Huntress
by totallyunrelated

Summary

After Annabeth's death, Percy becomes a Huntress. A century later, she will have to face her darkest fears once again... as evil is rising again, intent to finish what Gaea and Kronos started. Can she save the world for the third time? fem!Percy I don't own the characters, Rick Riordan does. (NO Guardian/Chaos!)
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Chapter 1

PERCY

He could still remember the worst moment of his life, of his entire demigodly career. (And trust him, there's been more than a few.) He'd been lying in his cabin, looking fondly at old pictures of the Seven, of him and Annabeth, and wondering when he'd see his Wise Girl again. Sadly, she'd gone home to see her father and step-mother two weeks ago, but she was due back any day now. He missed her stormy grey eyes, her smile, everything about her. After the Giant War, they'd finally had some well-deserved peace and quiet, and now, six months later, everything was going perfectly. (Of course, Percy knew that that was when something bad was going to happen, but he pushed that feeling away and let himself live.)

"Percy!" The sound of a familiar voice shouting his name in desperation shook him out of his reverie, and he immediately jerked up, drawing Riptide in one graceful motion. An Iris message hovered above his head, showing him an alleyway, bathed in blood, and his Wise Girl, leaning against a brick wall that was so blood-spattered that it was hard to tell what its original colour had been. Her orange Camp Half-Blood T-shirt was covered in blood, and he could see a wound on her side oozing blood. She was pale, and he could tell she'd already lost a lot of blood.

"Annabeth!" The heart-wrenching cry tore out of him, and his heart broke, seeing her lying there, so vulnerable, and him helpless to do anything but watch. If only he was there with her right now.

"Annabeth, no, you have to hold on – where are you – I'll get you help…"

"No, Seaweed Brain," she whispered, her hand coming up as if to stroke his cheek before falling limply back to her side. "It's too … late …"

"No. Annabeth, you're not dying on me," he choked. "Remember? As long as we're together. You'll be fine. Do you have ambrosia or nectar on you?" He wouldn't, couldn't, accept that she was dying in front of his eyes. There had to be something he could do. "Tell me where you are. I'll send help. Annabeth, please just hold on. For me?"

He turned desperately, trying to figure out what he could do. He couldn't leave his cabin, but where else would he find help? Please, he prayed, to whomever he could think of. Help her. Athena, Apollo, Dad – please. Help her. He didn't know if they heard, but it was the best chance he had. "Chiron!" he shouted, hoping against hope that he would be heard. After all they'd been through together, she just couldn't leave him.

A rasping cough from the IM drew his attention. She looked even weaker now, blood seeping through her fingers at an alarming rate. "It'll be alright, Seaweed Brain," she whispered. "I'll always love you. But please, don't blame yourself for this. It's not your fault," she said, her voice getting weaker with every word she spoke.

Percy had been in enough battles to know when someone was dying, and Annabeth was. But he refused to accept it. She was Annabeth, she was his Wise Girl – she just couldn't die. Not now, not when they had everything to live for. "NO!" he screamed, feeling the ocean outside respond to his tumultuous feelings. "Annabeth!" he yelled, watching her eyelids droop and her breathing get shallower, paralyzed with his own uselessness. "I love you, Annabeth," he choked out. "Don't leave me. Please."

She managed a small smile. "Percy – I – I always loved you. Stay … strong," she coughed. "I'll be waiting for you … in … Elysium …" And with that, the light, the beautiful, wondrous light, in her
eyes went out, and she slumped to the ground.
Chapter 2

THALIA

The first thing she saw when she arrived at Camp Half-Blood was the hurricane. Then she noticed the raging waves and storm clouds, and she immediately knew that something was wrong with Percy. Majorly wrong. Either he was pissed, or he was really really upset about something. She felt worry surge in her, and immediately took off at a dead sprint for Poseidon's cabin, not even waiting for a dismissal from her mistress, Artemis. She didn't care if she'd get reprimanded for it later; Percy needed her. And that took priority.

She slowed down as she reached Cabin Three, approaching tentatively, and knocking softly. There was no response, which she'd expected. "Percy?" she called softly. "It's me. Thalia. Open up." For a minute, there was silence, only broken by the occasional crash of the waves on the beach, then the cabin door slowly opened. Thalia stepped inside, her eyes adjusting to the dark interior, and saw the shape of her cousin huddled on a bed. She approached cautiously, not wanting to do anything to trigger him further. As she neared, he turned a tear-streaked face up to her, tears still running down his face. Overcome by emotion, she sat down next to him and hugged him, sensing that he needed comfort right now. She still didn't know what had happened, but she knew he'd tell her when he was ready.

She didn't know how long she held him for as the storm raged outside and rain came down in torrents, but eventually, through heartbroken sobs, he choked out, "She's gone, Thalia. She's gone and I couldn't do anything about it …"

Dreading his answer, Thalia asked, "Who, Percy?" She knew full well that it could only have been two people who could have reduced him to this state, and she wished, anything. Anything but that … But her wishing was futile. Through his sobs, Percy replied, "Annabeth …"

And she broke.

She curled into Percy and they wept together, mourning the loss of the bright-eyed, light-spirited blonde girl who had left such a big impact on both their lives, who didn't deserve to die, not when she had so much left to live for, finally, after she'd survived two wars. Thalia mourned for the seven-year-old she'd first met in that alley, who'd had such courage to stab a fully grown Cyclops in the foot at her young age to save her friends. She grieved for what could have been, the life she ought to have led with Percy, the happiness she should have had. For the bright future that had been so cruelly robbed from both Annabeth and Percy, the wonderful marriage, kids, grandkids they deserved.

They half-sobbed, half-laughed, telling stories about the intelligent young woman who'd been lost too soon, finding comfort in each other in the darkest of times. Who'd, so rightly, predicted that they would either be the best of friends and the worst of enemies – and Thalia was grateful, oh so grateful, that they'd eventually become the best of friends. She knew that without Annabeth, there would be a giant hole in both of their hearts, but she had faith that they could both make it through and celebrate her life instead of mourning her death. Eventually, exhausted, they both fell asleep, to dreams of a lively, wild Annabeth, finally free in Elysium.

The next morning, Thalia awoke to find herself no longer tangled up with Percy, as she'd been the night before, but moved to the bed next to him sometime in the middle of the night. (She suspected he knew her mistress would be none too pleased and didn't want to get her in trouble.) She sat up, rubbing her swollen eyes, and looked over at Percy. Tear tracks still adorned his cheeks, but he
looked peaceful as he slept, a thin line of drool coming out of his mouth. Suppressing a chuckle, Thalia rose and headed to the bathroom. Staring at herself in the mirror, she noted the identical tear tracks to Percy's, and her eyes started watering again. She wanted to believe last night was a dream, that she'd never heard those awful words, and in the light of day, she could almost believe it. Almost believe that Annabeth was still alive, that she would suddenly come bursting into the Poseidon cabin with her shining blonde curls and calculating grey eyes, and everything would be right again.

She turned back to the main cabin, back to Percy, and gently shook him awake. He woke with a start, his hand drifting to his pocket, before he registered her face and flopped back onto the bed. "Why, Thalia?" he whispered, his eyes holding a shattered look in them. "Why her? Why now, when we've come so far, when we could've had everything?" She didn't have a response for him, so she just settled for shaking her head. Hesitantly, she asked the question she'd been wondering since last night. "Percy, how? How did it happen?"

He turned his face away from her, and for a second she thought he wasn't going to answer. But then he spoke up, in a voice broken beyond recognition.

"Yesterday, she Iris Messaged me," he whispered. "I think ... I think it was a monster attack. Maybe there were too many and they overwhelmed her. She ... when I saw her she was already bleeding out, she'd lost too much blood and ... and ... she told me it was too late. She knew she was going to die. And I couldn't do anything. I just sat there, I couldn't do anything and she died right in front of me." His voice had been steadily growing in intensity and volume and Thalia flinched as he finished, staring blankly at his hands. "It's my fault," he muttered. "If only I was good enough – if only I went with her to San Francisco – if only I wasn't so goddamn useless and sat there like a fool when I could have done something – she would have been alive right now, she wouldn't – she wouldn't –" He couldn't finish, choking up, and her eyes blazed.

"SLAP." The sound of her palm hitting his cheek reverberated around the small cabin, and he flinched, raising his eyes to look up at her. "Don't you dare blame yourself, Perseus Jackson," she hissed. "Annabeth wouldn't have wanted that. She loved you, and she wouldn't want to see you blaming yourself for her death. So don't, okay? It wasn't your fault. Sometimes, you just have to accept that, okay?" She was breathing heavily by the end of her little rant, and he looked at her, his eyes wide. "I know, Thalia, but I just can't help thinking, I should've, I could've saved her if I'd just done something ..."

