shaft exploded like a Greek fire bomb, flinging bolts of electricity in all directions. A lightning storm raged across the drakon's body. Its head sizzled and blackened. The rest of it charred from the inside out, like an eel in a hotpot. Clarisse somersaulted back onto the sidewalk, still screaming in fury.

The drakon collapsed into an ashy shell of bronze scales. The smell of burning rubber filled the air. Clarisse paused, balanced on one knee, breathing heavily. Electricity crackled around her, giving her an otherworldly glow.

Then she turned and ran back to us. I unhooked the helmet of the imposter to reveal ... Silena.

Her beautiful face was blistered from the poison. Only her eyes, full of sadness and regret, remained untouched.

Clarisse knelt and pulled Silena's head onto her lap. 'What were you thinking?'

Silena's voice was a hoarse whisper. 'Wouldn't ... listen. Cabin would ... only follow you.'

'So you stole my armour. You waited until Chris and I went out on patrol, you stole my armour and pretended to be me.' Her voice rose in outrage. She rounded on Sherman and Ellis. 'And none of you noticed?'

The Ares kids shifted their weight nervously.

Silena lifted her trembling left hand. 'Don't blame them. They wanted to ... to believe I was you.'

'You stupid Aphrodite girl! You charged a drakon! Why?'

Tears ran down Silena's ruined face. 'All my fault ... the drakon, Charlie's death ... camp endangered —'
A chorus of voices rose in protest, but died when Silena opened her palm. The silver bracelet Percy had described in our war council after Beckendorf's death lay there, with its unmistakable scythe charm.

It seemed so obvious now. So many little things I couldn't believe I hadn't seen. Her sudden interest in camp defences last year. The mix-up with the gold flakes. The way she'd kept blaming herself for stuff that should have had nothing to do with her. Her certainty that she could get past enemy lines to reach camp.

'You were the spy,' Percy said.

Silena drew in a ragged breath. 'Before—before I liked Charlie, Luke was nice to me.' Her tears fell faster as she tried to explain how he had charmed her. Coerced her to keep helping the Titans, even when she wanted out. 'He promised ... he promised I was saving lives. Fewer people would get hurt.' He'd even assured her Beckendorf would be safe. All lies.

My world tilted on its axis. I barely noticed as Clarisse sent her siblings off to carry on the fight. The battle at the doors of Olympus seemed a million miles away.

_Tell them it will save more lives._ Luke's voice, breaking through Kronos's façade, but intended to dupe the spy at camp. He'd dated Silena before he'd skipped camp. Made her promises and broken them before he'd fallen under Kronos's control. He'd toyed with her from the beginning ...

_I don't care if I betray anyone else._

A cold clamp closed over my heart.

Silena exhaled with a sob. 'Forgive me.'

Clarisse shook her. 'You're not dying!'

But the light was fading from Silena's beautiful eyes. 'Charlie ... see Charlie ...'

Slowly, the world came back into focus: Silena, lying heartbreakingly still. Clarisse, shaking with grief and fury. Percy, looking like he'd just been stabbed in the gut.

The battle raging just a block away.

I slid Silena's lifeless eyes shut. 'We have to fight. She gave her life to help us. We have to honour her.'

Clarisse ran her sleeve over her face. 'She was a hero, understand? A hero.'

No one argued. I couldn't blame Silena even if she had betrayed us. In the end ... in the end, she had done everything she could to put things right. And she'd paid the ultimate price.

Clarisse dove into battle. Her rage transformed her completely. The brightness that had surrounded her when she slew the drakon continued to glow with a red tinge around the edges. She shone like she was a goddess herself, as if she, too, had jumped in the Styx. She dragged the dead drakon behind her chariot like a gruesome mascot, screaming as she cut through enemy lines, destroying everything in her path.

Even after the enemy retreated, she kept going. She continued to circle the block with her drakon carcass, bellowing a challenge to Kronos at the top of her lungs.
I stumbled back into the Empire State Building with Percy. My mind was a fog bank. Driving the
effect back from Olympus had given me a momentary purpose, but now that we were at an impasse
again, my energy was crumbling into hollow emptiness. I understood Clarisse's need to keep
charging down the absent enemy. In the quiet, my mind returned to Silena and how she'd died,
tortured by the role she'd been forced to play.

The role Luke had forced her to play.

I wandered numbly around the wounded. Will Solace was riding up and down the elevator, ferrying
the severely injured to Olympus, while his remaining siblings patched up those who could still return
to the fight.

And then there were those who were too far gone. I watched Phoebe the Hunter kiss the forehead of
a fallen comrade ... Austin Lake sing a tearful final blessing to a Demeter boy ... Kayla Knowles
draw a shroud over another friend ...

Someone had brought Silena's body inside. It lay under a bright pink shroud—her favourite colour.

The lobby dissolved into a mist of tears. There was too much death. We'd been losing people left and
right for two days, but it was only truly sinking in now.

Percy came up behind me and offered me his hand. I shook my head. I couldn't take it.

Silena's broken voice looped in my head: *He promised I was saving lives.*

Percy had tried to warn me: *Luke was evil even before Kronos took over.*

*There's a point and you can't come back after it,* Thalia had said.

Were they right? Was I a fool to believe otherwise? Had Luke completely lost sight of his anchors
and thrown mortal decency to the wind?

We passed Grover, holding the hand of the old satyr Leneus as he reincarnated into a laurel plant.

'I should plant him,' Grover said, scooping up the new shoot, soil and all. 'In Olympus, in the
gardens.'

'We're going that way,' Percy told him. 'Come on.'

We entered the elevator in silence. My heart seemed to stay on the ground floor when it rose. The
they seemed to chant. *You were wrong about him.*

I still didn't want to believe it.

I could feel Percy's eyes on me, like an accusation.

My voice came out in a bitter whisper: 'Percy, you were right about Luke.'

'Annabeth, I—'

'You tried to tell me,' I admitted. 'Luke is no good. I didn't believe you until—until I heard how he'd
used Silena. Now I know.' My voice broke on a bitter coda. 'I hope you're happy.'

'That doesn't make me happy,' he said quietly.
I couldn't look at him. There wasn't anything he could possibly say or do to make this better.

Grover's voice cut through the tension. 'Well ... sure good to be together again. Arguing. Almost
dying. Abject terror. Oh, look, it's our floor.'

We stepped onto the sky bridge to Olympus. The streets were completely deserted now. Will had
taken over the park at the foot of the mountain for his medical base. Campers, Hunters, and satyrs lay
on the grass, groaning and nursing their wounds.

Even up here, there was more death. A short line of shroud-covered bodies lay under a grove of
trees. I couldn't look at them.

Somehow I found a smile to plaster on my face as I clapped my wounded friends on the back and
promised they'd done great. Their broken bones and severe burns would heal in no time. The pain
would stop. The words were empty and mechanic, but I kept it up. This was no time to fall apart.

We continued on to the palace. The thrones were still unoccupied. Hestia was back, in the shape I'd
always known her: an eight-year-old poking disconsolately at the fire. Her hearth had burnt down to
glowing embers. She turned when we approached, but said nothing. Her eyes flickered like a candle
struggling against a strong wind.

At the very end of the throne room, before the seats of Zeus and Hera, Rachel Dare stood like a
supplicant in prayer. Wrapped in her arms was the black-and-white *pithos* Thalia had carried up to
Olympus earlier.

Percy approached her like she was a wild animal who might spook easily. 'Rachel?' he said slowly.
'What are you doing with that?'

'I found it.' Her voice was dreamy and trance-like. 'It's Pandora's jar, isn't it?'

Percy spoke even slower, enunciating every word. 'Please put down the jar.'

'I can see Hope inside it.' There was an odd, sing-song quality to her words. 'So fragile.'

'Rachel.' He took the *pithos* from her and gave me a look I wished I didn't know how to interpret.

*Give us a moment,* it said.

I winced. 'Grover—' I made up some excuse and dragged him away.

Outside the palace, Grover ran his fingers nervously over his pipes. 'I hope Juniper's okay.'

'She's at camp?'

He nodded. 'She can't leave her tree for long. I wish I'd gotten the chance to see her before ...' He
gulped. 'Will you tell her, if I don't—'

'You'll tell her yourself,' I snapped.

Grover fell silent. We stood at the top of the marble steps, watching the healers move around the park
below. Will was still travelling up and down with the wounded. Nothing else moved. There wasn't
even the rustle of a leaf on any of the trees. The entire mountain seemed to be holding its breath.

Grover was the first to speak. 'Annabeth, you don't really believe that stuff you said about Luke.'

It wasn't a question.
I scowled. 'I thought you read emotions, not thoughts.'

He smiled faintly. 'Sometimes they aren't all that different. You still hope he's in there. Luke, I mean. For what it's worth ... when Kronos showed up yesterday, I sensed something weird. Like anger, but not at us. I didn't really get it at first. I mean, why would Kronos be mad at himself? It didn't fit. Then I realised ... it had to be Luke.'

I squeezed my shaking hands into tight fists. 'Percy said he was struggling to break through. But—what does that matter? Even if he does fight Kronos for control, he isn't on our side. He—he tricked ...'

I couldn't say the thing I feared most—that he'd tricked me, that his promises to me were as empty as the ones he'd made to Silena. But I guess Grover sensed it with those infuriating satyr powers.

'Annabeth, nobody hates themselves if they don't regret the things they did. I'm not saying that he's a good person, or that we can count on him. In fact, I think we'd be stupid to. But I just thought—I thought you should at least know.'

None of this was particularly positive. Yet the faintest glimmer of hope lifted my heart from the chasm it had fallen into, like Elpis had crept out of her jar to give me a boost.

'Thanks, Grover,' I said softly. 'Let's go see if Percy's done.'

Chapter End Notes

I know the text in canon implies that 30 Ares warriors showed up to fight. However, I find the maths on that utterly implausible, because that would mean Ares had 30 campers compared to 40 across the rest of the camp—while at the same time, Hermes is still the overcrowded cabin. My best fix was to include some warriors Clarisse has historically called on to supplement the numbers.
Our Reinforcements Are Dead

Chapter Summary

More unexpected help arrives, but Kronos breaches the last line of defence.

Chapter Notes

Big thanks to CupcakeQueen816, strawberrygirl2000 and Athenachild101 for their Ameri-picking for this chapter—in particular the US 'translation' of 'wicked!'

When we walked back into the throne room, I felt like we'd interrupted a private moment, but not the one that would have tied my insides into knots. It was more like Rachel and Hestia were having the private moment, and Percy was as much a third party as Grover and me. He was staring at them with an expression that was half-stunned, half-confused. He'd looked a bit like that the first time we'd met, when he'd just woken up after his fight with the Minotaur, with no clue what had just happened.

'Percy?' My eyes darted among the three of them. 'Should we, um, leave again?'

Percy shook his head. To Rachel, he said, 'You're not going to do anything stupid, are you? I mean ... you talked to Chiron, right?'

'You're worried about me doing something stupid?' Rachel asked. Annoying as she was, she had a point.

Percy tried again. Rachel just gave him a withering look and told him to go save the world.

He turned to Hestia, Pandora's pithos in his arms. 'I give this to you as an offering,' he told her.

'I am the least of the gods,' Hestia said. 'Why would you trust me with this?'

'You're the last Olympian. And the most important.'

The shadow of a smile hovered around Hestia's lips. 'And why is that, Percy Jackson?'

'Because Hope survives best at the hearth.' He held out the jar more firmly. 'Guard it for me, and I won't be tempted to give up again.'

Hestia took the pithos, and I felt that flutter in my chest again, the sense that Elpis had taken flight within. Hestia caught my eye. In the dancing flames of her pupils, I saw the outline of a young demigod holding out a knife to a little girl.

You have to dig deeper than that, Hestia had told me months ago. Family is important ... Remember me, Annabeth Chase.
The *pithos* disappeared into her hearth, jumpstarting the fire. 'Well done, Percy Jackson. May the gods bless you.'

Percy glanced at Grover and me. 'We're about to find out. Come on, guys.'

He led us over to the throne on the left of Zeus's. It was made of black leather, with a curved back and raised armrests that extended into a narrow pole-holder. Crusted seaweed wrapped around the bottom of the pedestal.

Percy reached for the edge of the seat. 'Help me up.'

He wanted to climb on Poseidon's throne? 'Are you crazy?'

'Probably.'

Grover moistened his lips. 'Percy, the gods *really* don't appreciate people sitting on their thrones. I mean, like, *turn you into a pile of ashes* don't appreciate it.'

'I need to get his attention,' Percy insisted. 'It's the only way.'

This would get Poseidon's attention, all right, though I didn't see how that would help us. But if Percy had a plan ... well, I trusted him. Besides, desperate times called for desperate measures.

Grover and I formed a step with our arms so Percy could hop onto the seat.

We waited with our hearts thudding in our mouths. We couldn't really hear Percy's one-sided conversation. Steam curled from his hair as he talked, like something inside him was coming to a boil. His edges grew faint. Grover and I exchanged a nervous look.

At last, he jumped down. He was thankfully in one piece, although wisps of vapour still emanated from his skin.

'Are you okay?' Grover asked. 'You turned pale and ... you started smoking.'

'I did not!' he protested, then he stared at his own arms. How had he not noticed himself burning up?

'If you'd sat there any longer, you would've spontaneously combusted,' I predicted. I guess I'd been right about what the curse of Achilles wouldn't guard against. 'I hope the conversation was worth it?'

'We'll find out soon.'

He definitely had something other than steam up his sleeve, but I didn't get a chance to ask what his plan was. The doors to the throne room burst open and Thalia entered, looking like she'd just been in heavy battle. I noted with dread that her magical Hunter's bow was broken in two.

'You've got to get down there,' she said without preamble. 'The enemy is advancing.' She gave me a significant look. 'And Kronos is leading them.'

+++  

There wasn't even a block of amnesty. We emerged straight into the warzone. Clarisse had finally ceased her relentless chariot parade; she'd become a Hyperborean ice sculpture. The drakon carcass had been liberated and fashioned into a thousand bronze breastplates, gleaming on the chests of the advancing enemy demigods. Kronos himself was twenty feet from the entrance of the building. He was flanked by Ethan Nakamura, a *dracaena*, and two giants. It was the first time I'd seen Luke since Silena's death. The sight of him made my stomach turn.
Even worse, our last pillar of defence was guarding the doors with a bow stretched across his chest, arrow at the ready.

'Chiron,' I whispered.


'Step aside, little son.' The command was a fierce reminder of who was running this show.

'I'm afraid not,' Chiron said. His voice was steady, but I knew him well enough to see the anger layered thickly under his calm.

'Chiron—' My feet were practically glued to the ground. Lifting them was a Herculean effort. 'Look out!'

He'd been so focused on Kronos that he hadn't noticed the *dracaena* leaping forward. Fortunately, whatever magic Kronos had extended over us didn't hold Chiron in its grip. He turned with a swiftness born from thousands of years of skill and put an arrow straight through her forehead. But that was his last arrow. A grimace flickered over his face as he shouldered his bow and drew his sword instead.

My heart hammered in my throat. Luke's skill at the sword had surpassed Chiron's long ago.

Kronos approached leisurely, already savouring Chiron's defeat. 'You're a teacher, not a hero.'

Chiron held his gaze steadily. 'Luke was a hero. He was a good one, until you corrupted him.'

A pang struck my heart. Did Chiron still blame himself for not being the mentor Luke had needed?

Kronos's rage exploded in a reverberating scream: 'FOOL!' There was something about that cry—so full of power, but also an anguish that could not be the Titan lord's. 'You filled his head with empty promises. You said the gods cared about me!'

I drew in a sharp breath. If I had been able to move, I would have reached involuntarily for Luke. Chiron had heard it, too. 'Me. You said *me*.'

Luke's face wavered. Before I could tell if his eyes were indeed changing, Chiron lashed out. His sword feinted down, then straight up at Luke's head.

'BACK!' Luke recovered quickly, slashing Chiron's blade away with his scythe. It hit with a rush of black energy that blew Chiron straight into the wall. The bricks cracked instantly and crashed down, burying him in a pile of rubble.

Something inside me broke. 'No!'

The spell holding us captive shattered, as though Luke had lost control of it along with his temper. My feet found purchase on the pavement. I scrambled to the heap of brick and mortar that was all we could see of Chiron. Percy and Thalia knocked away pieces of it, but it was a tomb three times higher than us.

I whirled around. Luke was studying us with an unbearably smug smile playing about his lips. His eyes were as dark as his ugly expression.

'You—' I choked up. First Silena, now this. 'To think that I—that I thought—'
I'd thought all we needed was for Luke to shine through, to push Kronos back. But he'd definitely emerged just now, and he'd still attacked Chiron.

Chiron, the closest thing I'd had to a father for so many years.

Luke knew that.

Percy realised what I was going to do a split second before I acted. His fingers grasped for my elbow. 'Annabeth, don't.'

But I was unstoppable. I flew at Luke with my dagger. I should have done it when he'd stood on my doorstep, before he'd taken everything I held dear: threatening camp, betraying my friends, littering the city with their bodies ... and now Chiron.

All this at the hands of the person who'd sworn to protect me.

Hermes was right. I had failed. I'd failed to stop Luke from becoming this—this monster.

My knife found its target perfectly. Luke didn't even lift a finger to defend himself—something that wouldn't penetrate the red haze over my mind until later. The blade slid into the gap in his armour. It connected with a clang that shook my whole body.

I collapsed at his feet. My right arm hung at an awkward angle. My shoulder joint flared with pain.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. He was like Percy, protected by the curse of Achilles.

The scythe came down on me at last, as though my strike had kick-started the circuits in Luke's brain: Oops, an attack. Kill! If Percy hadn't grabbed me, I'd have been sidewalk slice and dice.

I struggled against his restraining arms. My knife was hanging loosely in my injured arm, else I'd have flown at Luke again, invulnerability or no. There had to be a chink somewhere, a weak spot. Or maybe there wasn't. I couldn't see how he could still be human after all of this. Whether he was Kronos or Luke or something in between, I didn't know. All I knew was—'I HATE you!'

Percy wouldn't let me go. He insisted that he had to fight Luke.

But it was my fight, too. This was between me and Luke. Hermes himself had said so. Luke had come to me to prevent this.

'So much spirit,' Luke taunted. 'I can see why Luke wanted to spare you.'

The name sent another jolt down my injured arm. Luke.

Who was he?

'Unfortunately,' Kronos said, raising his blade again, 'that won't be possible.'

Percy tensed. He pushed me into Thalia and Grover and took a protective stance in front of us.

Then a howl ripped through the air like a resounding bugle. Kronos hesitated.

Was it reinforcements? I couldn't think who there was left to back us up. All our campers were here. The Hunters were spent. The Party Ponies were scattered. Daedalus's statues had been hacked to pieces.

That howl sounded a lot like Mrs O'Leary, but ...
A wave rippled through the monsters on Fifth Avenue, like an invisible bowling ball rolling through their ranks. They parted like the walls of the Red Sea. I had a sudden flashback to Daedalus's timely arrival with Mrs O'Leary during the Battle of the Labyrinth. Had she worked a similar miracle?

But the boy standing next to her at the end of the cleared monster aisle was small, skinny, and clad in armour as black as the Styx.

Percy lowered his sword a fraction. 'Nico?'

Boy and hellhound advanced, Mrs O'Leary in one enthusiastic bounce, Nico calm and confident. It was his energy parting the monsters, pushing them aside with creepy fingers of death. His helmet was shaped like a skull, with round sockets for his eyes and mouth. Under the thin black bridge of his nosepiece, a sarcastic smile stretched across his jaw.

'Got your message,' he said to Percy. 'Is it too late to join the party?'

Luke spat at him. 'Son of Hades. Do you love death so much you wish to experience it?'

Nico fixed him with a steely glare. 'Your death would be great for me.'

'I am immortal, you fool!' Luke shouted. 'I have escaped Tartarus. You have no business here, and no chance to live.'

I didn't see how Nico could possibly make a difference. Already, the monsters that had parted on his arrival were recovering from their shock and closing back in. But Nico clearly disagreed. He raised his sword and the entire city trembled. Cracks erupted on every available surface: walls, pavement, concrete. Bony fingers crept through them, an army of skeletons emerging from the crevices of the earth. They crawled out between the monsters, startling the enemy into retreat.

'Awesome!' one of the Ares warriors exclaimed. 'They're even better than ours.'

'HOLD YOUR GROUND!' Luke screamed. 'The dead are no match for us!'

But Nico wasn't finished. A black thunder cloud rolled in, casting the whole block into its gloom. A horn drowned out Luke's voice. Once again, the monsters were knocked aside, this time by the massive black chariot that rattled down the avenue. It was pulled by a team of demon horses with glowing red eyes and nightmarish bodies. Their hooves pounded the air with waves of dark energy that shook the concrete beneath them.

The chariot driver had an intense, manic face with black flames burning in his eyes. The helm on his head sent terrifying images shuddering through the air: every nightmare I'd ever had about Janus, and Luke, and impossible sacrifices, and losing Percy, and—

I clutched at his arm like it was a lifeline against the hideous visions. Percy met my eyes with terror in his own. Our shared connection was the only thing pushing back the waves of fear radiating from Hades's helm of darkness.

We weren't the only ones affected. All around us, demigods fell to their knees, clutching at their heads. Thalia's face was so pale, her freckles were little brown buoys bobbing in a white sea.

Even Luke looked shaken, though he maintained his aggressive stance. He drew his scythe across his chest as he faced the three newcomers: Hades and two tall ladies who had to be his wife, Persephone, and her mother, Demeter.

'Hello, Father,' Hades said coolly. 'You're looking ... young.'
'Hades.' Luke said it like a curse. 'I hope you and the ladies have come to pledge your alliance.'

Hades sounded almost bored. 'I'm afraid not. My son here—' he glanced at Nico, who went slightly pink under his helmet, 'convinced me that perhaps I should prioritise my list of enemies. As much as I dislike certain upstart demigods,' he switched his focus to Percy, who shuddered at the new blast of nightmarish fear from Hades's helm, 'it wouldn't do for Olympus to fall. I would miss bickering with my siblings. And if there is one thing we agree on—it is that you were a terrible father.'

Demeter's eyes raked critically across Luke's scythe. 'True. No appreciation of agriculture.'

Persephone stomped her foot. 'Mother!

From his sheath, Hades drew a sword like Nico's, only it was double-edged with silver. 'Now fight me!' he commanded. 'For today, the House of Hades will be called the saviours of Olympus!'

Luke made a frustrated noise in the back of his throat. 'I don't have time for this!'

He brought down his scythe, but not to attack. He drove it into the sidewalk, creating yet another crack that raced down both sides of the pavement. (One more hit, and I was sure the roads would be done for.) A hazy barrier rose from the fault line and circled the block.

'What's he doing?' Percy asked.

Thalia raised her hands as though sensing the vibrations in the air. 'Sealing us in.'

Luke had cut the magic outside his new barrier and reigned it in tighter. The only dead zone was now his new ring around the Empire State Building. Hades and his forces were caught outside. The black chariot slammed into the shimmering wall of energy and bounced off like my knife against Luke's skin. Hades toppled out, looking incensed.

'ATTACK!'

The street exploded with fighting. With the removal of the sleeping spell, mortals along Fifth Avenue awoke into their worst nightmare. It was a good thing we'd pushed most of them out of the way earlier, or they'd have been in serious trouble, caught in the crossfire between our allies and the monster army.

Percy ran to the barrier, but it blasted him back just as it had Hades. We were completely cut off from the fight. Only four of us (plus Mrs O'Leary) were left inside the ring of magic to face Luke and his honour guard—two Hyperboreans and Ethan Nakamura. And my shoulder still hung, dislocated, at an awkward angle.

'Grover!' I said. 'Help me.'

He grabbed my arm and helped to heave my shoulder back into joint. Pain shot splinters up my neck and down my side. 'Thanks,' I gasped.

'Look out!' Grover dragged me out of the way as a downpour of frost cascaded from one of the Hyperboreans. Thalia leapt into action. Quick as a mountain goat, she scaled the giant's back and drew two blades across his neck.

Meanwhile, Percy made short work of the other Hyperborean. He pulled Riptide out from the giant's blue butt and raced off down the sidewalk, along the barrier.

'Percy!' I yelled. Where was he going?
Fifth Avenue was a mess of fighting that we couldn't get to. Mortals wailed with terror; could the Mist even disguise something this awful? I caught a glimpse of Will Solace, desperately trying to drag the wounded to the safe zone, but unable to pull them across Luke's barrier.

Luke himself had disappeared in the melee. The doors to the Empire State Building hung open.

Oh no.

'Percy!' I sprinted after him. On the other side of the barrier, an unknown mortal snatched up a sword from the ground and shoved it straight through a *dracaena*'s belly. He turned to Percy with an excited grin. I recognised him then—Percy's stepdad. I had completely forgotten that Percy's family was right outside the building.

'Mom!' Percy waved his arms to get her attention, but Sally's back was turned. I didn't know if she heard him or sensed the Laistrygonian closing in on her, but she spun around and blasted the giant with a police shotgun.

Mortal bullets typically didn't work against monsters, but the Laistrygonian stumbled straight into Nico di Angelo's sword. The Stygian iron dissolved him instantly into black dust.

Percy's stepdad whistled. 'Nice one.'

Percy's jaw dropped. 'When did you learn to fire a shotgun?'

'About two seconds ago,' Sally said. 'Percy, we'll be fine. Go!'

'Yes, we'll handle the army.' Nico slammed the butt of his sword into a *dracaena* without even looking. 'You have to get to Kronos!'

I grabbed his arm. 'Come on, Seaweed Brain.' Had Luke reached the elevators already?

We raced for the building doors. Mrs O'Leary was too big to fit through the doors, so Percy set her digging for Chiron. The rest of us plunged into the building.
The elevator rose too slowly. I counted ten heartbeats for every floor that blinked by. The same upbeat elevator music was playing, but it no longer seemed appropriate. I wasn't so concerned about *staying alive* as I was about stopping Luke. But my brain was racing too fast to formulate a plan.

Luke must have cracked the Olympus sky bridge because it was splintering like the pavements of Manhattan. Any later and we wouldn't have made it across. As we leapt from the elevator, a chunk of marble broke off, severing it from the rest of the bridge. A piece beneath my feet crumbled into dust, throwing me off balance.

My stomach swooped. I cried out for Percy even before I consciously realised that my jump wasn't going to carry me across.

A split second of utter terror ... and then he had me, clinging to the very tips of my fingers. The city sprawled beneath me, the spire of the Empire State Building ready to impale me once I fell. My bag swung from my shoulder. Something small and green toppled out—Luke's diary, the last trace of all that had been good about him.

I was going to go the same way.

Percy's face contorted. His knuckles turned white with the effort of holding on. Then he had my wrist, my arm, the rest of me. He heaved me up onto the broken edge of the bridge and he did not let go. His whole body was trembling—or was it mine? He squeezed me so tightly, every nerve was tight as a steel drum.

Abruptly, he pulled away. I brushed my hair behind my ears. 'Um, thanks.'

He muttered something incoherent.

Grover urged us on. The sky bridge tumbled away as we ran. When we reached the slopes of Olympus, it was gone, leaving a fifty-foot chasm between us and the floating elevator.