She hissed out a sigh between her teeth and sat down. "It wasn't your fault," she repeated, uselessly. She knew she wasn't getting through to him. She didn't know what else to say, and he seemed too lost in his thoughts to say anything, so she just watched him in silence. Idly, she wondered, what was going to happen now?

As if he read her thoughts, Percy released a deep breath. "I can't stay here, Thalia," he said. "There's just – there's just too many memories." His voice broke. "I would go to my mom, but I don't want to endanger her because of my demigod scent – and I know New Rome would welcome me, but that's where – that's where Annabeth and I planned to start our new life, and I – I don't think I could bear it there without her, and Thalia, I just don't know what to do anymore, she was my life, she was everything and now she's gone and what do I do without her?" His voice broke and he bent over, sobbing. Thalia's heart went out to him. She stared at him, racking her brain for a plan. She knew he'd never commit suicide – Annabeth was waiting for him in Elysium, and people who committed suicide didn't make it to Elysium – but at this rate, he might very well seek out a monster patrol and allow himself to get killed. She just couldn't let that happen. She couldn't lose Annabeth and Percy, too. She just couldn't. And she knew the rest of the Seven, and Camp Half-Blood, and the Romans felt the same way, too.
Her day had started out normally. Go shopping for groceries, play with Bobby and Matthew, go to the library. Then it had all gone wrong. A patrol of monsters – Cyclops, dracaenae, empousai, hellhounds – had ambushed her behind the library, and there had simply been too many. It shouldn't have been anything more than your run-of-the-mill monster attack, but she'd forgotten to bring her invisibility hat, and this time, she was alone, with no Percy to back her up and watch her back. It wasn't like she'd relied on him – hardly, she was no one's sidekick – but ever since Tartarus, they'd gotten used to fighting together constantly, and this was the first time she'd fought without him.

She did her best – kicking, whirling, slashing, dodging, slicing off heads and limbs left and right, lashing out with her dagger every time a monster got too close – but she was only one person, and there were at least two dozen of them. Desperately, she prayed to every god she could think of to help her, to at least send her some assistance, but she got none. She slashed, hacked and stabbed through everything in her way, gold dust raining down on her, keeping her focus on nothing but staying alive, until the adrenaline ran out and she was left, slumped, haggard and panting, on the ground, not daring to believe her luck. Somehow, she'd managed to kill every last one of them (or maybe some ran) and she was still alive.

She tried to get up, but found she couldn't, and all of a sudden, fiery pain pierced through her side, leaving her gasping for breath. High on adrenaline, she hadn't noticed that some monster had gotten a lucky swipe at her, leaving her with a gaping wound in her left side that was leaking blood at an alarming rate. Feeling dizzy, she knew that she'd already lost too much blood and soon it'd be too late. She fumbled in her bag for nectar and ambrosia, only to belatedly realize that they'd run out just that morning and she'd been planning to grab some from Camp Jupiter, only to get sidetracked by her trip to the library. She cursed herself now, as her head spun from the blood loss and she started seeing spots. She could feel her lifeforce slowly draining away, her eyelids growing heavy, and resolved to do at least one thing before she died.

Weakly, she grabbed a drachma from her bag and tossed it into a puddle of water she poured from her water bottle. "O Fleecy, do me a solid. Show me Percy Jackson at Camp Half-Blood," she ordered, her voice slowly fading. Damn it all to hell. She would at least tell Percy one last time that she loved him before she died. She owed him that much.

The image in the mist showed her adorable boyfriend lying on his bed in the Poseidon cabin, apparently lost in his thoughts. "Percy!" she yelled, and watched with some amusement and he spun, with Riptide in his hand in less than a second. She stared at him, drinking him in, as if it was the last time she would ever see him. (Well, technically, it was.) Distantly, she heard him scream her name in horror, but she knew it was already too late for her. She just thanked the gods for giving her one last chance to see him.

She watched their conversation happen as if from far away. She told him that she loved him, and not to blame himself. Really, she knew he would anyway. It was just who he was. But she didn't think she could bear knowing that he blamed himself for her death, that he couldn't move on because of her. She wanted him to be happy, even if it was without her. Her last view was of his sea-green eyes that she loved so much, begging her to stay with him. I'm so sorry, Percy. I love you so much, was her last coherent thought.

Annabeth fully expected to wake up – well, not really wake up, but you get the point – in the waiting room she'd last seen when she was twelve (and hoped not to see for a very long time, but you never
get what you want, do you?) but, as she supposed she should know by this point, nothing goes as planned in the life of Annabeth Chase. Unfortunately. Because if she had it her way, she'd have stayed alive, gone to college in New Rome with her boyfriend, gotten married and had kids (someday). She'd have finally built something permanent, become an architect like she'd dreamed since she was a kid, not dead in this … place. Where was she, anyway?

She was broken out of her musings by three flashes of light. She averted her eyes, and when she turned back, the Fates were in front of her. Bowing respectfully (because it would not do to piss off the Fates), she asked, "No offence meant, my ladies, but why am I here? Should I not be on Charon's ferry to the Underworld?"

The Fates seemed to regard her with pity, and she felt a bit of anger flare up in her. She'd never responded well to pity. "Annabeth Chase," one of them intoned. "You were meant for much greater things," another one said, frowning at her ball of yarn. "You were not meant to die now. However, even we are not so powerful to turn back time and reverse what has already happened. So," Here she looked at Annabeth sternly, and Annabeth shrank a little under that gaze, although a small part of her was demanding, if she hadn't been meant to die now, then why had she? And why couldn't they make it right? It was so unfair. She had so much to live for!

"We are willing to offer you something that has never been offered before," the third Fate continued. "Although we cannot give you back your life, we can allow you to live what should have been through dreams." Annabeth's eyes widened. She hadn't known that was possible. "If you agree, every time you fall asleep, you will be living your life as it should have been, day by day, as if you had never died. Every time you enter your dreamscape, nothing will exist but that life, as if it were real. And," she added, her eyes glittering, "Perseus Jackson will join you, every night, as if you truly had him by your side. Basically, you'll be sharing a dream, a dream of a life that you should have had, had you been given the chance. Do you accept?"

Did she accept? Annabeth was ecstatic! She didn't care that she'd most likely be more heartbroken when the dream ended. All she cared about was that she'd be able to "live" her life like nothing had happened, and the best part was, Percy would be there with her. Not a dream Percy – a real Percy. She took a millisecond to think it over, then readily agreed. She'd never wanted something so much.
Chapter 4

THALIA

Thalia could already tell that news of Annabeth’s death had reached the majority of Camp Half-Blood’s demigodly population. She could tell by the sorrowful looks the other demigods shot at the Poseidon cabin, and her on occasion, by the somber, tense atmosphere and the storm clouds still hanging threateningly over the entire camp, as well as the choppy waves and the occasional mournful screech of an owl. The whole camp was in mourning.

As she entered the Artemis cabin, many pairs of eyes rose to look at her before being averted in a hurry. It seemed that all of them knew that she’d spent the night with a boy. Well, she refused to feel shame. He was her cousin, her best friend, and he’d needed her. She wouldn’t apologize for that, even if many of her fellow huntresses now thought she was the lowest of the low.

Sitting down on her bed in her personal room (one of the many perks of being Lieutenant of the Hunt), she put her head in her hands, returning to her thoughts. Where could Percy go? He’d already ruled out many (okay, all) of the options, and she wasn’t keen on him going to the Underworld. Sighing, she flopped on her bed, throwing an arm over her face. She’d left Percy sleeping in his cabin, and knew she was running on limited time. She’d estimated that he would wait at least until Annabeth’s funeral (which was in a week’s time) to find a monster patrol and get himself killed. She didn’t have much time left to think up a plan to stop him.

There was a soft knock on her door, and Thalia called, "Come in," without missing a beat. She removed her arm to see who it was, and was surprised to see the silver eyes and auburn hair of Artemis. "My Lady," she greeted, making to get up, but Artemis stopped her. "How many times have I told you, no formalities?" she sighed exasperatedly. Thalia smiled. Since joining the Hunt, Artemis had proven to be the sister she’d never had. Sure, she had a lot (blame it on Zeus who couldn’t keep it in his pants) but most of the godly ones weren’t worth mentioning. Her only real sibling, Jason, had been taken away from her when he was two, and as a consequence they weren’t really that close, even after being reunited. She was probably closer to Percy than to Jason, if she was honest. Percy felt much more like her little brother.