My insides plummeted like Luke's diary. 'We're marooned. On our own.'

'The connection between Olympus and America is dissolving. If it fails ...' Grover said with a nervous bleat.

Thalia closed her eyes. 'The gods won't move on to another country this time. This will be the end of Olympus.' She shuddered. Was she wondering what that would mean for her and her Hunters? 'The final end.'

Will's medical bay was nowhere to be seen. I couldn't even identify the park where it had been.
Along the path was the detritus of a hastily fought battle, but no bodies were in sight. The glorious architecture of Olympus lay in ruins. It was like Kronos's scythe had reaped the soul of the beautiful city. Houses were on fire. Trees and sculptures had been hacked to pieces.

Luke was halfway up the mountain, screaming in deranged anger as he climbed towards the heart of the city: the palace at the peak.

'That was my promise!' he cried, and the word caught in my chest. Promise.

'Tear it down!' With each word, a new structure exploded. A marble fountain honouring Poseidon. A golden statue of Apollo. A shrine to Artemis. ('He'll pay for that,' Thalia seethed.)

'BRICK BY BRICK!' They were Luke's words as much as they were Kronos's. Which was he? Did it even matter?

Grover cried out in alarm. 'Look out!'

We were passing the massive statue of Hera. The ground buckled, ripping the statue from its foundations. Someone shoved me from behind. I flew into Percy and landed in a tangle of limbs. Marble dust swirled around us.

'Thalia!' Grover's hands flew to his mouth in horror.

She was pinned under the massive statue. Unlike the other ruins Luke had hacked to pieces, it remained intact. The carved features of the grudging goddess scowled at me, as though displeased that she hadn't gotten me, too.

Percy heaved at the statue with his shoulders, but it was no use. The thing was heavier than the boulder that had entombed Polyphemus's cave. It pinned Thalia's legs so tightly, tears sprang from her eyes when we tried to yank her out.

She cursed loudly. 'I survive all those battles and I get defeated by a stupid chunk of rock?'

I swore the statue's expression turned smug.

'It's Hera. She's had it in for me all year. Her statue would've killed me if you hadn't pushed us away.' Not that her hateful highness would have cared much if it had killed Thalia. There had never been much love lost between the two of them either.

'Well, don't just stand there,' Thalia said. 'I'll be fine. Go!'

I cast an agonised glance between her and Luke. He was almost to the palace now. We didn't have much time. Nearly all the temples on the mountain slopes had already been trashed. With a sharp pang, I watched my mother's Parthenon go up in flames.

We promised Thalia we'd be back, and hurried on.

The last hundred yards to the palace were the hardest to cover. It was like sprinting through treacle. Maybe it was Luke, messing with time. Or maybe it was the earth of Olympus itself, making a last desperate bid to repel its attacker.

In the throne room, Luke stood like a conductor under an orchestra of stars. 'Finally, the Olympian Council!' His cold, bitter laugh echoed back and forth around the twelve thrones. 'So proud and mighty. Which seat of power shall I destroy first?'
Ethan Nakamura didn't answer. He slunk near Hestia's hearth, wisely keeping clear of Luke's swinging scythe. The hearth glowed faintly, nothing but embers now. I couldn't see Hestia, but I sensed her presence nonetheless.

*I am always there,* she'd told me once. *I live at the heart of every home.*

Nakamura turned and spotted us. 'My lord.'

I wasn't prepared for Luke's expression. It was completely at odds with the harsh laughter that had issued from him seconds ago. The gold in his eyes could have been mere reflections off the torches on the walls. He looked like the fourteen-year-old who'd just run from a blazing inferno feeling utterly forsaken by his godly father—the same fourteen-year-old who had pushed aside his own terror and bitterness to offer me sanctuary.

*Promise.*

I heard a choked gasp. A second later, I realised it was mine.

Luke's mouth contorted into a sneer. 'Shall I destroy you first, Jackson? Is that the choice you will make—to fight me and die instead of bowing down? Prophecies never end well, you know.'

At the mention of the prophecy, my dagger tingled so violently in its sheath, it sent a shockwave up my spine. I hardly heard Percy's reply. My ears were ringing.

*Single choice ... end his days.*

*Cursed blade.*

I found the hilt of my dagger. Little threads of dark energy crept along it, travelling up my fingers, up my arm. They stung like the hurt of Luke's broken promises, my obliterated hero worship, and all the terrible things he'd done.

The sky on my back. Silena's melted face. Chiron buried in rubble.

*Curses build on the actions of their owners.*

*It will always protect its owner.*

My dagger had always tried to warn me. Every time it had burnt red-hot in my hands—whenever Luke betrayed his promise to Thalia and me. It had shown me its history, trying to tell me about the power of sacrifice.

The world unravelled in a blinding web of shining threads, like power lines that connected us all. The strongest wound around Luke and Percy, a seething mess of sinister tendrils circling them as they faced off. But the energy emanating from my dagger was a burst of silver and grey, straining to reach those horrible black lines.

I pulled my dagger from its sheath, seeing it in a whole different light now. 'Percy, the blade!' The lines of the prophecy were drawn from my mouth: *The hero's soul ...*

Could it reap Luke's soul from Kronos?

Luke's scythe had morphed into his own original weapon—the bronze and steel Backbiter with its twin edges. The evil, soul-reaping blade we'd zoomed in on as the perfect fit for the cursed blade in the prophecy.
But we hadn't realised there was another blade here that was every bit as cursed, not by purpose, but by oath.

'Wait!' I cried. But Percy and Luke were already in motion. Their blades clashed. They whirled and spun.

To my right, Ethan Nakamura drew his dagger and edged towards Percy's unguarded back. I flew at him, tackling him to the ground before the backstabbing son of Nemesis could even get close. He snarled and twisted round to engage me.

Our battle took us to the far side of the throne room, where the female godesses's thrones stood in a line down from Hera's. Grover started to play on his reed pipes. Vines sprung from Dionysus's throne, creeping across the ground to ensnare Nakamura. He cursed and sliced them away.

I tried to keep an eye on Percy and Luke's fight, but even with Grover's vines distracting him, Nakamura was a formidable opponent. He thrust and stabbed in quick succession. My own swings were clumsy, hampered by my need to guard my right shoulder.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Percy sail through the air and land by the hearth. One of the thrones exploded in an electric storm, blasting Luke aside. His sword clattered out of his hands.

I drew up my knees and shoved them into Nakamura's gut, kicking him away as hard as I could.


He glared at me, golden eyes furious, like the monster inside sensed what I meant to do. He waved a hand through the air. The reverberation was a solid backhand that sent me flying straight into my mother's throne. The crash felt like it cracked my head open.

I heard Percy shout my name. His voice was so far away. The room looked disjointed and broken, like I was staring at the world through cracked glass.

Each fractured piece was a different picture. In one, an altar lay on the stone floor. Achilles plunged my dagger into the struggling fawn on its marble slab, while Calchas warned, 'The Fates demand a life to set things right.'

Another glassy window showed the Minotaur tussling with a weedy hero, until a trembling young girl cried out, her voice wracked with grief: 'Asterion!' A moment of distraction, and Theseus broke off the Minotaur's horn, plunging it into the man-beast's heart.

Another piece: Luke faced his father, angry tears swimming in his eyes. 'Tell me! If you love me, TELL ME!' Behind them, May Castellan screamed, green mist flooding from her eyes and mouth: 'No, not Luke, not my boy, please no!'

There were a million more shards, like the shattered pieces of Luke's promises. I saw myself alone, burning a shroud in the empty amphitheatre. Staggering under an impossible weight. Crying on Half-Blood Hill. Crouching behind a corrugated iron sheet.


Promise.
The fractured images coalesced into a single eye that flickered with soft candlelight. Hestia sat in her hearth, gazing intently at me. She reached out and handed me Pandora's *pithos*. It was cracked down the sides, every shard etched with the things I'd seen, as if Hestia had pieced it together from the fragments of my visions. There was one missing piece, a hole through which the elfin face of Elpis, Spirit of Hope, peeked through.

The hole was a perfect fit for my dagger.

Elpis blinked at me. Her face blurred into Luke's: bright blue eyes, sharp cheekbones, a mouth twisted into what might have been bitterness, hurt, or a desperate plea. His expression spanned all of his incarnations over the years, from the innocent nine-year-old to the jaded Titan host.

'A single choice shall end his days,' Hestia said. 'Do you know what to do?'

I knew.

*Daughter of Athena, your time is coming.* For months, I had dreaded Pan's prophecy, Janus's promise. They had played in my nightmares, taunting me with awful possibilities. I'd been terrified that the choice would be between Percy and Luke, the fate of one or the other in my hands.

But that wasn't my role.

I was the keeper of an oath, one sworn in complete innocence, which had nonetheless grown into a protection *and* a curse. Both woven by Luke.

Thalia had been right. Luke *had* gone too far. And there was only one way to set things right. Only one way to redeem a soul that had gone too far over the edge.

I clicked the dagger into the *pithos*, closing the gap. Blinding light burst from the cracks, filling my vision. A soft melody filled my ears, like birdsong in spring. The music swept through my veins like a crackling fire.

My eyes opened. It took a moment to get my bearings. The throne room was a sheet of grass, with thick roots spreading across the two lines of thrones. Grover was coming towards me with his pipes at his lips. It was his song that flowed through the room, spreading life and hope and healing.

Grover reached my side and put down his pipes. The music stopped, but its echo lingered in the air, soft and hopeful. He dug a square of ambrosia out of his pocket and put it in my mouth.

Warm sweetness exploded over my tongue, the taste of buttery blue waffles and hot chocolate. Strength flooded my body.

'Thanks.' I tried to shake off my disorientation. The world had a hazy tinge to it. Ethan Nakamura was gone. A jagged fissure ran along the left side of the room, near the thrones of the male gods. It cut through Grover's grassy carpet, a chasm in the ground that fell away into nothingness. Percy and Luke were a blur at the edge of it.

'Percy!' Grover scrambled to his hooves and launched himself across the room. Luke deflected him easily. He rolled dangerously close to the edge of the steep drop. Only a thick clump of grass and roots kept him from falling in.

Panic threw the room into sharp clarity. I struggled to my feet. Everything unfolded in slow motion: Luke flying at Percy; the clash of their blades; Riptide clattering out of Percy's hand and falling into the fissure, plummeting to earth.
I saw the triumph in Luke's eyes as he raised Backbiter again. The confidence: he had won. Yet there was hollow displeasure in his expression, like this victory was an empty one.

I saw the shock and apprehension that rippled across Percy's face as weaponless, he looked up at Luke's blade. The certainty: this was it. The cursed blade that would reap his soul.

But it wasn't. The prophecy wasn't set in stone yet—but it would be my choice.

I held something infinitely more powerful than all the weapons in the room: the ability to shape the deciding line of the prophecy.


It wasn't a choice between saving Luke or saving Percy. My choice would save both of them ... except saving Luke didn't mean what I'd expected it to. It was the same choice Ariadne had made eons ago in the Labyrinth.

I had always thought saving Luke meant saving his life. But it was no longer about his life. It was about his soul.

'STOP!' With a silent prayer to Athena for strength, I forced myself to move.

Luke's sword slashed through the air and came down on me. I met it with my dagger—an insane, impossible move, but I knew with utter certainty that its thin bronze blade was the only thing that could stand against Backbiter now.

'Luke, I understand now. You have to trust me.'

'Luke Castellan is dead!' he bellowed. 'His body will burn away as I assume my true form!' His blade pressed harder against mine, inching towards my throat, but my dagger held firm. Its power lay not in size or strength, but in its history. It had been a sacrifice laid down to protect others. To protect family.

Family. 'Your mother—she saw your fate.'

'Service to Kronos! This is my fate.' His pronouns were slipping. I was getting through. My arms were in agony, but I didn't let go. My dagger burnt red-hot in my hand, glowing and lending me strength.

'No! That's not the end, Luke.' This was my moment. I could end this. I could call him back.

I also knew what that meant.

My chest constricted, but I didn't pull back. 'The prophecy—she saw what you would do. It applies to you!' Had Hal Green seen it, too? Was that why he'd given Luke the dagger?

'I will crush you, child!' I could see the battle raging in his eyes: blue and gold, wrestling for control. Luke was fighting. Kronos was struggling.

'You won't. You promised. You're holding Kronos back even now.'

'LIES!' Gold surged through his eyes. He backhanded me across the face so hard, I saw stars. With Kronos's power, I should have flown across the room. But he'd pulled back.
He'd pulled back.

I stared up at the double-edged sword, raised in an executioner's stance. Something dribbled from the corner of my mouth. It had a bitter, coppery tang. 'Family, Luke. You promised.'

Luke's knees buckled. He lowered his sword. 'Family.'

I felt the coals of Hestia's hearth grow stronger at his declaration.

Luke made a choked sound, halfway between a sob and a cry. 'Annabeth ...' He lurched towards me. 'You're bleeding.'

I locked eyes with him. 'My knife,' I whispered. From the anguish on his face, I was sure he understood. Tears stung at my eyes.

I tried to place the dagger in his hands, just like he'd handed it to me so many years ago. But my arm would not move. Jarred by Luke's blow, it was twisted even more awkwardly than before. My blade slipped from my fingers.

*No.* The moment it left my hand, my strength left me. The room tilted. My head swam with vertigo. I couldn't—

No. I wasn't done. I had to finish this. Otherwise, all would be lost. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw movement. Percy and Grover, both making their way towards me.

'Percy—' In the end, he was still the one I trusted to help me. The one who was truly my rock. 'Percy, please ...'

He was next to me in a flash, my knife in his hands. He disarmed Luke with ease.

Luke didn't even parry the attack. His focus was on me.

He took a step forward.

'Don't touch her!' Percy snarled.

'Jackson ...' Luke's face flickered. Golden anger crept back into his eyes. It rippled over his skin.

*No!* I had been so close!

But I had underestimated Luke. He broke through again. 'He's changing. Help.' His plea had the same tone as the one he'd made on my doorstep. This time, it could not be clearer what he meant. 'He's—he's almost ready. He won't need my body any more. Please—'

He shuddered. Was it just the bright spots exploding across my vision, or was a glow actually flickering over his body?

Kronos contorted Luke's face—'NO!'

Percy intercepted him again, but this time Luke shoved him away. Percy landed sprawled next to me. His hand was still closed around my dagger.

'The knife, Percy.' My head swam. I had to explain—needed him to understand what we had to do, but I couldn't find the right words. My body ached to shut down. *Going into shock,* I thought dimly. I heard my own voice beseeching, *'Hero ... cursed blade ...'*
Luke reached towards the hearth. Backbiter lay there, but the moment he touched the sword, Luke cried out. The blade fell back into the smouldering fire. Hestia appeared among the coals. She had taken on the appearance of a blonde seven-year-old with stormy grey eyes.

Me.

Luke fell to his knees. His hands were raw and blistered. Golden smoke curled from his palms, rising from his fingertips.

'Please,' he begged again, but this time, he addressed Percy.

Percy staggered towards him, my knife clenched in his fist. Had he understood what I'd tried to say?

'You can't ... can't do it yourself,' Luke gasped. 'He'll break my control. He'll defend himself. Only my hand. I know where. I can ... can keep him controlled.'

Percy hesitated. My knife trembled in his hand. He looked at me, and fear gripped my heart. The prophecy, in its twisted, unpredictable way, had forced the choice back into Percy's hands.

My mother's warning became crystal clear.

*What will he choose when his need to play the hero conflicts with the wisest course of action?*

If he chose me now, Kronos would kill us all.

The glow over Luke's skin became painfully bright. 'Please. No time.'

The world hung on a timeless precipice.

A final choice.


Chapter End Notes

This chapter has been a long time in coming. The outlines of it have existed pretty much since I embarked on *Necklace of Harmonia*—as you may pick up from some of the references to the power behind curses. I had this idea how the final showdown was meant to end, and though the actual phrasing of sequences has changed much over time, this is the conclusion I have been working up to for two years. It's a heady feeling to actual get here!

The history of the dagger is completely my fictionalisation (except for the bit about it passing hands from Hal to Luke to Annabeth, which is found in *The Diary of Luke Castellan*). However, in my love for backstory, I wanted the inanimate object to have one as well. And I wanted the final resolution to be much stronger than 'the dagger is a cursed blade because Luke broke his promises.' Much of this story is a speculation of *why* broken promises cursed the dagger, and to do so, I went back to create the history of the dagger, stemming from Ismene's sacrifice with it, to how it passed along to Achilles and Iphigenia, and later through Jenny to Hal, and finally Luke. I hope the clues to its importance (going back to *TGF* in some places, but most pertinently *NoH*) have been constant, yet subtle enough that Annabeth would not plausibly have
connected the dots until this point. That was also a huge logic puzzle that needed to be resolved—how did Annabeth come to the final answer, but only then.
My Mom Reveals Her Master Plan

Chapter Summary

After the battle, Athena drops a bombshell on Annabeth.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Prophecies were the most twisted monsters in Greek mythology.

As we crouched there in the throne room, the fate of the world hanging in the balance, I saw the great and terrible beauty of the Great Prophecy in perfect clarity. It had been exquisitely crafted to mislead. Every line had a double meaning, carefully shrouding the truth in complex layers. The hero's soul. The cursed blade. The single choice.

Even now, it wasn't over. My dagger lay in Luke's hands, waiting for his decision. His choice, to determine how the lines of the prophecy would ultimately play out.

I'd made my choice. Percy had made his. And now here we were, trusting Luke to make the right one as well.

Could a prophecy apply in triplicate?

Luke undid his armour straps. His shirt was scorched, whether by electricity during the fight or his own burning body. He peeled off his torn sleeve to reveal a patch of pale skin under his left arm. A shiver ran through me. I felt like I knew that spot more intimately than I should have.

Luke raised our dagger and sank it into the last mortal point on his body.

There was an awful, defeated howl. A violent tremor shook the ground. Luke glowed, brighter than a star, brighter than a god, as bright as death.

I couldn't tear my eyes from him. I don't know if I would have shrivelled up if Grover hadn't ducked my head and shielded my eyes.

Heat seared across us, hotter than the lava chamber of Mount St Helens. The explosion was worse than the one Percy and I had set off there, too. It left a ringing silence thundering in my ears.

Luke lay at the heart of Olympus. Blood trickled from the stab wound under his left arm, pooling on the ground beneath him. Percy knelt by his legs in stunned silence.

'Help me,' I whispered to Grover. He looped my good arm over his shoulder and we limped over.

Luke opened his eyes—bright and blue, the way they had been before. There was a deep sadness in them.

'You knew,' he said. 'I almost killed you, but you knew ...'

I detached myself from Grover and crawled to his side. 'Shh. You were a hero at the end, Luke.'
You'll go to Elysium.'

'Think ... rebirth.' He coughed. Blood splattered from his mouth. 'Try for three times. Isles of the Blest.'

A noise somewhere between a laugh and a sob escaped my throat. 'You always pushed yourself too hard.'

His hand trembled. The skin was completely blackened. I met his fingers, but there was hardly anything to hold.

Another bloody cough wracked his body. His eyes were hazy. 'Did you ... Did you love me?'

In his words, I heard the hurt of the lost boy he had been, wondering if his father loved him. I heard his pain when Thalia renounced him on the cliff of Mount Tam. I heard the desperation when he'd stood on my doorstep, clutching for one last lifeline to lift him from the dark path he'd chosen.

I swallowed hard. 'There was a time I thought ... well, I thought ...'

Maybe I could have pretended, and soothed him with a lie. That would have been the easy thing, maybe even the kind thing to do. But our dagger lay between us, cursed by the promises that had turned false.

Promises that Luke had made because he needed to feel like he could do something right. Just as I'd made him out to be greater than he was, I had represented something else to him, too—proof that he was still a hero. I was his talisman, not something real.

We didn't love each other. We were each other's illusions.

I felt Percy's gaze on me, as though his fate, too, hung on my answer. The moment my eyes found his, I nearly drowned in their hunger. It hit me with astounding clarity that this was the question that had hung in dissension between us this past year, turning our friendship upside down, wringing our hearts inside out.

I had to speak the truth. For all of us.

'You were like a brother to me, Luke. But I didn't love you.'

Luke exhaled slowly. There was no disappointment, only resignation. I got the sense that maybe I wasn't the one he'd been seeking confirmation from.

I thought of Thalia, telling me that if she was his anchor, it was too late. Of our faces beaming up at him from the Titan Phoebe's scrying pool.

Maybe I couldn't give him the love he sought. But there was something else I'd given him—I was the final person to still have faith in him. The only one who hadn't given up on him. I'd given him his chance to be a hero at last.

Pain contorted Luke's face. Grover rummaged in his pockets. 'We can get ambrosia. We can—'

'Grover, you're the bravest satyr I ever knew,' Luke rasped. 'But, no. There's no healing ...'

His voice was weakening. He coughed again. Then he found one last burst of energy and reached for Percy. 'Ethan. Me. All the unclaimed.' His voice shook. 'Don't let it ... Don't let it happen again.'

Percy promised.
I was too stricken to cry. We made a circle around Luke's broken body, our hands clasped around each other's.

Luke's hand fell limply to his side. He turned his head to me, as though I was the last thing he needed to see to ease his passage across the Styx.

I held his gaze. 'Family,' I mouthed. He smiled faintly and closed his eyes.

His chest rose one final time.

+++ 

It was probably the most anticlimactic arrival of the gods in history.

The sight of them storming the palace, twelve giant deities in full Greek battle armour, might have been impressive if the enemy they came to confront had not already been expelled.

Hermes fell to his knees at his son's body. I waited for him to blast me to smithereens for my failure, but he simply produced a shroud from the air, pure white with green lines running across it like beating wings, and wrapped it around Luke.

The gods parted to allow three wizened old ladies to pass through. They knit as they walked, shining threads of blue, grey, and green trailing from their clinking needles. It was the same quilt I'd seen them weaving when they'd shown up in the attic the night Percy had arrived at the Big House, three years ago. The strands of our fate, intertwined in a thick braid—a circle of three, bound in love and hate. In its glowing fabric, I saw all of us, changing through the years.

Luke's mom handed her new baby proudly to Hermes. A golden basket landed on my father's doorstep. Sally kissed the top of Percy's head and tilted his face towards the sea.

I saw the children we had been and every stitch that tugged our paths closer together. I saw our lifelines tangle when we met. And I saw the end: a single blue thread unravelling from the others, cut and frayed while its green and grey counterparts continued to twist onwards into the future.


A sacrifice to set things right.

The three Fates scooped Luke into their wrinkled little arms.

'Wait.' Hermes came forward. He had removed his armour, revealing his ancient chiton and winged helm. His face was wet with tears. He uncovered Luke's face and pressed a kiss and a blessing to his son's forehead. 'Farewell.'

The ache in his voice tunnelled deep into my heart. My legs went weak. Percy grabbed my right shoulder—the wrong one. He let go quickly when I yelped with pain and caught me around the waist instead. 'Oh gods, Annabeth. I'm sorry.'

'It's all right,' I murmured. His face swam before me. I sank into a deep, green pool.

I found myself back in the Labyrinth, but its twists and turns were kindly now. Down its corridors, I saw scenes of what must have happened elsewhere while we fought Kronos on Olympus. Hades thundered down Fifth Avenue, smiting Laistrygonians and Hyperboreans with helm and sword alike. Nico followed in his wake, his Stygian blade radiating death.
Demeter tackled the side streets: vines and shoots sprung out of the cracks, ensnaring *dracaena* and telkhines. Persephone waved her hands and the trapped monsters became daisies growing out of the sidewalk. My cabin four friends ran to their mother, beaming. Together, they turned the streets of Manhattan into a literal urban jungle.

I watched Typhon drive the Olympians back in his relentless charge towards the city. He tore up the George Washington Bridge and waded into the Hudson, but a tidal wave of power swamped him. Poseidon joined his family in a hurricane of swirling wind and water, just like the one Percy had created in Central Park. Like Hades, he had brought a back-up army: thousands of merpeople, Cyclopes, and sea creatures leapt into battle. At their head, tall as a Hekatonkheire, Percy's brother surfed the waves on a hippocampus with rainbow scales. He waved his club defiantly in the storm giant's face.

Typhon went down in a deluge of lightning bolts and tsunamis.

On the opposite side of the corridor, I saw the sinister mirror to Olympus: the black palace on Mount Othrys. Mist was wrapped thickly around it such that only its edges were visible, but I could tell it was crumbling as if something were eating it up from the inside. A large, black throne toppled through the fog, cracked and smoking like it had been blasted with lightning.

The Labyrinth swept me down another tunnel, this one narrower, with offshoots that showed me the mortal side of our families. Luke's mom sat at her kitchen table, surrounded by burnt cookies and mouldy peanut butter sandwiches. Her head was in her hands, as though she knew the fate she had feared for her son had finally come to pass. My father stood at the entrance to a temple of majestic columns and carved friezes: the original Parthenon, which he'd wanted to take me to see. His head was bowed as though in prayer. Did he sense that I'd been in trouble? On the corner of Thirty-third and Fifth, Sally Jackson bandaged wounded demigods and Hunters while her husband (his name came to me at last: Paul Blofis) manned a firehose over the flaming cars in the street. They both glanced repeatedly towards the top of the Empire State Building, as though searching for a sign.

I kept going, following a shining path of green light like the one Rachel had claimed she saw when she'd guided us through. At the centre of the maze, the double doors to Daedalus's workshop glowed with its blue symbol, but it was an owl instead of the Greek Delta. Next to them, Hestia waited patiently for me in her adult form.

'Are you coming home?' she asked.

I didn't know if she meant Camp Half-Blood or San Francisco.

'Home is wherever your heart is,' she chided. With a sweet smile, she flung the workshop doors open.

I stepped out into consciousness.

I awoke in a forest glade under a brilliant blue sky. My arm was in a sling and my body was weak, but there was a refreshing lightness to my body, like someone had cleaned out my insides with breath mints. Only once in my life had I ever felt this rejuvenated—when I'd worn the Golden Fleece.

'Hey, Wise Girl.'

My heart did a flip-flop at the sight of Percy's lopsided smile, the one dimple in his cheek winking at me. 'Seaweed Brain.'

He helped me up. 'How are you feeling?'
I flexed my arm. It didn't feel like it had been broken mere hours (or however long I'd been out) ago. In fact, the sling seemed to be little more than a precaution. Grover was helping Thalia limp into the glade, and I certainly felt better than she looked.

'How long was I out?'

Percy thought about it. 'I dunno. Maybe half an hour, max? Apollo took care of it.'

This took a while to sink in. The god of healing himself had attended to me? That was ... wow.

'At least his healing skills are better than his haikus,' Percy joked.

He filled me in on what had happened while I was out. Zeus had turned the Empire State Building blue as a personal favour—'A sign for my mom,' Percy said, winking.

'Like Theseus.' I thought of Sally and Paul throwing repeated, worried glances at the building, and smiled. 'Minus the accidental miscommunication.'

The gods were fixing their throne room. The Cyclopes were rebuilding the sky bridge so that the rest of our friends and allies could come up. The rest of the city ... well, it would have to wait until the most urgent repairs were done.

We headed out to watch the reparations, Thalia hobbling along with us on crutches. The Cyclopes were almost to the floating elevator when we got there, piecing together marble slabs to form a new, stable walkway across the chasm. Tyson was among them. He waved to us, but didn't stop working.