"So, Thalia," Artemis started cautiously. "Care to explain what happened yesterday?"

Thalia was perhaps the only Hunter to know about Artemis's slight crush on Percy. Oh, she’d never said it outright, but Thalia knew. She saw how Artemis looked at Percy when she thought no one was looking, with that weird mix of longing and confusion. She wasn't sure if even Artemis knew what she was feeling, but Thalia definitely knew. She didn't disapprove – she knew Artemis would never do anything about it, and really, almost every girl had a crush on Percy. He, of course, was too loyal to Annabeth to even notice. So Thalia knew that she could potentially be in a lot of trouble with Artemis if she didn't explain, both because of Artemis's jealousy and the fact that she, a Hunter, had spent the night with a boy. In a cabin. Alone. Even if they didn't view each other like that. So with a sigh, she recounted everything to Artemis: how she’d known that Percy was in trouble by the storm, how he’d told her about Annabeth’s death, and her dilemma about what to do.

She watched for Artemis’s reaction apprehensively. She had a thoughtful look on her face. "So Athena's daughter is dead?" she asked. Thalia nodded mutely, tears threatening to overwhelm her. It was still too soon. Artemis nodded, lost in thought.

"I may have a solution to your dilemma, Thalia." Thalia jumped. "What?" she asked curiously. She'd been racking her brains for over two hours with no results. What could Artemis have thought of that
she hadn't?

"Well, Perseus is strictly straight, is he not?" Artemis asked, and Thalia nodded dubiously, wondering what this could have to do with anything. "I guess? I think so," she said thoughtfully. She'd never thought about this before. True, most demigods were at least bisexual, but she was pretty sure her cousin was 100% straight. At least for Annabeth, anyway.

"Perseus would make a good addition to the hunt," mused Artemis. Thalia jolted. "What?" she shrieked, shocked. Of all the things she'd been expecting, this was not one of them. "But – My Lady – as much as I would like to – he's a male! And males don't get accepted into the Hunt!"

"Peace, Thalia," answered Artemis with a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "What if he wasn't male?"
Chapter 5

PERCY

Percy opened his eyes to suffocating darkness. Immediately, his hand went for Riptide, only to discover that it wasn't there. Then came the realization – he was dreaming. Resigned, he settled for sitting on the rough floor – _wait, was that a skull?_ – and waiting. After six years of being a demigod, he'd sadly gotten used to demigod dreams, which was what he assumed this was.

Sure enough, the area was flooded with light and he was met with the sight of the three old ladies he'd first seen when he was twelve years old, back when he'd just been a normal kid. Well, as normal as you can get when you've been kicked out of six schools. Anyway. The Fates were sitting in front of him, blatantly staring, spinning their stupid yarn. He resisted the urge to scream and rail at him, even though it was about the only thing he wanted to do right now, as it wouldn't do to get on the bad side of them, got up, and bowed respectfully. (Even though it was the _absolute last_ thing he wanted to do.)

"Miladies," he said carefully. "To what do I owe this … _pleasure_?" Try as he might, he couldn't keep the biting sarcasm out of that last word.

The Fates regarded him coolly, seeming unimpressed. "Perseus Jackson," one of them intoned, and he had to suppress a shiver – _wow_, that was almost Kronos-level – and keep a straight face. "We have an offer for you," another said, her lips barely moving. _Unless you can bring Annabeth back, you can go *****, _his brain screamed, but with the last of his self control, he gritted his teeth and said nothing. (He was afraid that if he opened his mouth, everything would flood out, and _that would not be good_.

"We cannot bring the daughter of Athena back," the first one said – almost like she read his mind … _wait, she probably did_ – with … _wait, was that a smile?_ She rolled her eyes, probably reading his mind again. He really wished immortal deities would stop doing that. _Anyway_, the snarky voice in his mind remarked, _if they can't bring her back, then they should really stop wasting my time. I have better things to do, you know._ He suppressed the voice with a massive amount of willpower and continued to stand in silence. The Fates glared at him, and he silently cursed himself, willing his sarcastic side to _shut the Hades up_ before it got him killed. Which, by the way, had happened way more times than he could count. Which was probably a bad thing – okay. Getting off track.

When Percy snapped back to attention, all of the Fates looked mildly amused. "If you're finally listening, Perseus," the middle one smirked, and he blushed. "We're here to offer you the same thing we offered the daughter of Athena. She was not supposed to die so soon. However, we cannot bring her back, so we have come to a compromise. You will be able to live out your life as it should have been with her, in dreams. Every time you fall asleep you will be able to live with her, day by day, as if she had never died. When you are in the dreamscape, nothing will exist but that life, as if it were real. By day, you will be living out your real life, with no recollection of your dream. _However_, this will only happen if you stay alive. So, do you accept?"

Percy was flabbergasted. He'd never heard of the Fates offering such a deal to … well, anybody. "But … what about Annabeth?" he asked tentatively. "What did she say? Isn't she in Elysium now?"

The first Fate answered, "Annabeth said yes. She is currently in limbo, in a place like Charon's waiting room, living out her dream until the day it ends, after which she will enter Elysium."
Percy's mind was whirling. This sounded too good to be true – but he couldn't pass up such an opportunity. "I accept," he said, half waiting for the punchline.

"There will, however, be conditions," the other one said. "You must not speak of this to anyone. And above all, you must remain true to Annabeth Chase, and never love another, until the dream comes to an end. Otherwise, it will end. And we cannot give you a second chance."

Percy nodded in acceptance. Annabeth was all he'd ever needed. He wouldn't have ever moved on even without this condition. "Thank you, miladies," he said, bowing. "I am very grateful for this gift."

The Fates regarded him emotionlessly. "Do not disappoint us, Perseus Jackson," they intoned as one as the scene faded to white and he woke up.

"…Percy? Percy!" Someone was shaking his shoulders. Violently. As his eyes opened, he saw the face of none other than Thalia Grace, leaning over his bed in concern, the tips of her black hair brushing his nose.

"I'm up, I'm up," he groaned groggily, sitting up. "What are you doing here? At –" He glanced sideways at his alarm clock. "7:00 AM? Really, Thalia? You couldn't have let me sleep in?"

Thalia rolled her eyes. "In the Hunt, we're awake at five," she replied brusquely. "Count yourself lucky that I've let you sleep in this long. Are you awake now? I have an offer for you."

"An offer? What kind of offer?" Percy thought back to his strange dream with the Fates. For some reason, he couldn't recall what exactly happened – which was weird, because when he had demigod dreams, every detail was crystal-clear – but he felt the sudden urge to go to sleep.

Thalia took a deep breath. "Don't freak out –"

"Oh, that makes me feel so much better –"

"Shut up and let me talk. You told me that you didn't have anywhere to go, right? Well … Lady Artemis has offered for you to join the Hunt."

Much to Thalia's shock, Percy didn't laugh or scream. (Her money had been on him screaming.) Instead, he looked at her, closed his eyes, and sighed. She tilted her head at him, confused. He didn't even look surprised. What was going on?

"Thalia …" Percy said. His voice had suddenly gone soft and vulnerable, any trace of teasing gone. "I need to tell you something."

She only waited, sensing that she shouldn't talk, just listen. She had a feeling that this was something important, something he wouldn't trust just anyone with.

"I … I used to be a girl."

Okay, Thalia had to admit, out of all the things she'd been expecting him to say, this was definitely off the charts. Because wait. What? She voiced her thoughts in disbelief.

"I know it's hard to believe. And I've only told Annabeth and the Seven before. But I wasn't born a boy …"

Flashback:
"Marina! I'm home!"

The brown-haired young woman, Sally Jackson, was tackled by a black blur, which revealed itself to be an adorable young girl with striking sea green eyes and raven black hair. She laughed, picked her daughter up and spun her around. However, her eyes seemed dimmer, her face more haggard than when she'd left the house that morning. "Mommy! Daddy's here!" the little girl cheered, clapping her pudgy fists together. Sally tried to smile for the sake of her daughter, but she couldn't quite manage it. There was no putting off this conversation any longer. "Sweetie, why don't you go put on a movie?" she asked, ruffling her daughter's messy hair, ignoring her indignant squawk of "Mommy!"

"Poseidon?" she called softly as she entered her bedroom, finding a man who looked like the spitting image of Marina Jackson, dressed in an obnoxious Hawaiian shirt, as always. He seemed to notice her grim look and enveloped her in a warm hug. For just a few seconds, she let all her worries wash away in the comfort of his arms. She knew she was very lucky. Poseidon was the god of the seas, and by ancient laws, he was not supposed to be here. However, a few times a month, he snuck away to visit her and their daughter. It was a lot more than most mortal lovers of gods got … but she knew it couldn't last forever. Certainly not as her daughter got older.