Once the bridge was done, our friends brought the injured up from the ground level. We helped to carry them to the glade and load them up with nectar and ambrosia.

Then there were the fallen. Some of the bodies, like Michael's we would never recover. But the others ...

I never wanted to see shrouds laid out like this again.

Will brought the last corpse—the too-tiny body of my sister Holly. Nico di Angelo trailed behind him. He said a blessing over each shroud in the glade. Then he followed his father up to the throne room. I heard a cheer go up when they arrived at the palace gates, possibly the first time all three sons of Kronos had been truly united since Cath's prophecy.

Athena came down the palace hill, still dressed in her battle armour, complete with glowing purple cape and owl helmet. She fixed Percy with a piercing stare. He quickly mumbled something about seeing how the throne room repairs were going. He and Grover hurried off together.

'I'd better go find Lady Artemis,' Thalia said. She nodded to my mother (I guess bowing was a challenge in her current state).

Athena touched Thalia's bracelet with a small smile. 'Well fought, Thalia. Your lady is proud.'

Thalia exchanged one last grin with me before hobbling up the hill.

'Mother,' I said.

Her expression was poker-straight. I couldn't tell if she intended to chide or congratulate me. At last, she said, 'You did well. You brought my final strategy together in the end.'

'Your ...' I felt like someone had sucker-punched me. 'You meant for me to ... Did you know this
Athena gazed over the side of the mountain. 'You know that we are forbidden to interfere directly with the lives of mortals. All direct attempts—they are doomed to fail.'

'You told me Hermes sought to thwart Luke's fate.'

She nodded severely. 'He tried to placate him, to cajole his anger, perhaps. A direct attack. You and I, we understand the importance of playing the long game.'

_The long game._ 'Thalia's Aegis. The dagger. They were yours.' My head spun. 'In Hal's house. You led Luke and Thalia to it. And then you led me to them.' It was a strategy so complex, so dependent on every piece coming together perfectly, that it was a wonder it had even worked.

'The plan was not without its flaws,' Athena admitted. 'I anticipated that your friend Thalia would play a greater role. Percy Jackson was an ... unexpected complication.'

I scowled. After he'd saved Olympus, against all her dire predictions, surely Athena couldn't still be wary of him?

She saw my expression and smiled. 'I cannot control the Fates any more than you can. The Great Prophecy had to play out as it was specified. All I could do was set up the pieces of the chessboard.'

'So we were your pawns.'

Athena studied me closely. 'Do you know what happens to a pawn when it reaches the other end of the board?'

'It becomes—' My breath hitched.

Athena smiled. _You were my secret weapon all along, Annabeth. I sent a pawn, and she became a queen._

While I was still trying to absorb this, she cupped her hands around my face. 'Now come. The council is gathering, and you will want to be there.'

Chapter End Notes

In some ways I feel like I've subverted canon in making Annabeth the central point of the prophecy, when obviously the PJO books are about Percy's role. In others ... well, the moment Annabeth's dagger was the lynchpin, I would argue that the evidence is there that this was _her_ story as much as Percy's. It's never entirely clear that the 'choice' of the prophecy is definitely Luke's. Yes, it could be, and it makes sense as an interpretation. But all three of them made choices in that scene, and it was Annabeth who set the ball rolling. A lot of _TLO_ is about Percy yielding—and the idea that the prophecy was all about Luke, and Percy was always a background setting in turning sixteen, the way _and see the world in endless sleep_ was a setting detail to the main events of the prophecy. But Luke's story isn't all about Luke. It's about Luke _and_ Annabeth. The more I looked down that path, the more important it felt to give her a story, a strong one, in which _she_ controlled the narrative.

I must stress that I do not proclaim any of this story to be canon at all. I simply wanted to
tell a tale that put her at the centre—Annabeth's story, and not just Annabeth's opinion of Percy's story—and give it enough plausibility that it could conceivably be part of canon. We're still not done yet, but this note fits most with regards to the prophecy on which the series centres on.
The Olympian Council hands out a bunch of rewards.

The throne room was packed when I arrived. All twelve Olympians were in session, plus Hades. The gallery was full of minor gods and goddesses, nymphs and satyrs, and Poseidon's entire entourage of Cyclopes, who stood with their heads scraping the enchanted ceiling. Through a small gap in the crowd, I saw Hestia at her hearth, which was glowing brighter than a brilliant sunset.

There were demigods in attendance as well: Clarisse, unfrozen and looking simultaneously stunned and apprehensive to be sitting at her father's right hand. (I didn't blame her; sparks flew from Ares's hands as he appropriated a rusty spear as a nail file.) Nico di Angelo also perched at the foot of his dad's makeshift throne, but he looked a lot happier about it. I didn't think I'd ever seen him grinning that broadly.

And of course, there was Percy, standing with Grover at the end of the Cyclops parade.

I went straight to him. 'I miss much?'

His lips quirked. 'No one's planning to kill us, so far.' He was probably thinking of the last Olympian Council we'd been to.

I returned his wry smile. 'First time today.'

A bubble of helpless laughter escaped his mouth. Hera the Humourless glared at us.

Zeus announced his gratitude to his brothers (though he sounded like he was choking on it). He turned to us. 'Which leaves us only the matter of thanking our young demigod heroes, who defended Olympus so well.' He glanced down. 'Even if there were a few dents in my throne.'

Percy rolled his eyes. I shook my head, smiling, and punched him softly in the arm. And then, daringly, I left my hand there. He didn't seem to mind.

'Thalia, my daughter,' Zeus called.

Thalia swung herself forward on her crutches. I was again reminded vividly of the last Olympian Council we'd attended—the one in which Thalia had accepted Artemis's offer to lead the Hunt.

'You have fought bravely and been instrumental in holding the city against enemy forces. Right up to that unfortunate, ah ...' He glanced at his wife. I was pleased to see that Hera didn't dare to meet his eyes.

'Never mind,' Zeus said. 'I will do what I can to help you rebuild your band of Hunters.'

I had no idea how Zeus would manage this. The image of him hanging out in middle schools scouting for teenage girls was downright creepy. Thalia went red and bowed as low as she could without toppling forward.
Artemis stood and held out her hands to Thalia. She was much more effusive in her praise. She even bullied Hades into accepting all the fallen Hunters into Elysium. I couldn't help wondering about Luke. Had he made it there in the end?

Tyson came next, receiving Zeus's personal commendation and an official appointment as general of the Cyclops army. None of these seemed to thrill Tyson as much as Zeus's promise to provide him with a new stick.

Mr D got up next and called for Grover. He went white, chewing nervously on his sleeves. Percy and I had to push him forward.

Mr D gave him a long-suffering sigh. 'Oh, stop chewing your shirt. Honestly, I'm not going to blast you.' He recited the formalities in a bored tone, finishing by nominating Grover to Leneus's newly-vacated spot on the Council of Cloven Elders.

Grover's eyes went wide. He swayed on the spot and promptly passed out. A bevy of nymphs rushed forward to carry him out. Percy and I exchanged a grin. No satyr deserved this honour more than Grover, Pan's own Chosen One.

Then Athena called my name, and all other thoughts evaporated from my head. In front of the entire assembly of gods, she called me, 'My own daughter.' Those three words were a greater reward than any honour she could have bestowed upon me.

Percy beamed at me. I gave his arm a little squeeze before going to kneel before my mother.

'You, my daughter, have exceeded all expectations. You have used your wits, your strength, and your courage to defend this city and our seat of power.' She spread her hands. 'It has come to our attention that Olympus is ... well, trashed.'

The damage that had been sustained in the battle was extensive. I winced, remembering the exploded temples and statues we'd passed when we chased Luke here. The gods could have repaired it magically, as they'd done with their own thrones, but ...

An enigmatic smile played on Athena's lips. 'The gods feel that the city could be improved. We will take this as an opportunity. And you, my daughter, will design these improvements.'

Her words knocked the wind from my lungs. It took me a few seconds to find my voice. 'My—my lady?'

'You are an architect, are you not? You have studied the techniques of Daedalus himself. Who better to redesign Olympus, and make it a monument that will last for another aeon?'

I had to pinch myself to be sure I wasn't dreaming. 'You—you mean ... I can design whatever I want?'

'As your heart desires. Make us a city for the ages.'

I take it back. Her words of endearment were not the greatest reward she could bestow.

The other gods immediately chimed in with requests. I barely heard them. My head was flooded with every idea that had ever crossed my mind: all the fantasies I'd dreamt, sketches I'd jotted down.

The first time I'd visited Olympus, I'd been awed at its majesty. Yet there had been this tiny voice that had whispered, how would I do it better? I'd quashed it, terrified at my own presumptuousness in critiquing the eternal city—the arrogance of believing I could do better than the gods. But now ...
'Rise, my daughter,' Athena said. 'Official architect of Olympus.'

Percy's eyes shone with congratulations. 'Way to go.'

My mouth opened and closed soundlessly. 'I—I'll have to start planning,' I said breathlessly. Drafting paper, pencils ... I was going to need a whole new stock of supplies.

Then the boom of Poseidon's voice called out the one name that could cut into my ecstasy of planning: 'PERCY JACKSON!'

It was obvious that the most important assignation was yet to come. The throne room was so silent, Percy's footsteps had a resounding echo as he made his way to kneel at the front of the room.

Poseidon bade him to rise. 'A great hero must be rewarded. Is there anyone who would deny that my son is deserving?'

I would have defied any god who dissented. None of them did.

Zeus nodded. 'The council agrees. Percy Jackson, you will have one gift from the gods.'

It was such a loaded statement. 'Any gift?'

'I know what you will ask,' Zeus said. 'The greatest gift of all.' He rubbed his chin. 'Yes, if you want it, it shall be yours.'

I had the briefest moment to wonder what sort of gift this could be, that had been withheld for centuries. Then Zeus's offer crushed the air from my lungs.

'Perseus Jackson, if you wish it, you shall be made a god. Immortal. Undying.'

I could not hear what Zeus said next. That one word rang in my head like a death knell, louder than the preceding silence had been.

**Immortal.**

With everything that had transpired in the last few hours, I had not thought about the curse of Achilles. It came crashing back down on me now. Percy's body was already moulded into god-like invulnerability, all but for a single, mortal point. He wouldn't need that anchor any more. Zeus was offering to finish the transformation.

Percy, a god.

No: the god, *Perseus.*

Two winters ago, we had watched Thalia make a similar choice in the very same spot where Percy now stood. I had given her my blessing to make the decision that felt right to her. But I could not find it in me to do the same for Percy.

If he accepted Zeus's gift, he would stay fifteen forever—no, the rising sun threw a bloody glow over the ceiling of the throne room, reminding me that we'd reached the eighteenth of August. Percy's sixteenth birthday had dawned just as the Great Prophecy had predicted.

His final birthday, if he so chose. *A single choice shall end his days*—yet another twisted meaning to the prophecy line that had haunted me for so long.

Was that the curse of Achilles? The eventual loss of one's mortality to the seductive power of
invincibility?

Even if he survived now for all eternity, he would not be my Percy, with the unfailing loyalty that had captured my heart. What had Thalia said? The gods were incapable of loyalty. Their very permanence impeded fidelity.

With a jolt that left my skin tingling, I realised that *permanent* did not mean *steadfast*.

I'd told Percy that I hated for things to be temporary. But ... this was the gift *and* the curse of being mortal. Sometimes things went away, but they could always come back. And sometimes things ended, but something more beautiful could start. *Temporary* didn't always mean *loss*.

My heart was splintering into a million pieces. Everything I still had to say to him, every misunderstanding I should have cleared up, all the things that should have been possible now that we had survived ...

Percy turned. His gaze fell on me. For an infinite second, the Spirit of Hope danced in my chest.

But I dropped my eyes. Zeus was right—this was not a gift lightly given. I could not hold Percy back, much as I selfishly wanted to plead for him to stay with me. If he wanted this ...

I could not look at him. That was the best I could do.

The word started up my heart again. My skin tingled the way it had when I'd touched his Achilles spot. Was it just me, or was the same spot on the small of my back sending sparks up my spine?

'No?' Zeus cupped his ear, like he was sure he hadn't heard right. *I* wasn't even sure I had heard right. 'You are turning down our gift?'

'I'm honoured and everything, don't get me wrong.' Percy was still looking in my direction. 'It's just ... I've got a lot of life to live. I'd hate to peak in my sophomore year.'

My heart was a balloon, swelling, rising up, up, up, right out of my chest. Could he be saying—had he chosen ... because of me?

I finally dared to look up. He *was* staring at me.

A tiny squeak escaped me. I pressed my hands quickly over my mouth, but no one was paying any attention to me. The gods were all staring at Percy, their expressions ranging from bewilderment to outrage.

But Percy wasn't done. In the upheaval of Zeus's offer, I had forgotten that the king of the gods *had* offered Percy a gift of his choosing.

He asked for recognition—but not for himself. 'All the children ... of *all* the gods,' he said.

It was Luke's dying wish. Given the opportunity to receive anything he wanted in the world—fame, riches, *godhood*, for Olympus's sake—Percy had chosen to honour the final request of his enemy. Or maybe the man who had once been his friend.

I had thought my heart was already full to bursting when Percy had turned down immortality. I was wrong.

Could I possibly love him any more than I did in this moment?

He extracted a promise on the Styx: no more unclaimed, amnesty for the minor gods and peaceful
Titans. Acceptance for the children of Hades. (Nico's head shot up; he stared at Percy with a
worshipful expression. I guess his grudge was well and truly over.)

'And no more pact of the Big Three,' Percy said firmly. 'That didn't work anyway. You've got to stop
trying to get rid of powerful demigods.'