"What's wrong, Sally?" he asked, caressing her cheek. He always knew how to read her so well.

"I … I've found a way to keep Marina safe from the monsters," she explained. Her voice was wobbling, but she was determined. "I'm going to marry a mortal man. His name is Gabe. He … he's disgusting, but … his scent will be able to cover hers."

Poseidon's eyes were blazing. "Sally, you don't have to do this," he begged. "I can protect you. You know I can. I don't care about the ancient laws. Sally, I love you. I love Marina. Don't do this. Please."

"I have to," she whispered, tears clouding her eyes. "It's the only way. You won't be able to protect us forever. Your visits have already been getting shorter and more infrequent. I'm not stupid, Poseidon. I know they're going to find out eventually. It's better this way."

"There's another way –"

"No. I can't. You know that I have to do this by myself. You'll only put us in more danger if we do that."

Poseidon sighed, his eyes saying all that he couldn't. "Just remember I love you. Marina, too," he replied heavily. Sally allowed herself another moment in his embrace, allowing herself to imagine that he was her husband, they were a normal mortal family, and he wouldn't have to leave like he always did in order to avoid his brother's wrath.

"I have a favor to ask," she said, stepping out of his arms and gazing into his face. "It isn't easy, but … Today I told Gabe I have a daughter. And he … he …" she shuddered, repulsed, remembering the way his face lit up in a lecherous leer. Poseidon's face twisted in fury, the sea roiling in his stormy eyes. "I have to marry him to keep her safe, but she won't be safe the way she is."

"What are you saying, Sally?" Poseidon asked, his expression unreadable.

"I'm saying that the only way she'll be safe is if she isn't a girl." The words burned, but she had to say them. No matter if she had a daughter or a son, she would love Marina the same.

She chanced a look up at her lover, and found that he actually looked relieved. She narrowed her
eyes. "I believe that is the best course of action," Poseidon said. He seemed lighter, somehow. "Once she entered the Greek world, she would not be safe as a girl. You have heard the stories about my family. They can't resist a beautiful girl … they would destroy her. As a boy … she would have a better chance."

Sally sucked in a breath. She hadn't allowed herself to think that far. "So it is decided, then," she said softly.

"One more thing," Poseidon said, his eyes betraying all the pain he was feeling. "Once this is done … I will not be able to come back again."

Tears dripped down her face. She couldn't imagine losing him, even though she wasn't even supposed to have him. But for her daughter … she would endure. "I love you," she whispered. "But Marina comes first."

He sighed in resignation. "I know," he said. "I don't want to let you go. But let us enjoy just this one more night." Their lips met, fierce and desperate, neither wanting to let go. She fell into him, allowing herself to forget everything and just have him one last time.

Afterwards, as she lay curled into his warmth, she murmured, "I will name her Perseus. In hope that she will have a happy ending."
Chapter 6

THALIA

She was dimly aware of her jaw dropping and was about 99% sure that her face resembled a fish out of water, if Percy's growing smirk was any indication, but unfortunately she was too preoccupied with the mind blowing information she'd just been hit with to slap that irritating smirk off his face. Because for as long as she'd known Percy, he'd been a boy. He'd never shown any girlish traits – given that she'd never been looking for them in the first place – and for the gods' sake, he'd dated Annabeth. Okay, she had no problem with that – she was pretty sure 100% of the demigodly population was a part of the LGBTQ+ community – but this was … this was just insane. Her mind was struggling to wrap around this new information. The only thing she could manage to say was, "So … um, is that a yes, then?"

Percy blinked owlishly at her … then abruptly doubled over in a fit of hysterical laughter. For a few seconds, she just stared at him, then she began laughing as well. This situation is absurd, she thought idly. "In fact," he said, straightening, "I've actually already been offered … twice."

"WHAT?"

Thalia thought that was an appropriate reaction in the face of such news. Lady Artemis, man-hater, offering Percy Jackson, a male, a place in the hunt? So maybe he wasn't really male, but still! She was struck speechless for the second time that day, her eyes as wide as dinner plates. "You – what – how – when – huh?" was all she could manage to get out through her tumultuous thoughts (certainly made no better by her ADHD – ugh, was that a fly on the wall?)

By this point, Percy was in stitches, gasping for air and clenching his stomach in hysterics. "Your – face – hahahaha – if I'd – hahaha – known – I would have – hahahahhahaha – told you sooner – hahahahaha" Thalia rolled her eyes and shocked him, bright sparks flying from her fingers. "Ow!" he protested. "That was uncalled for, Pinecone Face."

"Talk," she ordered.

He rolled his eyes. "Fine. So …"

Flashback:

"Milady wishes to talk to you," said Zoë, her expression one of distaste. Percy got up nervously and entered the large silver tent. "Lady Artemis," he said, bowing. When he looked up, he saw that she was regarding him with a strange expression – like she wasn't sure what to make of him. At least it wasn't utter hatred, like Zoë seemed to bear towards him. "Zoë," she said without looking away from him. Her voice chimed softly like silver bells. "Leave us." Zoë began to protest, but was silenced with a look from her goddess, and departed swiftly.

Percy felt strangely vulnerable and out of place, left alone in the tent with the maiden goddess. He started to fidget with Riptide in his pocket, unable to keep his ADHD at bay. Artemis examined him as if he was a rare piece of steak, making him feel uncomfortable. He wished she'd just say something and get this over with.

"You are … different," she said at last, peering at him closely. "I am the goddess of Maidens. I can tell that you are … used to be one. Still are, perhaps. No matter what has been done to you."
Percy jerked, stiffening. How could she take one look at him and immediately know his deepest, most intimate secret, one which he hadn't even told Annabeth or Grover? He felt exposed before her, like no matter what he did he couldn't hide anything from her.

She looked him over once again. "If you wish," she said softly, a contrast from her earlier, harsh words, "I could turn you back to your natural state. I can tell that you miss it. You could join the Hunt with us."

Now Percy was really gaping. His mouth opened and closed like a fish, and he was rendered speechless. He didn't know what to say. Artemis, man-hating goddess, offering a male a place in her Hunt? Unheard of. He could feel his resolve weakening. Such an offer ... it was tempting. Evade the Prophecy, escape the confines of this male body that he'd always hated because it reminded him of what his mother had to suffer because of Smelly Gabe, run wild with the Hunt forever ... yes, it was tempting. And yet ... he couldn't leave Annabeth, Thalia, Grover. He couldn't leave the burden of that prophecy to someone else. His fatal flaw was loyalty. To join the Hunt would be turning his back on his friends. And so ... "Milady, I am honored," he said, making sure to speak with the utmost respect – after all, she might change her mind and turn him into a jackalope after all for refusing her – "but I cannot leave all my friends. I am sorry."

She regarded him in a new light – like he had surprised her, but also with a tinge of disappointment. He guessed that it was not often that someone turned down an offer to be in the Hunt. "A shame," she mused. "You would have made a great Hunter. No matter. If you need it, my offer will still stand. I am the goddess of maidens, after all, my job is to help maidens in need – and I can tell that you, Marina Jackson, are definitely in need."

She left Percy staring after her, not sure what had just happened.

Time skip – after the Giant War

Percy was exhausted. Not just physically, but mentally as well. The horrors of Tartarus were swirling around in his mind, keeping him from the release that sleep would bring. He was currently sat on the beach, mindlessly creating shapes with the water to relax himself. The waves lapped at his toes, sending a message of comfort.

Suddenly, there was a muted silver flash next to him, revealing Artemis, goddess of the hunt and moon next to him. Percy didn't move a muscle, the only acknowledgement he gave her being a slight dip of the head. She slid down next to him, watching the playful prancing of the water Pegasus he had created.

"I would like to congratulate you on a job well done," she began. "Not many people would be able to endure the burden of two Great Prophecies. Your father is very proud of you."

Percy gave a noncommittal shrug. "Isn't that a hero's job?" he asked, his voice traced with sarcasm. Artemis side-eyed him, her silver eyes filled with pity. "A hero's life is never easy," she agreed. "But without you, we would have fallen to Kronos, and to Gaea. And although my family is prideful, and we do not like to show our gratitude towards demigods, I would like to thank you for all that you have sacrificed so that we might survive."

Percy just sighed. "Thank you, milady," he said, but it was half-hearted. In reality, he just wanted to scream – not really at her, personally, but to all those so-called almighty gods, sending kids to fight their battles for them, not caring for them beyond when they were needed. He was sick and tired of it. Sick and tired of this life that neither he, nor any of the others, had asked for. For gods' sakes, he was only seventeen! Seventeen and been through so much more than he should have. And what about Hazel? Youngest of the seven, or the oldest, depending on how you look at it, having died and
come back to life because of those pricks. He squeezed his eyes shut tightly, opting to remain silent lest everything come bursting out in front of Artemis. That wouldn't be good – even with all that she had said and implied, she was still a goddess, prideful and fully capable of blasting him to bits with one jerk of a finger. No, it was best to not say anything at all.

Artemis seemed to guess his thoughts, but she said nothing. Likely she was also thinking the same thing – after all, many of her Hunters had also perished in the battles, whereas her godly counterparts had been sitting up on Olympus twiddling their fingers. Percy was willing to bet that she was one of the only goddesses who actually sort-of cared – about her Hunters, at least, if not for other demigods – unlike the other gods who couldn't give two shits about if their sons and daughters died to save their asses and likely wouldn't even remember half of their names. It just wasn't right.

"Have you considered my offer, Marina?" Artemis asked abruptly, breaking the peaceful silence. Percy stiffened at her use of his former name, but also felt oddly comfortable at the sound of it. He hadn't heard that name in such a long time. Even his mother had given up, believing that nothing could bring her daughter back. She still loved him, but he always saw a tinge of sadness in her eyes when she looked at him, like she was seeing what he could have been instead. He didn't blame her. He often wondered that too.

"I …" In all honestly, he had. Restless nights on the Argo II, wondering how different everything would have been if he had accepted Artemis's offer so long ago. But then he berated himself, because he would rather it be him who had suffered that some other innocent demigod, thrown under the bus just because of their parentage. Better it be him. And if he had accepted her offer, he wouldn't have Annabeth. And she was the most precious thing – besides his mother – in his life. "I admit that I have considered it, and found it tempting," he confessed. He took a deep breath. "But as I said before, I cannot leave my friends. And …" he hesitated. "Annabeth," he said finally. "I haven't told her. I don't know how she would take it. She's already been through so much … everyone she cared for left her … I can't do that to her as well. It would break her. And I love her too much … better I suffer instead of her."

"That is truly commendable," Artemis commented. "Even Aphrodite would have to admit that what you two have is true love, not some meddling from her. But even if you do not wish to join the Hunt, I could still turn you back. It would be the least we could do for you."

For a moment, Percy seriously considered the offer. To have back what had been stolen from him … his mother had meant well, but it had broken both their hearts, and Poseidon's too. He knew about the curse that Artemis had placed on him after the incident with Orion – that he would never have daughters unless he had real, true love with the woman. It might seem like a weak curse, but since Poseidon was Big Three, Artemis had been unable to place a strong curse on him. That was the best she could do. And it worked, because everyone knew that Poseidon treasured his daughters above all. Demigod daughters especially. So he had been ecstatic when Percy was born, and had stayed with Sally even with the oath looming over their heads … until he'd been forced to leave and lose his only daughter. If Percy accepted …

"I would love to, milady," he said wistfully. "But Annabeth … we have talked about children. In the future. She wants a family, so very badly, something permanent to call her own … and I want to give that to her."

Artemis nodded thoughtfully, her face betraying nothing. "I understand," she said finally. "I respect you for your decision. But if anything changes, you should know that my offer always stands. You are a hero, Marina Jackson. And you shouldn't ever forget that." And with that, she disappeared in a silver mist. Percy returned to staring out at sea, his mind clouded with longing for what could have been.
"So let me get this straight. Lady Artemis offered for you to join the hunt. Twice. And you declined. Twice." stated Thalia, still in a state of complete and utter disbelief. Artemis had never breathed a word of this to her, and she was still stunned. It simply wasn't possible. And the way Percy had described it … he'd been tempted. And he'd missed being a girl … but had given up the chance to regain what he had lost, because of Annabeth. Because he'd wanted children, a family with her … and he'd never get to have that. She noticed the tears streaming down Percy's face, and dimly felt the fat tears rolling down her own face, and almost unconsciously reached out and hugged him tight. Her cousin didn't deserve this. Didn't deserve to have the one person who he'd sacrificed everything for taken away from him. Didn't deserve to have all his hopes and dreams crushed at such a young age.

"Thals … I have nowhere left to go. Annabeth was … my other half. Without her, I don't know what to do. My life would forever be incomplete, and I couldn't even entertain the idea of moving on. When I was younger, I was tempted by the offer to join the Hunt, but I turned it down for her. Now … I think I will accept, this time. This way, I can do some good, still be able to protect demigods. Make her memory mean something, you know? So that I can deserve her love, instead of wasting my life by throwing it away."

Thalia growled. "You are more than deserving of Annabeth," she said fiercely. "Don't think less of yourself. She would have wanted you to be happy. Now come. We're going to see Lady Artemis."
Chapter 7

ARTEMIS

Since the Hunters were in camp and Artemis was in charge of them, she was currently stationed in her cabin, perched on her bed. What was she doing? Brooding about Percy Jackson. To her, he was an enigma. Not many girls had ever refused an invitation into the Hunt, albeit twice. Even Thalia Grace had accepted the second time the offer was made to her! The first time she had met Perseus Jackson, she had fully been expecting another "hero" like Heracles. She'd been surprised, though, when not only was he a respectful, loyal male, but he wasn't male at all. He might look male for now, but she knew that he was a strong, brave maiden through and through at heart. Why else would he have been such a great hero? No male could have succeeded at that. Only a maiden could have. And he was the most courageous maiden she had ever had the pleasure of meeting. Rejecting an invitation into the Hunt twice for the same girl? When she could clearly see how badly he wanted what she offered – if not the Hunt, then at least her offer to change him back? She could see that their love was true, and that was what she mourned for. The heartbreak of one of the best maidens she had ever met. He would have made a good Hunter, she mused. Still will make a good Hunter, she amended.

"Milady!" It was Thalia, who appeared in the doorway, emitting sparks from the tips of her spiky hair, the boy next to her wincing every so often when the sparks hit him. Artemis stifled a laugh at the pained, contorted expression of his face and the way he eyed his cousin warily, but schooled her face into a neutral expression. "Yes, Lieutenant?"

"I have a potential new recruit," Thalia said formally, half bowing. Inside, Artemis felt like jumping around and squealing in joy. Outside, she remained indifferent. She'd lost so many good Hunters in the Giant War, and new recruits had been nonexistent. They were too busy grieving. So to have the addition of someone like Percy Jackson was a dream come true for the Hunt. With the combination of him and Thalia, the risks for the Hunt were greatly reduced, small as they were now.

"Perseus Jackson," she said to him. She had no way of knowing if he'd told Thalia about his past, so her best bet was to play it safe. "I see you have finally decided to accept my offer."

"Yes, milady," he said, bowing. She smiled. "Very well. Since your case is … ah, a special one, the process will be a bit different from everyone else's. Thalia, you may leave now."

Thalia looked about to protest, but Artemis sent her a sharp look, and after a concerned glance at her cousin, she left without comment.

"Good," Artemis said. "Now. First, we will do the transformation, and then you will swear the oath. Is that acceptable?"

"Yes, milady."

"Good. Then we shall begin."

With a thought, she placed a barrier around the room, then took two steps forward and placed her hands on Percy's shoulders. This took a bit of effort, as she was in her twelve-year-old form and he was more than a head taller than her, so she grew into her seventeen-year-old form. Her eyes glowed like silver pools of moonlight, compelling Percy to stare into them, and she began glowing a faint silver. Dimly, as she chanted under her breath in Ancient Greek, she heard Percy scream, a sharp, short noise, abruptly cut off by a blinding silver flash.
When the light cleared, Artemis opened her eyes to a sight that made her inhale sharply. There, in Percy's place, was a girl with raven-black hair that flowed down her back in windswept curls and striking eyes. Whereas before, Percy's eyes were both a beautiful sea-green, this girl had eyes of two different colours. Her right eye was the same familiar sea-green as before, but her left eye was a clear aquamarine colour, reminiscent of the crystal clear sea waters of Artemis's youth, before pollution was a thing. As a boy, Percy had been handsome, but as a girl, she looked drop-dead gorgeous. She was examining her new body in wonder and awe, reaching back to run her fingers through her hair. When she finally looked up at Artemis, her eyes were brimming with unshed tears. "Thank you," she breathed, her arms coming up as if to hug the goddess but then thinking better of it. Artemis's breath caught at the sound of her voice. It was wonderfully melodic, like a thousand chiming bells. She could only imagine what her laugh would sound like.