A sharp look passed between Aphrodite and Hephaestus. Maybe they were thinking of Silena and
Beckendorf.

'I hold you to your oath—all of you,' Percy said.

It was really something, to see a bunch of all-powerful deities squirming in their seats before him like
children who'd just been told off. And in a way, they had been told off.

'The boy is correct,' Athena said, fair as always in her acknowledgement of the failings of the gods
and their hand in the war. Next to her, Artemis nodded, though many of the others still looked sulky.

'Percy Jackson.' She fixed him with a cold stare. 'I have had my doubts about you, but perhaps ...'
Her gaze softened as it drifted across me. 'Perhaps I was mistaken.'

I heard the double meaning in her words. On the surface, she was affirming his request.

To me, she was giving us her blessing.

The council's vote carried. Not that they had much choice, having already promised on the River
Styx.

Percy ran his hand through his hair, unsure what to do now that he'd just schooled the entire
Olympian Council. Then his father called to the Cyclopes. They made a double line along the U-
shape of the thrones, an honour guard fit for a god.

'All hail, Perseus Jackson, hero of Olympus,' said Tyson, newly-appointed Cyclops general, his eyes
misty with pride. 'And my big brother!'

Halfway down the room, Percy stopped and held out his hand to me. I took it. The Cyclopes knelt as
we passed. Behind them, even the gods were standing.

Hand in hand, we left the throne room of Olympus as heroes.
The Prophecy Comes Full Circle

Chapter Summary

Annabeth's role in the Great Prophecy is finally resolved.

Chapter Notes

Sorry to those who commented last chapter; I know I haven't replied yet. I had my thesis defence in the week so was completely out of fandom. But I'll get on to it once this chapter's posted!

We didn't stay long after the council. The gods' after party was pretty subdued. The palace grounds overlooked the ruins of the beautiful city, which kind of killed the mood. Or maybe it was because the nine Muses had smashed their instruments during the battle.


I found Grover on the hillside, surrounded by half a dozen forest nymphs. One of them was handing out grapes from a golden platter, but he ignored her in favour of the mountain of tin cans by his side.

'I'm guessing you don't want me to mention this to Juniper,' I said.

Grover slapped his forehead. 'She is so going to kill me.'

I laughed. 'She'll just be glad you're okay.'

'What did I miss?' He jerked his head at the palace. 'Did you guys get a reward as well?'

I told him about my new appointment, and Zeus's offer to Percy. Grover didn't seem at all surprised that Percy had turned it down.

'He wouldn't have left you behind.'

My heart did a cartwheel. 'You think so?'

'I know so.'

'Because of the empathy link?'

Grover looked at me like he could sense every emotion flooding my heart. Which, of course, he probably could. 'I've never needed an empathy link to tell how he feels about you.'

I tucked my hair behind my ears. 'We're going down to the city. You coming with us?'
Grover glanced at the pile of tin cans he'd yet to finish. 'Maybe a little later.'

At the foot of the mountain, I ran into some of the senior counsellors discussing the logistics of getting the injured and fallen back to camp. They had already started airlifting campers back with the pegasi for further care. To my relief, Travis Stoll informed me that Mrs O'Leary had dug Chiron out of the rubble downstairs and whisked him back to camp. He would be fine.

I waited for Percy at the end of the sky bridge, taking in the city and its ruined landscape. All over the mountain, nature spirits set to work re-growing the razed vegetation. So much of the infrastructure had been levelled to the ground that the slopes of Olympus were a blank canvas, an undrafted blueprint waiting to be developed.

Waiting for me to develop it.

In my mind's eye, I could see a hundred different possibilities. A circle of temples ringing the majestic mountain, their designs integrated with the natural landscape. A gradual evolution of the buildings' structures as they progressed outwards from the main palace, to reflect a slow modernisation of the gods' legacy. And this bridge, the link to the mortal world, lined with stones that glowed like the light of Hestia's hearth—to welcome us home when we visited.

Because if I'd learnt anything from Hestia, first goddess of architecture, it was that the heart of architecture was a connection to where you belonged.

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Percy showed up smelling of smoke.

'Long story,' he said when I asked him about it, but he didn't elaborate.

Sally and Paul Blofis were waiting for us at the street level, though 'waiting' is probably too tame a word to describe how they were haranguing the doorman.

'I'm telling you, we have to go up!' Sally's fierce expression reminded me uneasily of my stepmother, Janet. She'd berated a nurse the same way when she and my dad had scoured San Francisco's emergency rooms looking for me. 'My son—'

Paul saw us first. He squeezed Sally's arm and pointed.

'Percy!' Sally flew at him. She engulfed him in a hug and peppered him with exclamations. Then she turned to me and squeezed me tight.

Paul grinned at us. The sword he'd found earlier hung loosely in his right hand.

'Mr Blofis.' I was glad I'd finally recalled his name. 'That was wicked sword work.'

'It seemed like the thing to do,' he said casually, like this was all in a day's work. He was more interested in Olympus than swordplay. Disappointment criss-crossed his face when Sally told him it wasn't for mortals. Something in his expression made me think of Rachel Dare and the way she'd followed Percy and Sally to camp at the start of summer, just to see what it looked like.

Actually, where was Rachel? I hadn't thought about her since we'd left her in the throne room with Hestia.

As if on cue, Nico di Angelo burst in through the building doors, his eyes wide with alarm. 'It's Rachel.'
The insane mortal girl had stolen Percy's pegasus. What was she **thinking**? So she'd been to Olympus—already more than any mortal had a right to expect—but she'd trespassed on a weakened Olympus, with its magical barriers lowered. As far as I knew, the defences around camp were still holding strong. Monsters and mortals alike couldn't enter without permission. Not to mention, Peleus would probably eat her the moment got close.

We'd have to go save her. Again.

The thought didn't annoy me as much as it had a day ago. I was beginning to realise why Rachel pissed me off so much. And also that maybe ... it didn't have to be that way.

The logistics of getting back to camp were tricky. We'd pretty much trashed the streets of Manhattan (I estimated the traffic jams would take days to clear). Rachel had just absconded with our last means of rapid transportation. But then Percy remembered the rivers. He summoned up three hippocampi. We clambered on and raced eastwards.

We spotted the problem as soon as we landed on the fireworks beach. From the crest of the sand dunes, we could see the Big House awash with green light. It radiated from the windows like someone had set off a nuclear bomb inside.

Chiron was laid out on a large stretcher outside the farmhouse, his back legs immobilised in plaster casts and his left arm in a sling. A group of satyrs formed a half-ring around him. Their pipes dangled in their hands like they'd been working woodland magic, but had stopped abruptly when the commotion started.

Every eye was fixed on the frizzy redhead on the porch. She stood with her arms flung wide, like a supplicant at a godly altar.

'What's she doing?' I glared at Blackjack. 'How did she get past the barriers?'

'She flew,' said Woodrow the satyr. 'Right past the dragon, right through the magic boundaries.'

'Rachel!' Percy took a step towards her, but the satyrs held him back.

Chiron held up his good arm in a warning gesture. 'Percy, don't. You can't interrupt.'

Interrupt? He spoke as though there was some sort of ritual going on. Like Rachel was **meant** to be standing there, seeking a blessing from a deity within.

Only one thing in the Big House could spew green light and smoke like that.

I thought of Cath and May Castellan, and my insides flipped. Surely Rachel wasn't trying to ...

Percy rounded on Chiron. 'I thought you explained things to her!'

'I did,' Chiron said calmly. 'And I invited her here.'

'My jaw dropped. So did Percy's. 'You said you'd never let anyone try again! You said—'

'I know what I said, Percy. But I was wrong.' Chiron rubbed at his bandaged head. 'Rachel had a vision about the curse of Hades. She believes it may be lifted now. She convinced me she deserves a chance.'

Of course—the curse on the Oracle. On Cath. I didn't know how Percy had heard about it, but he seemed to understand exactly how much trouble Rachel had gotten herself into.
'And if the curse isn't lifted? If Hades hasn't got to that yet, she'll go crazy!'

It was too late. The green light had found Rachel. It pooled around her, surrounding her in its otherworldly glow. She gave a violent shudder.

'Hey! Stop!' Percy tore himself away from the satyrs and lunged for Rachel. A foot from her, he hit an invisible barrier and was flung back onto the lawn. I cried out, but I guess the curse of Achilles was still in effect, because he seemed fine.

I ran over. Rachel turned when I reached Percy. Her eyes were hazy and unfocused, like she was looking through us into a completely different world.

'It's all right.' Her voice had the same dreamy quality as when we'd spoken to her on Olympus. 'This is why I've come.'

'You'll be destroyed!' Percy insisted.

'This is where I belong, Percy,' she said with a grim smile. 'I finally understand why.'

The door to the Big House burst open. Mist flooded out in undulating waves, like a thousand writhing snakes. In its midst stood the mummified form of the Oracle herself.

I had never seen her leave the attic before. Now she glided across the porch straight towards Rachel's outstretched arms like an iron sheet drawn to a magnet.

Rachel didn't pull away. 'You've waited too long. But I'm here now.'

There was a burst of light over our heads. The next moment, a cheeky youth was lounging over the porch rails, between Rachel and the Oracle. A golden tan shone over his lean muscles; sparkling Ray-Bans perched jauntily on his forehead. We was remarkably self-assured for a guy draped in a revealing chiton. Only a god could have pulled off such casual arrogance.

Apollo winked when Percy greeted him, then motioned for us to be silent.

'Rachel Elizabeth Dare.' His severe tone didn't match his dazzling countenance. 'You have the gift of prophecy. But it is also a curse. Are you sure you want this?'

'It's my destiny,' Rachel said. I wondered if her visions had shown her the destiny of the last Oracle. The fate of Cath and her brother. Even if Rachel did manage to host the spirit of Delphi without going insane, she could end up chained to it for life—a virgin Oracle until the day she died.

Whether she knew what they were, Rachel accepted the risks without hesitation. She pledged herself to Apollo with a vow that was strikingly similar to the one Thalia had made two winters ago. (Then again, Apollo and Artemis were twins.)

Green smoke rushed from the mummified Oracle's mouth, the way it always did when she delivered a prophecy. This time, it took the spirit of Delphi right out of the mummy. As she crumbled to dust, I saw the ghost of the girl she used to be, with her inky hair and sad, solemn eyes.

Apollo held us back. 'This is the most delicate part.'

'What's going on? What do you mean?' Percy asked.
He answered in haiku. Or at least, I think he tried to. He was missing one syllable. 'Either the spirit; takes hold or it doesn't.'

I crossed my arms. 'And if it doesn't?'

He counted out five more syllables. 'That would be real bad.'

Percy dropped to his knees on the porch steps. The light around us faded. The Big House stood empty. The presence that had lingered inside it for decades was gone.

Rachel's chest was barely rising. What would happen if the spirit rejected her? Would she end up like Luke's mom, her own spirit fractured?

Nico drew in a sharp breath. He'd obviously sensed something we couldn't.

Then Rachel groaned and tried to lift her head. 'Percy?'

He helped her to sit up. 'Are you okay?'

Nico bent anxiously over her. 'Rachel, your life aura almost faded completely. I could see you dying.'

Rachel's mind still seemed far away. 'I'm all right. Please, help me up. The visions—they're a bit distracting.'

Once it became evident that Rachel was indeed alive and not at all insane (though that was debatable — personally, I thought she was crazy enough even before she attempted to host a prophetic spirit), Apollo hopped to his feet and spread his arms. 'Ladies and gentlemen, may I introduce the new Oracle of Delphi.'

'You're kidding.' I wasn't sure what I expected—a green tint to her skin, maybe, or a glow in her eyes. Rachel just looked like the same annoyingly pretty redhead.

'It's a little surprising to me, too,' Rachel admitted. 'But this is my fate. I saw it when I was in New York.' She said it with unflinching certainty. 'I know why I was born with true sight. I was meant to become the Oracle.'

As if to cement her point, she gasped and clutched her stomach mid-explanation. She got to her feet like she'd been drawn up by a puppet string through the centre of her head. Green light shone from her eyes. Smoke spewed from her mouth, along with a reverberating voice that wasn't quite Rachel's, but not exactly the Delphic rasp of the old Oracle either.

A prophecy came spilling from her mouth—four lines spelling uncertainty and doom. With this startling pronouncement, she toppled off the porch into Percy and Nico's arms.

It was just like Hal's description of the start of Cath's stint as Oracle. Rachel didn't remember a word she'd said, either. If this was how the last Great Prophecy had begun, did this mean we now had a new Great Prophecy?

I hadn't expected to jump from the one we'd just escaped straight into another. But if we had learnt anything from the current Great Prophecy, it was that there was no guessing what it meant. Up to the very end, the lines had still been moulded by our choices.

There was no point worrying about it now. The prophecy would play out whenever it did.

Right now, we had our lives to carry on with.
Percy, Chiron, and Rachel stayed on the porch to iron out the details of her new role with Apollo. I wondered if she would stay at camp. What would that be like, having her around all the time? Surprisingly, it didn't annoy me as much as I'd have thought. (Maybe because I remembered something important: celibacy was a key requirement in her job description.)

Nico and I were distracted by the arrival of Clarisse's flying chariot. It touched down on the lawn, pulled by a team of pegasi. Will rode with her, an Apollo-Ares truce at last. They had airlifted the bodies of all the fallen warriors home from Manhattan.

The rest of the afternoon was a blur. We prepared the amphitheatre, wove shrouds, and lit the funeral pyres.

We honoured our enemies as well—the lost and unclaimed children that Percy had gone to bat for. Ethan Nakamura's body had been found shattered on the sidewalk of Fifth Avenue. I had not seen him fall during our battle, but Percy assured me that he'd turned on Kronos, the way Luke had. I didn't press him for more details. I knew it would be a while before either of us wanted to discuss that final battle in the throne room.