Her eyes landed on something she'd somehow missed, and all the breath rushed out of her body. For instead of legs, this girl had a tail. A beautiful mermaid tail, shimmering emerald and azure and all shades of ethereal green and blue, with iridescent scales running along the length of it and fusing seamlessly with human skin just below her belly button, skin which, Artemis observed, had taken on a faint pale tinge of blue. Her fingers were slightly webbed and scaly, with curved clawlike talons instead of nails. Her now oversized orange Camp Half-Blood T-shirt covered most of her torso. The fin at the end of her tail was waving gently as she stroked it almost reverently. Artemis noticed that she was crying, shimmering tears running down her cheeks. "I never thought I would see this again," she murmured. "I missed this so much. I … I can never thank you enough, milady."

"I – don't mention it," Artemis stuttered. "It was the least I could do for you, after everything you've done for us. But – but how? I've never heard of Poseidon's demigod children being merpeople – I don't understand …"

Percy – or Marina, now – laughed, a beautiful tinkling sound that was music to Artemis's ears. "You're right," she agreed, flapping her new tail and gazing at it adoringly. "Most of Dad's demigod children are human. But I was born like this. I can shift between forms, but since I was his first demigod daughter in so long, I guess I got a higher concentration of his powers. I'm pretty sure it's also because what he had with my mom was real, true love, and that gave me something more," she shrugged. "There's also something else … I'm going to need you to swear on the River Styx never to tell anyone this." She looked imploringly at Artemis, who was torn.

Finally, she nodded. "It will not harm Olympus?"

"No. Do you really think I saved it twice just to doom it by my own hand?" Marina scoffed. Artemis smiled slightly. It was good to know that she hadn't lost her sarcasm and sense of humor even with everything she'd faced.

"Okay. I swear on the River Styx to never repeat what Marina Jackson is going to tell me unless she permits me to," Artemis declared.

Marina sighed and took a deep breath. "I'm not just Greek," she said, looking directly into Artemis's eyes. "I … I'm both Greek and Roman. Both of my father's forms were brought together when I was conceived," she explained. "That's why I fit in so well at the Roman camp."

Artemis was blown away by this revelation. She hadn't thought it was possible – after all, with the Greeks and Romans feuding for so long, and the split-personality disorder that had occurred during the Giant War … this was huge. "I – but what – how?" she sputtered. "That shouldn't be possible!"

"Well, your Greek and Roman forms are basically the same person," said Marina. "They just have different beliefs. You just need to reconcile them with one thing they both agree and feel strongly about. For my dad, that was my mom."
Artemis's mind whirred. *This could change everything,* she thought. With the merging of their forms, the gods would be infinitely more powerful … but. Her thoughts ground to a halt. *That's not necessarily a good thing …* Gods knew some of her family already abused their power enough. This would explain why, although Poseidon had figured it out, he hadn't so much as hinted about it to them. Really, she couldn't blame him.

"If your dad figured this out before everyone else, even Athena, maybe he's not as dumb as she makes him out to be," Artemis said thoughtfully. "Athena will be so pissed that he figured it out before her. Then again, she hates the Romans too much to ever consider it."

Marina nodded, suddenly looking solemn and furious. Belatedly, Artemis realized: it was because of Athena's obsession with the Romans that Annabeth had had to retrieve the Athena Parthenos on a suicide quest, and ultimately Athena's fault that Annabeth and Percy had fallen into Tartarus. She suddenly felt immeasurably guilty. How much would these kids have to go through for the gods, who didn't even care about them? She felt ashamed of the people she called her family.

"Well – if you're ready to swear the oath, then, Marina?" she asked, abruptly changing the subject, and was relieved to see the cloud lift from Marina's expression.

"I am," she said resolutely.

Artemis smiled. "Then repeat after me." (insert oath here because I'm not bothered to go find it, sorry)

"Welcome to the Hunt," Artemis told her newest member, newly outfitted in silver Hunter garb with a sea green T-shirt that said *I'll see you later* on it. She'd had to stifle a laugh at that one. She could already tell that the Hunt was about to get much more interesting with Marina in it. She'd reverted to human form for now, although she'd done it reluctantly. *Swimming with legs is just not the same,* she'd complained. *I feel like an oversized whale.* Artemis outright laughed at that.

With a snap of her fingers, Artemis dispelled the barrier and they walked out of the room – smack dab into a certain Thalia Grace, who, apparently, had been trying to eavesdrop outside the door.

"What took you guys so long?" Thalia grumbled, rubbing her forehead. Marina was snickering, trying and failing to hide a laugh. Thalia sent a death glare her way – which quickly evolved into a shocked expression.

"Wow," was her only comment. She looked her cousin up and down, and Artemis felt a surge of unfamiliar emotion arise inside her, gone before she could identify it. She shook it off.

Marina laughed. "Do you like it?"

"You're gorgeous," Thalia said simply. "Now come on! I want to see everyone's reactions. Does anyone have a phone? I need to video it."

"Thalia, we're demigods. No one has a phone," Marina said, rolling her eyes at her cousin's antics.

"Annabeth has one – oh."

Immediately with the mention of the daughter of Athena, the atmosphere grew somber and sad. Thalia pulled Marina down on the couch and quietly said, "I'm sorry."

Feeling like she was intruding, Artemis slowly backed out of the cabin and left the two girls alone.
Chapter 8

MARINA

Dreamscape:

"Percy!"

Percy looked away from the twelve-year-old Apollo camper he was instructing in swordsplay at the sound of the familiar voice, and broke into a grin at the sight of his Wise Girl cresting the hill at a run, her blonde ponytail flying out behind her and turning gold in the sunlight. Turning back to instruct his class to pair up and spar, he whipped around and ran towards her, catching her midstep and twirling her in the air.

"I missed you so much, Seaweed Brain," she whispered into his mouth as their lips met passionately in a heated kiss. He grinned.

"I missed you more, Wise Girl."

"Oi! No PDA on my watch!" Thalia yelled, beaming at the sight of her best friend. Whirling, Annabeth raced to embrace her.

"Thals! I didn't know the Hunters were here!"

"It wasn't planned," Thalia explained. "We just got here two days ago. We ran out of ambrosia and nectar, so we had to restock. And hopefully find some new recruits. You interested, Annie?" she joked.

Annabeth laughed, pretending to think about it. "Hmm..." she mused jokingly. "Sorry, no can do. Seaweed Brain would get himself killed within two seconds of me joining," she smirked.

Percy placed a hand over his heart, pretending to be offended. "Hey! I've saved your butt too, you know!" he retorted, slinging the other hand around her waist. She snuggled into his side and he kissed the top of her forehead, relishing in her familiar warmth. Next to them, Thalia pretended to gag. "Ew! I'm outta here!" she yelled, fleeing to the sounds of her friends' laughter.

Marina awoke with the vestiges of the dream lingering in her mind and an ache in her heart, like a piece of it was missing. She thought about Annabeth's bright smile and her ability to instantly cheer her up by her presence alone, and another piece of her heart broke. How was it possible that she'd never get to see that smile again, never hear Annabeth laughingly call her Seaweed Brain again? She'd give up her newfound form ten times over just to have Annabeth back.

She became dimly aware of someone – Thalia – stroking her hair, and slowly sat up. The previous night, they'd stayed up until two am, laughing through tears and recalling fond memories of Annabeth, remembering just how much she'd meant to them. To everyone she'd known. She wouldn't want us to grieve, she remembered Thalia telling her sometime into the night. She'd want us to be happy. Because she's always with us, here in our hearts. Especially you, Marina. She loved you, and she would have wanted this for you. For you to be happy. And they'd both cried themselves to sleep, holding each other like they were the only thing keeping them afloat. Which was kind of true, honestly. Marina's heart hurt with just the mention of Annabeth, and she knew that there was a hole in it that would never quite heal. But with the help of Thalia, and her friends, she could learn to treasure Annabeth's memory and live like she'd have wanted.
Thalia smiled a watery smile at her. "I was afraid you were going to sleep through breakfast," she joked half-heartedly.

"And what, you wouldn't have woken me up?" Marina asked playfully.

"No, I would have just left you here and gone by myself."

"Rude." Marina flicked Thalia's shoulder lightly.

They ventured out to the pavilion together, laughing and talking, and for a minute both could imagine Annabeth beside them like she'd always been and that everything was okay.

When they reached the pavilion, Marina automatically walked towards the Poseidon table, like she did every morning, but Thalia's hand on her arm stopped her.

"What are you doing?" she hissed. "You're a Hunter now. Besides, there'll be too many questions if you sit down at Poseidon's table. As far as everybody knows, there have been no new campers about."