Although the Fates had claimed Luke's body, I wove him a shroud anyway, patterned like the tapestry of our life threads. When it burned, the colours blended into one connected spiral of smoke, a reminder that his memory would be wound into our lives long after today. Maybe forever.

At the end of the funerals, Chiron wheeled up and handed me a battered green diary. It must have fallen to the sidewalk from Olympus, possibly right onto Chiron himself.

I traced my finger over the faded leather cover. Hal Green had seen a sacrifice in Luke's future. Had he known that it connected with his sister's prophecy? Was that why he'd passed on diary and dagger, to enable Luke to make the right choice? And Luke ... had he realised that we needed to understand his story to call him back?

Now they were both gone. But I didn't think I'd ever forget what they had written.

I handed the diary back to Chiron. 'You keep it.'

'Are you sure?'

I nodded. 'Maybe it can—maybe their stories can help someone else. Other demigods.'

Chiron's fingers closed over the book's spine. 'I am sorry about what happened, Annabeth.'

'Me too.'

'I know it was not an easy choice for you.'

I looked at him in surprise. 'How did you—'

'Guess that the final choice was yours?' Chiron pulled from his breast pocket the wrinkled oak leaf on which I'd written the Oracle's final prophecy. Beckendorf's prophecy, from the start of summer.

'Wisdom chooses,' I read. 'Water remains steadfast.'

'I guessed that line might have a double meaning. Especially if it was meant to bring the Great Prophecy full circle: Cath Green's first and last prophecies.'

Both prophecies finally made sense. By summer's end, a hero's fate shall claim three—Beckendorf,
Michael, and Silena had each died a hero's death. *The summer that legends are made*—well, who could ever forget the Battle of Manhattan? *A sacrifice to set things right by the blade* ... it matched the Great Prophecy's line about the cursed blade so neatly, I couldn't believe I hadn't made the connection before. *The spirit of Delphi shall rest*—and she had, until the Great Prophecy came to fruition and Rachel gave the prophetic spirit new life.

As for *wisdom* and *water* ... it had been me and Percy in the end, deciding the fate of Olympus. Who knew for certain which of our choices had led to the defining moment in the battle? It could have been the instant Percy had handed Luke my dagger—a choice to yield and put his faith in Luke. Or even Luke's choice, to plunge that blade into his own weak spot.

But none of their choices would have been possible if I hadn't opened the door to them.

Pan had been right about the nature of my role all along.

Chiron smiled at me. 'I guess we know now why the Oracle entrusted the prophecy to you long ago. She knew all along: you were its hidden hero.'

*You were my secret weapon*, Athena had said.

The enormity of the part I had played stole my breath away. Even though no one would ever know (and I had no desire to reveal my choices on Olympus to anyone else), just realising what power I'd had made my knees tremble.

'So ... what now?'

Chiron laughed. 'I think you've earned yourself a good break. And maybe a celebration.' He winked. 'After all, you've come through *against all odds*.'

His words brought back the opening lines of the Great Prophecy: *shall reach sixteen against all odds* ...

The revelation smacked me in the head. Sixteen. Today. August eighteenth.

Percy's birthday.

I'd registered it on Olympus, but hadn't said a word about it to him, let alone had time to get him a present. But the day wasn't over yet.

And there was something he'd asked for that he hadn't yet collected.

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My plan wasn't as easy to pull off as I hoped. Mainly because when it came to the culinary arts, well, I was no Sally Blofis. The nymphs would have kicked me out of the underground kitchen if it hadn't been for Tyson, who showed up just before dinner, looking puzzled. He said a dove had sent him.

I rolled my eyes. Of *course* Aphrodite would stick her nose where it didn't belong. But I accepted his help gratefully. Thanks to Tyson, even though my chocolate cupcake *looked* like a brick, it wouldn't actually taste like one.

I brought it to Percy after dinner. He was sitting alone at his table, watching Grover and Juniper stroll along the moonlit beach.

'Hey,' I said. 'Happy birthday.'
He blinked at my cupcake. 'What?'

It was so typical of him to have forgotten the date, even when the resolution of the Great Prophecy should have been a blinking neon sign. 'It's August eighteenth. Your birthday, right?'

He stared from me to the cupcake. I wondered if he remembered the disastrous exchange we'd had on my birthday. This time, I was determined to get it right.

'Make a wish,' I told him.

He examined the cupcake. 'Did you bake this yourself?'

'Tyson helped,' I admitted.

Percy hid a smile. 'That explains why it looks like a chocolate brick. With extra-blue cement.'

I considered telling him that Tyson had actually saved the day—or the oven, at any rate—but he was already blowing out his candle.

He offered me the first bite. I dipped my fingers into the icing. Together, we polished off the cupcake (which did not taste anything like a brick). The ocean made a soothing backdrop to our companionable silence. The slow, steady roll of its waves was like Percy himself: full of unimaginable power under his calm, easygoing surface. You wouldn't guess from looking at him (especially with blue frosting dotting his nose and cheeks) that he was the saviour of Olympus.

'You saved the world.'

He looked at me. 'We saved the world.'

The earnestness in his voice made me smile. We're a team, right? he'd said on our first quest. You provided him with a source of power, my mother had told me.

This was us. It had always been us. Even when things had gotten so complicated, with Luke, and Rachel ...

'And Rachel is the new Oracle,' I said. 'Which means ... she won't be dating anybody.'

Percy raised his eyebrows. 'You don't sound disappointed.'

'Oh, I don't care.' And I didn't, not really. Even if she hadn't taken in the spirit of Delphi, after everything we'd seen and done ... well, if I wasn't sure of Percy after that, when would I ever be?

'Uh-huh,' Percy said.

'You got something to say to me, Seaweed Brain?'

He raised his hands in surrender. 'You'd probably kick my butt.'

I grinned. 'You know I'd kick your butt.'

He turned serious. 'When I was at the River Styx, turning invulnerable ...' He swallowed hard. 'Nico said I had to concentrate on one thing that kept me anchored to the world, that made me want to stay mortal.'

My breath caught in my throat. I had a sudden flash of him in the canoe lake, floundering until I pulled him back to me. He must have been taking his dangerous bath the very night I'd had that
dream.

'Yeah?' I breathed. My fingers itched to sneak around to his weak spot, to feel that connection sparking between us again.

'Then ... up on Olympus, when they wanted to make me a god and stuff, I kept thinking ...' He paused, contemplating the offer he'd forgone.

'Oh, you so wanted to,' I teased.

'Well, maybe a little. But I didn't, because I thought—I didn't want things to stay the same for eternity, because things could always get better. And I was thinking ...'

My mouth threatened to burst into a giddy smile. 'Anyone in particular?'

He lifted his eyes. 'You're laughing at me.'

My lips twitched. 'I am not!'

Percy made a face. 'You are so not making this easy.'

He ran his fingers through his hair, struggling to find the right words. For months, I'd longed to hear him declare his feelings. Now I found I didn't need him to say it. Grover was right. I didn't need an empathy link to see how he felt about me.

There was no point dancing around it any more. I'd second-guessed myself, second-guessed us for long enough. It was time to stop running away from my doubts and fears.

This was Percy. I loved him. I trusted him. And like the eternal city I was tasked with rebuilding, I was ready to build something permanent with him, too.

'I am never, ever going to make things easy for you, Seaweed Brain,' I promised. 'Get used to it.'

I put my arms around him and kissed him. This time, I was definitely sure he was kissing me back.

It might have been the perfect romantic ending to the day, except Clarisse, of all people, had taken a leaf out of Aphrodite's book. She emerged from the bushes, leading an army of whooping, wolf-whistling campers.

'Well, it's about time!' she proclaimed.

'Oh come on, is there no privacy?' Percy whined as they surrounded us and lifted us onto their shoulders.

In response, Clarisse declared, 'I think the lovebirds need to cool off!'

They bore us away to the canoe lake, to the same dock I'd stood on in my dream, anchoring Percy to safety. With gleeful cries, our friends tossed us in. We fell into the water in a tangle of arms and legs. Fortunately, Percy was good at improvising. And water, of course.

The moment we hit the surface, a thin film of air bubbled over our skin. Without letting go of my hand, Percy pulled the layer of air around us, encasing us in our own private bubble just like he'd done at the bottom of Siren Bay.

My arms drifted around his waist, drawn to the spot on the small of his back that tied us together. His free hand traced the grey streak in my hair that matched his. Even his bath in the Styx hadn't faded it...
out. Because that linked us, too. There were so many things that bound us, visible or not.

'How long should we make them wait?' he asked.

'Are you in a hurry?'

He twisted a lock of my hair around his finger. 'Well, we have all the time in the world now, right?'

I put my arms around his neck. 'Maybe you're not such a Seaweed Brain after all.'

He laughed and pulled me closer. At last, he kissed me.

And it felt like coming home.

Chapter End Notes

Hal and Cath's story was intended to follow the theme of the story of Cassandra, the prophetess of Troy who was cursed to speak prophecies that no one believed. She had a twin brother, Helenus, who is less famous, perhaps because his prophecies were believed. (I have no idea if RR chose 'Halcyon' to match Helenus—both seven letters, beginning with H—but my choice of Catharine was intentional to match that pattern.) I particularly like how the Cassandra story fits nicely into the bigger picture of the Trojan War—which you'll no doubt have guessed is the thematic base for this fic. I particularly like how Cassandra links to Iphigenia (albeit in a convoluted way) in her predictions of Iphigenia's father Agamemnon's death at the hands of his wife Clytemnestra, in part a revenge for arranging the murder of their daughter. The connection here between Hal and Jenny is very loosely a nod to the intricate links in the Trojan War stories. In my fic research, I was inspired greatly by Cassandra by Hilary Bailey, but none of it ultimately made it into the story or characterisation of Cath or Hal.

Fun fact: I wanted to make all of Annabeth's different prophecies line up, with a line from each (four of them, since she didn't get one in TGF), but I hit a snag on the BotL/TIM prophecy because the obvious line was 'destroy with a hero's final breath'. Except pretty much nothing except death rhymes with breath, so I finally gave up making this story's invented prophecy match up. The four selected lines would go like this:

*Daughter of wisdom awaits her prophesied fate* [DoW]
*A circle of three bound in love and hate*; [NoH]
*Destroy with a hero’s final breath* [TIM]
*A sacrifice to set things right by the blade* [TFS]

And in case you were worried about this being the final ending ... there's still one last chapter after this, so no fear, I haven't ended it right at the kiss ...
Percy and I fell into the pattern of dating so naturally, it was as if we'd been a couple all along. Being his girlfriend didn't change things much. He was still the same old Seaweed Brain: sarcastic, funny, and so exasperating. Except now, when he did something dumb, I could just kiss him to shut him up. He forgot whatever he was saying pretty quick when I did that.

Yeah, the kissing was definitely an improvement.

Percy seemed amazed by it all, like he couldn't quite believe his good fortune. I chose not to remind him that he'd gotten this the wrong way round. I was keenly aware that the curse of Achilles still lingered over him. A good dose of humility would keep him grounded against its scourge.

And he certainly wasn't going to get it from anyone else. In the wake of the Battle of Manhattan, he'd attained celebrity status at camp. I had to take over sword-fighting classes because campers would concentrate on him instead of his demonstration. It probably didn't help that his moves had become too quick and clean, like he simply couldn't slow down any more. The younger kids kept dropping their swords and giggling when he came round to help them (that quickly got annoying to watch).

Everyone wanted to hear about our exploits, especially the new campers—and there was a deluge of them. The satyrs who had made it through the battle in one piece were mobilised right away to bring them in.

The demigods from Luke's army were the first. They arrived tentatively, guided to us by minor gods who had received amnesty from the Olympians. All were lost. All were disheartened. Our satyrs had to coax them across the camp borders. But once they arrived, no one turned them away. We had seen enough fighting.

Then there were the unclaimed. A flurry of older demigods, mostly thirteen to fifteen, coming in fast and furious from every corner of the country and beyond. We even got one kid who barely spoke a word of English, though he seemed to understand us just fine. The gods were making good on their promise to Percy. Campfire nights were a riot, with all the godly signs flashing like fireworks overhead.

My plans for Olympus had to wait: there was a more pressing demand for new cabins right here.
Nico was the first to get his own. Although both the Ares and Hermes groups had opened their doors to him, cabin eleven was now full to bursting point with the influx of new campers awaiting their own cabins, and Nico found the land mines in Ares (understandably) off-putting.

I drew up plans for a goth-inspired interior, taking my cue from Nico's typical attire. He seemed to approve. Once I presented him with the designs, he summoned a full skeleton work crew to start construction.

Hecate was next. We already had one of her daughters, Lou Ellen, who bounced on the balls of her feet as she detailed all the special effects she wanted in her cabin—including magic inscriptions on the stones that would warp the Mist indoors. A handful of her siblings trickled in during the amnesty, each with Hecate's maze-like tripod flashing defiantly over their heads as if to say, *yeah, we fought you guys. We lost. Get over it.*

I didn't see Alabaster Torrington. Maybe he'd fallen in battle like Ethan Nakamura, but we never found a body.

We built the Nemesis cabin next, in deference to her son's sacrifice. Like Luke, Ethan had turned on Kronos, only to pay with his life. I designed the cabin like the Supreme Court, with eight Doric columns framing the door, which was engraved with a set of scales. We only had one new camper to inhabit it for now, Damien White, but he assured us he did have siblings, all stuck on the other side of the country. Grover immediately sent a team of satyrs to collect them.