Belatedly, Marina realized that what Thalia said was true, and allowed the older girl to steer her towards Artemis's table. As one, all the Hunters looked up. She hadn't gotten the chance to properly meet any of them the night before; they'd spent the night in Thalia's room – she, as lieutenant, had a private room in the cabin – and so she hadn't noticed the other Hunters' arrival. Now, however …

Marina was shocked at the sight of the Hunters. When she'd first seen the Hunters, there had been at least three dozen of them. After the Titan War, their numbers had been depleted, although they'd gained some new recruits before the Giant War. But now … Marina counted only eight Hunters at Artemis's table, and the sight saddened her. No wonder Artemis had wanted her to join so badly.

"Girls!" Thalia said. "This is our newest recruit, Marina Jackson, daughter of Poseidon. Please introduce yourselves and make her feel welcome and comfortable."

Marina found it extremely weird that all the Hunters welcomed her with open arms, such a change from the previous times she'd interacted with them. Then, they'd treated her with open hostility and sneers. These girls wore kind smiles and laughed and joked with her like one of them. Which, she realized, she was now. This newfound realization was comforting.

"Wait a minute," Jenna, daughter of Athena, spoke up. "Daughter of Poseidon, did you say? How old are you?"

"Eighteen."

"That's not possible," Jenna said, her eyes calculating … just like how Annabeth's used to be. Marina's heart stuttered. "What about the oath? And your last name. Isn't that Percy boy's last name Jackson, too? This doesn't add up."

Trust a daughter of Athena to figure it out, Marina thought, inwardly sighing and barely managing to conceal a wince. This girl just resembled Annabeth too much. If not for her Hunter outfit, she could be Annabeth. Her heart ached, missing her Wise Girl.

"Not here," Thalia hissed. She glanced around furtively. Thankfully, demigods were a naturally noisy bunch, so nobody had noticed their conversation. "I'll explain to all of you later, at the cabin. Okay?"

Jenna nodded reluctantly. As a daughter of Athena, Marina surmised that she hated not knowing
something. That had always been Annabeth's weakness. Tears started unconsciously appearing in her eyes, and she had to will them away with her water powers. She caught Thalia looking over at her, concerned, and looked away. So she wasn't that surprised when Thalia grabbed her wrist and, announcing to the rest of the table that they were going for a swim, half-dragged her to the beach.

"C'mon," Thalia said, hands on her hips. "You need to relax a bit. Get in the water."

Marina looked out at the sparkling sea which looked so inviting and promptly gave in. "Only if you're coming in with me," she said.

"I can't, remember? Daughter of Zeus. Like you can't fly."

"Don't worry, Thals. My dad's chill. He won't mind, I promise."

Thalia was still resistant, so Marina caused a wave to wrap around her and drag her into the ocean, shrieking all the way. Laughing, she waded in herself, relishing in the feel of the cool water against her bare skin.

"STOP IT! LET ME GO!" Marina smirked at the sound of Thalia's yelps, carried in the distance, and sank beneath the waves, using the water to propel her out to sea. She smiled as schools of fish swam around in her, repeating My Lady!, their iridescent scales flashing, and looked down at her own body. Sure enough, the second her feet had touched water, they had morphed into a beautiful mermaid tail, the green and blue scales now lined with silver as proof of Artemis's blessing. Giving her tail a powerful flick, she sped through the water, reveling in the feeling of once again swimming with a tail. All those years of swimming with legs had just felt wrong, and she was beyond glad to have her tail back.

"You – UGH! MARINA! WHEN I GET YOU, I'M GONNA KILL YOU!" Thalia's furious voice echoed from the surface, and Marina smirked. She couldn't resist sending water tentacles to poke Thalia, eliciting an aggravated scream from her cousin. She surfaced next to her flailing body, chuckling as Thalia attempted to smack away the water tentacles, only to have her hand pass through it, earning a growl.

"Not – funny –" she growled in her cousin's direction, sending her a death glare … only to stop short and stare, her mouth falling open. Marina only laughed.

"Surprise!"

"What – how – you" Thalia's face was oddly reminiscent of Artemis's when she first found out. Marina desperately wished she had a phone, or a video camera of some sort, to record Thalia's priceless reaction. It would make great blackmail material someday, she mused. Alas, she didn't, so she had to settle for watching with an amused look and committing it to memory.

"You're a mermaid?" Thalia finally got out after much sputtering.

In answer, Marina flicked her tail at her cousin, sending a wave splashing into her face.

All shock forgotten, Thalia roared and proceeded to swim – or try to, really she was more like floundering – after her laughing cousin. In hindsight, not really a good idea when said cousin was a daughter of Poseidon and a mermaid. The rest of the afternoon (after Thalia had calmed down sufficiently) was spent with Marina teaching the daughter of Zeus how to swim, after she'd embarrassingly admitted that she'd never learned, due to the whole Big Three rivalry.

The sun was dipping beneath the horizon, colouring the gentle waves in soft pink and purple hues. Marina, perched on a rock some ways out to sea, ran her fingers along the surface of the water,
admiring her home. Although her mother, Sally Jackson, and Camp Half-Blood and Jupiter were always home to her, the sea was her true home. Right now, in the middle of her element, she was at peace, all her worries pushed away for now as she just let herself enjoy the beauty of the ocean before her. Thalia had long since left to the Artemis cabin, grumbling that too much time in the sea would give her premature wrinkles, to which Marina laughingly replied that she was *immortal*, she couldn't get wrinkles. Marina had spent a long time just swimming, enjoying the feel of her tail, talking with sea creatures and helping them. She'd just finished untangling a baby dolphin from a fisherman's net, and had been enraged at how inconsiderate the human population was, treating the sea like their dumping ground. She was so engrossed in her thoughts that she didn't see the ripples spreading through the water, disturbing the peaceful surface, didn't hear the chanting of the fish suddenly grow louder in her mind.

"Marina."

She was instantly alert, reaching for Riptide, which had transformed into a hair clip, like the one she'd seen so long ago in her vision of Zoë Nightshade, during her transformation, then relaxed at the sight of who was standing – well, floating – before her. Poseidon, God of the Seas. Her father.

"Dad," she said, smiling, and watched, concerned, as his face crumpled.

"Marina?" he whispered, reaching a trembling hand out to her as though not daring to believe that she was real. "Is it really you? I thought – Percy …"

"It's me, Dad," she said, her eyes filling with tears of joy. "I'm back. I joined the Hunters, and Lady Artemis changed me back."

"Oh, my daughter," he murmured, embracing her into a tight hug. "I have missed you so much. I am so sorry – so sorry that I wasn't there for you. So sorry that you went through so much because of me …"

"Don't ever say that, Dad. You were always there for me. You did what you did because of me, even though I knew it broke your and Mom's hearts to stay away from each other. I'm the one who should be sorry."

"You are our daughter, Marina. You need never apologize for that. Your mother and I would sacrifice everything for you in a heartbeat."

Marina was met with an incredulous sight – her father, Poseidon, crying, big fat tears running down his face. She hugged him back tightly, tears running down her own face, and for a moment father and daughter stood in the surf, waves lapping around them.

After much insistence, Marina had agreed to come to Atlantis with her father to "catch up", as he put it. The last time she'd been there, it was after she'd blown up the Princess Andromeda, and it had been in shambles due to the war with Oceanus. Now, she gasped as she beheld the true beauty of Atlantis. Even from afar, she could glimpse the dazzling coral roofs and gleaming marble structures that laid at the bottom of the sea, a sprawling city that went on for miles and miles. And in the middle of it all, a majestic coral palace rising out of the seabed. Surprisingly, it wasn't even the biggest building in the city – just another thing to show how different Poseidon was from Zeus. On Olympus, Zeus's palace was three times bigger than everyone else's, even the throne room. He was just *that* self-centered.

"Do you like it?" Poseidon asked, his eyes crinkling at the edges as he watched his daughter's starstruck expression.
"Like it? I love it! I've never seen anything like it. It's … wow, I can't even find the words to describe it …"

"Well, the daughter of Athena did design most of it," Poseidon acknowledged. Marina whipped around.

"What?"

"Well, as you know, after the war with Oceanus Atlantis was pretty damaged. So we had to rebuild it. Many people wished for a change, and who better to go to than the Architect of Olympus herself?"

Marina had no words. Tears glittered in her eyes as she gazed at the breathtaking visage that Annabeth had created. Poseidon seemed to understand, and not a word was said as they swam into the city. As they passed, merfolk looked up from their tasks and cheerily called out greetings to Poseidon, sending curious looks at Marina. She was awestruck. These people treated Poseidon like one of them. Not like a god, or even a king … As if sensing her thoughts, Poseidon glanced at her seriously. "I do my utmost to ensure that my people do not view me that way," he said. "They are every bit as unique and powerful as me. More, even. They do not need to bow to me. I am not my little brother."