I continued down the growing list of newly-claimed minor god kids. Clovis, who could hardly stay awake long enough to approve my designs for Hypnos cabin. The foreign demigod, Paolo, who turned out to be a son of Hebe. A son of Iris who caused a stir at campfire night when a glowing rainbow shimmered over his head, accompanied by a giggling Iris image of the rainbow call operator. She winked at us, blew a kiss to Butch, and disappeared. (The poor kid probably would have gotten teased much more if he hadn't been the size of a tank.)

We closed the space on the open green so that the cabin area now formed a rectangle around the hearth. Still more kids were claimed every day—Nike, Tyche (and others, too, not necessarily rhyming)—who would all need their own quarters.

'I might need Chiron to clear space for a whole new wing,' I said to Rachel. She stood surveying the construction progress with me. I'd almost forgotten why I'd ever found her annoying. With her eye for artistic detail and an uncanny ability to predict how many bunks we should provide per new cabin, she'd been a great help with the blueprints.

Rachel herself had taken up residence in a cave near the top of Half-Blood Hill. It seemed like an odd choice for a girl used to living in a luxury condo, but she seemed to like it. To be fair, it offered her twice as much space and tons more privacy than the rest of us. By the time she finished decorating, it was the perfect space to chill out and sketch designs, from wall art to, say, blueprints for a brand new city on Olympus. I spent many an afternoon there with my drafting paper spread across her studio-like floor, while Rachel painted colourful murals over her walls.

Rachel even let me use her cave to make one very important call. She had a back room with a skylight dug up through the hilltop that filtered sunlight through the panelled glass the way a prism would—perfect for Iris-messaging. (Though I didn't really get *who* she intended to IM. Maybe she just liked the rainbows. It went well with the rest of her psychedelic wall art.)

It was early in the morning in San Francisco when I called (I'd forgotten about time zones), but my dad was already up, studying an old battle plan on his desk. Maybe he was still jet-lagged from his trip. Then again, it wouldn't be the first time he'd stayed up all night because he forgot to go to bed.
He was so engrossed in his work, I had to call him twice before he looked up.

'Annabeth!' He knocked over his coffee mug and grabbed it before it could slosh over his antique map. 'What—how—?'

'It's an Iris-message, Dad. It's ... uh, magic. I had to do this because ... well, I can't use my phone. I kind of lost it.'

'Oh, um ...' He scratched his head. 'Is, ah, everything okay? Are you still at camp?'

I nodded. 'We're running later this year. We had—well, it's been a long summer.'

I settled into Rachel's plush armchair and told him about the battle we'd just fought. The gory details, I left out—he didn't need to know just how badly we'd trashed Manhattan, and I still wasn't ready to discuss Luke—but I described the battle lines and our strategic use of Central Park. That, he'd probably appreciate. When I got to the end, the part where Athena appointed me architect of Olympus, his eyes grew misty.

'You've certainly been busy,' he said. 'And ... I know I can't possibly understand all you've been through. But for what it's worth ... I'm proud of you, too.'

I let his words wash around me, warm and encouraging. Then I forged ahead with the plan I'd been concocting. I needed a huge favour from him.

'Thanks, Dad. The thing is, now that I'll be re-designing Olympus ...'

His brow furrowed. 'You want to stay in New York.'

I tucked my hair behind my ears. 'Yeah. But—not at camp. I thought maybe I could go to school in the city ...'

He leant back in his chair. 'I guess ... well, you'll be going off to college in a few years anyway. Janet did say you might want to consider programmes on the east coast.

I hadn't really thought that far ahead. It was only just sinking in that I could have a future. One that wasn't confined to camp, but an actual life in New York City, studying and actually being an architect. Just like I'd always wanted.

And I had to admit I had another reason for wanting to stay. Architecture wasn't the only thing I wanted to build.

'We'll find you a school,' my dad said. 'I may have a colleague who knows someone, who knows someone—well, we'll figure it out. In fact, I wouldn't put it past Janet to have made some back-up plans already.'

If only Iris-messages could transmit actions. I wanted to throw my arms around him and hug him tight. I had to settle for a heartfelt thank you. 'And, um—thank Janet, too, I guess.'

My dad smiled. 'But call us often, okay? We'll get you a new phone. And maybe before you start school, you could—'

'I'll come and visit,' I promised.

'Bring that boyfriend of yours if you want.'

'Da-ad! How did you know?'
'I didn't. But I do now.' He grinned and pointed behind me. 'And he didn't look half as scared the last
time I met him.' He leant forward conspiratorially and whispered, 'No guy looks that terrified of an
old professor unless he's dating his daughter.'

Sure enough, Percy was peeking in from Rachel's studio. He shifted his weight nervously from foot
to foot. 'Uh, sorry, I thought you might be—I mean, hi, Professor Chase.'

'I'll be done in a minute,' I told him. 'Why don't you go steal Rachel's artisan coffee?'

'I hate that stuff,' Percy complained. He glanced at my father and winced. 'I mean, yeah, sure. Uh,
nice seeing you, Prof Chase.'

'See you, Percy.' My dad had a twinkle in his eye.

'You're not going to read him the riot act?' I said.

'Fun as that might be ... no. The kid came all the way to our door two years ago because you were in
trouble.' He brought his hands together and studied the tips of his fingers. 'I know your life is
dangerous and I can't be there for most of it. I'd rather you did have someone who can look out for
you.'

I found myself blinking hard. Although I had never told my dad about Luke, it was almost as if he
knew how Percy had stepped up when Luke had failed.

'Besides,' he added, 'if I know your mother ... I have a feeling she's already threatened young Percy
more than I ever could.'

I remembered the weird, smoky smell clinging to Percy when we'd left Olympus. He'd never really
explained that. Now, I had a pretty strong suspicion why. 'Yeah. You're probably right.'

My dad gestured behind me. 'I guess you have to go. But Annabeth, now that that war of yours is
over, maybe we could take that trip to Greece next summer?'

I grinned. 'Deal.'

Percy and Rachel were both sitting on her squashy purple sofa when I emerged. (Don't ask me
where she managed to scrounge her furniture.) He leapt to his feet once I walked out, like he was
afraid I'd get mad that they were in the same room. He acted like he was facing a pop quiz whenever
Rachel and I hung out. One with questions that might explode if you got them wrong. I caught
Rachel's eye and smothered a grin.

'I'm staying in New York,' I announced.

Percy's anxious expression morphed into a huge smile. He caught me around the waist and swung
me in a circle. 'That's awesome!'

'Lucky you,' Rachel said. 'Wish I got to go to school in Manhattan.'

'Don't you?'

She shook her head. 'I made a deal with my dad. I'm off to Clarion Academy in two weeks—
finishing school in Hampshire.' She made a face, like she was about to spit up a deadly new
prophecy.

'You, at finishing school.' Despite the luxury condo and the millionaire dad, I still had trouble
picturing her as finishing school material.

Rachel mimed walking with a stack of books on her head. 'I'm going to hate it. But—' she brightened, 'vacations are gonna be so much better when I can come here!'

I couldn't argue with that.

+++ All too soon, our summer came to an end. After the long, drawn-out start, it now felt like I'd hardly blinked and the last two weeks had disappeared.

At least Percy and I would venture out into the world together this time. I'd make a flying visit home to San Francisco before returning for boarding school in Manhattan. My new school was only several blocks from the Empire State Building, near enough that I could drop by Olympus every afternoon. Percy was only a few subway stops away, and once he told his mom I was spending the year in Manhattan, she insisted I visit every weekend.

On the last night of camp, we stayed out late at the amphitheatre. The campfire burned brighter and taller than it had all year. Our numbers were creeping back up, almost to pre-war attendance levels. Twice as many campers were expected next summer. When we came back, this was going to seem like a whole new place, with so many new faces.

Jake Mason handed me a box full of this year's end-of-summer beads. His cabin had designed them, with the Empire State Building etched into the surface of each one to commemorate our defence of Olympus. I had insisted on one little detail: the names of our fallen printed over it, so that they made a protective spiral around the building.

All of our fallen.

I took the box and stood with Percy at the head of the campfire. He picked up a bead and rubbed it between his fingers.

'This summer, you guys were the bravest army I've ever seen,' he said. 'We couldn't have held Olympus without you. This bead—' he held it up, 'this bead represents what we fought for.'

The amphitheatre was silent, hanging on his words. Percy's eyes travelled over the Greek letters on the bead. He swallowed hard.

I stepped in. 'It represents our courage. And our sacrifice—especially that of our friends. We'll always remember them and what they gave for Olympus.'

'For Olympus,' echoed the others.

I read out every one of the names. Beckendorf, Michael, Silena ... so many others. And Luke. His name flashed right at the top of the engraved Empire State Building, near the spire.

We passed the box around and the senior counsellors distributed the beads. I strung mine on my leather cord. It was getting seriously crowded. The new bead settled next to my father's college ring and another new addition: a red coral pendant Percy handed to me when we settled back into the campfire circle.

'Because, uh ... we're dating now?' he said. 'I mean, presents are good, right?'

I laughed. 'Presents are always good. So I take it you have something planned for our one-month
anniversary?'

'Uh ...' He blinked rapidly, clearly thinking fast. 'A special dinner?'

I bumped his shoulder lightly. 'I'll hold you to that.'

A flashbulb popped. To my surprise, Chiron was behind the camera. He winked at us. 'You've reminded me that I need some new photos from my office wall.'

At the thought of Chiron's wall of heroes, my heart swelled. How long ago it had seemed that I'd wondered if I would ever stand among the ranks of the legendary demigods who graced his wall.

I looked out over the camp grounds as Chiron stood to make his end-of-summer announcements. Moonlight shone over Half-Blood Hill, making the Fleece on Thalia's pine glow silver. I could almost see the ghost of the girl I had been, making my way over the crest with Thalia and Luke.

The campfire ended. I stayed a while longer, fingering the beads on my necklace. Nine beads for nine years. In the smouldering embers, I got a brief glimpse of Hestia. Her soft, sweet smile was exactly as it had been the first day I'd stumbled into camp, lost, hurt, and desperate for a family that would last.

_The children who notice me are the ones who crave a home_, she'd once told me.

Now, she seemed to be asking, _You've found what you were looking for, haven't you?_

Percy held out his hand to me. 'Coming?'

I smiled and took it.

+++ 

I stared up at the towering building in front of me. Even after the awful battle it had just been through, the Empire State Building still made an impressive sight.

My first visit here on that fateful field trip four years ago seemed to belong to an entirely different lifetime. How I'd gaped at the delicate needle spire jutting out into the clouds. How enthralled I'd been to actually visit Olympus for the first time in my life.

Percy gave me a curious look. 'Are we going in, or what?'

'Yeah, of course. I just ... needed a moment.'

He smiled. 'Nervous?'

'No.' I paused. 'Maybe.'

'You'll be fine.'

'I know.'

The security guard stopped us at the gates. 'We're still closed for repairs.'

I fished in my pocket for the special key card that had been delivered to my school dorm earlier that week: gold, with the imprint of a mountaintop temple. A Greek _Omega_ was etched over it. The doorman's eyebrows shot up when he saw the card. He gaped at me with an expression that said, _who are you people?_
'Annabeth Chase,' I told him. 'Architect of Olympus. And—' I glanced at Percy and my heart swelled at his proud grin. 'And my boyfriend, Percy Jackson.'

Percy took my hand as we stepped through and boarded the elevator. The music had changed. A jazzy club tune was playing, one I wouldn't have thought twice about, except the lyrics caught my attention:

_I want something permanent, like the stars in the sky_
_Permanent, like the mountain high...

I laced my fingers tightly through Percy's and smiled. My dream was about to come true: I was on my way to build a city for the ages, like I'd always wanted. But architecture wasn't just about building things.

My something permanent was already next to me.

**THE END**

Chapter End Notes

The song at the end in the elevator to Olympus is *Permanent* by Randy Crawford. It seemed a fitting way to sum up Annabeth's 'quest' for permanence in her life—though I hope that by the end of this fic, it's become evident that she's learned how to better define those goals as she thinks about her future.

And speaking of the future ... This is the end of a massive, three-year project, and the last chapter of the *DoW* series. I'd like to say a huge THANK YOU to all the readers who have commented and encouraged me to keep going, keep posting, and keep sharing Annabeth's story as I've imagined it.

About what's coming next ... I don't know. I do have some edited out content that went into Hal and Luke's story as I was writing this, and if there is any interest in seeing that, I'll clean it up for posting (but after a break from this—I think I'll need some time off first!)

I don't intend to continue this series into *HoO*, for several reasons. First, time is the main factor. I've written and edited this fic concurrently with my PhD ... and as chance or coincidence would have it, I've completed both at nearly the exact same time (I passed my thesis defence just before chapter 35). *DoW* has seen me through some tougher moments—and some particularly mind-numbing ones, too! But keeping something of this scale going indefinitely isn't sustainable, especially with my new job. Second, *HoO* doesn't grab me the way *PJO* did in terms of having an untold story that I wanted to read. This is more to do with the format of the series—told in multiple PoVs—than anything about the content. Third, in what time I do have, I'd like to embark on some original writing—including the NaNo project I started last Christmas and didn't get a chance to finish, and the various novel outlines that haven't had time to take form while I worked on this story series. (I must stress that I certainly don't regret writing *DoW* or view the time spent on it as wasted; it has been an excellent exercise in plot, characterisation, and style, and all of your feedback on it goes towards making me a better storyteller!)
For those of you who have hoped I would continue into *HoO*, I know this may be disappointing, but I'll leave you with this: *DoW* started because I wanted to read a story and it didn't exist. It is my hope that someone may be inspired enough to do the same—I know many of you are aspiring writers, and I'd like to say that I'd be most happy to share the process of creating *DoW* and turning it into the final product that I've posted on this site. Feel free to drop me a note if you'd like to talk about this.

Thank you for following Annabeth's journey, and mine. I've really appreciated the experience of sharing the story.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!