They continued their journey to the palace. On the way there, many merfolk swam up and offered them gifts, sharing their condolences with the king and thanking him. Marina was greatly puzzled when the merfolk hinted at a tragic event that had occurred, but no one seemed to want to elaborate, and she didn't dare ask out in public. So she kept silent all the way to the palace.

If she'd thought the city was beautiful a hundred miles away, it was even more awe-inspiring up close. Most of the buildings just screamed Annabeth at her, filling her with longing, wishing that she could have come here with Annabeth, dancing their way through the streets, talking with the merfolk. But at the same time, she was grateful that at least, Annabeth had had the chance to build something permanent, something that these merpeople would cherish and always remember her by.

Embarrassingly, although she noted the lack of statues of Poseidon – apparently he wasn't as narcissistic as the rest of his family – she had, unfortunately, seen quite a few statues of herself. She'd caught Poseidon sniggering as he watched her reaction to the statues, fervently thanking the gods that nobody could recognize her as she was now and relate her to those statues. Gods knew how embarrassing that would have been.

"Why are there statues of me here?" she hissed to her dad as they passed the third statue.

"You're a hero of Olympus twice over, and my daughter," he whispered back to her in a conversational tone. "Of course there are statues of you."

"There aren't even any statues of you."

"Of course not. Do you think I like looking at myself all the time?"

"Yes."

"Brat."

They laughed so hard their stomachs hurt. Marina had to admit that it was a pleasant feeling. She knew the gods had rules. Nevertheless, she, like every other demigod, had always wished for a better relationship with her godly parent. She knew that Poseidon had longed to be a part of her life, but as she was scrutinized so closely by the gods because of her involvement in two prophecies, he simply
couldn't. She understood, she truly did, but many times, she had wished that things were different. Now that she was finally getting this precious time, she would not take it for granted.

As they swam into the throne room – much more understated than the one on Olympus, with only a simple coral-and-pearl throne and a smaller one next to it – Marina immediately noticed something amiss.

"Why are there only two thrones?" she asked critically, surveying the room. The previous time she had been there, it had been transformed into a war council room. Now, it was more like a council chamber, with a high dome that let sunlight in, pristine marble walls and a cozy atmosphere. It almost didn't look like a throne room at all.

Poseidon shifted nervously. "I would ask you not to repeat this information to anyone," he said sternly. "It is very ... sensitive. And it would be disastrous if the wrong people knew."

"I swear on the Styx."

Apparently satisfied, Poseidon conjured up two plush sofas and gestured for her to take a seat, and proceeded to explain to her everything. How Amphitrite and Triton had defected and joined Oceanus (apparently, he was Amphitrite's father); how he had immediately gone to Hera to have the marriage annulled; how he had always had suspicions that he was not, in fact, Triton's real father, and to prove it, had disowned him, only for Triton to spit in his face and laugh that he was not his father. When he had gone to fight Typhon on Marina's request (she couldn't help but feel guilty at this part) he had evacuated Atlantis, allowing them to take over. After the reward ceremony, he had enlisted the help of Apollo, Artemis, Hades and Athena to defeat them, succeeded, and had personally killed both Amphitrite and Triton. Oceanus had also been disposed of by the other gods. The rebuilding process had been cut short by Gaia's awakening, and had not been completed until last month.

"I am sorry that I could not come to you sooner, my daughter, but Atlantis needed me," Poseidon explained. "I hope that you can forgive me."

"Of course, Dad, I understand," Marina said. After the Giant War, Zeus had – grudgingly – held an award ceremony up on Olympus, where he'd offered all seven heroes (and Nico and Reyna) partial immortality and the choice of one gift from their godly parent. All had accepted. Personally, Marina thought that he just didn't want to offer them godhood and be rejected. Also, he'd grown somehow even more paranoid after the two wars, and probably didn't want more powerful contenders that could stand up against him. (She'd internally rolled her eyes, and she could bet that everyone else had too.) Frank and Hazel had asked for their curses removed and Hazel had received a pardon from the Underworld; Jason had requested help for his new role as Pontifex Maximus; Piper had received a new power from her mother, the power to manipulate a person's feelings, after swearing an oath on the Styx to never use it against Olympus; Annabeth had received telekinesis from her mother, something that she had been overjoyed for (she had always been insecure about her lack of powers), and had requested permission to create a city like New Rome for Camp Half-Blood. Nico had become lieutenant and right-hand man to his father, as well as getting promises from both Zeus and Poseidon to leave him alone when he was in their domains (Poseidon gave his willingly, and guess who yelled and screamed like a baby about it? Yeah, that's right. Zeus.) Reyna asked for a way to connect the two camps so they wouldn't always have to go across the country for visits. And Marina? Well, she had wanted to consider it first, and since Poseidon had flashed out immediately after the meeting, she had gotten her wish.

"Tell me," Poseidon said now, suddenly looking nervous and for all the world like a teenage boy as he fidgeted shiftily and played with his fingers. If she didn't know better, she would say he had ADHD. Now there was a thought. Could gods have ADHD?
"What would you say if … uh … if I wanted to marry your mother?" he blurted in one breath. "I love her, and I would never hurt her. I swear it on the Styx."

Thunder rumbled, sealing the oath. "Oh, please," Marina snorted, undignified. "Do you think I'm stupid? I know that Paul Blofis doesn't really exist. I mean, who has a last name like Blofis anyway? Dead giveaway, if you ask me."

Poseidon was now the one gaping like a fish out of water. "How – I mean – uh – how did you figure it out?" he asked, astonished.

She rolled her eyes again. "When I was a kid, you took my memories of you," she began. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him flinch. "It's okay. I don't blame you. You and Mom just wanted to keep me safe. But when I drank the gorgon's blood on my quest with Frank and Hazel – don't look so shocked, I'm fine – it didn't just bring back the memories that Hera stole from me. It restored all my memories. And I remembered that sometimes, when you were busy, you would come to us looking … different. Sort of similar to how Paul looks. And I realized that that was your Roman form … and … well. Paul Blofis is actually Neptune, isn't he?"

"I – yes," Poseidon said, stunned. "I had no idea … I thought you wouldn't ever remember …"

"I do. And you were an amazing father," said Marina, looking him in the eye. "I don't blame you or Mom. I'll never blame you. You were just trying to do what was best for me. And you were always there for me when it counted."

"You mean more to me than you can imagine, Marina," he said softly. "And before you ask – yes, your mother does know. She saw right through me," he chuckled ruefully. "At first, she marched straight up to me and grabbed me by the shirt – by the gods, Marina, your mother is one scary lady – and asked me fiercely, 'What are you doing here? You'll endanger Percy. Go away. I can't have you putting my child in danger.' I still get the shivers thinking about that moment. Man, she is intimidating when she tries to be." He shuddered, and Marina laughed. The thought of her mother intimidating this hundreds-of-thousands-of-years-old Greek God was almost laughable, but knowing her mother, she knew that she was fully capable of it. "I told her that I would only have endangered you when you didn't know your heritage, and besides, this time would be different. I told her my plan of appearing as a mortal in my Roman form – because, as you have probably witnessed firsthand, Neptune is not the most beloved god of the Romans – and nobody would ever notice, because most of my family prefer their Greek forms, and this way I could protect you both better. She put up a fight, but she eventually agreed. And I have been cautiously broaching the topic of becoming my immortal bride to her a few times now, but she always says no because she worries about you, and she doesn't want to die before you. But I think you and I both know that she is afraid," he ended with a sigh. "Afraid that she may end up like Hera, scorned in favour of endless other mortal women. I have tried to tell her that I will remain faithful to her, but she knows that we gods are fickle. Nevertheless, I love her, and I will try my best. For her."

"Honestly, I don't blame her," said Marina, looking him straight in the eye. "You gods are fickle. You left your wife for her. Who's to say you won't do the same a couple of centuries down the line? Being immortal is boring. You're bound to get tired of each other eventually."

Poseidon opened his mouth to protest, but she held up a hand to stop him. "But," she continued. "I know you truly love her. And I know she truly loves you. Just know that if you ever hurt her …" she left the threat dangling and glared at him with her best Wolf Stare. He shrank back, and she grinned, satisfied.

"I – um," Poseidon squeaked. Her grin widened. He cleared his throat. "I – uh, I do believe that it's getting late. Allow me to show you to your room," he said hastily.
Even the servants shrank back from Marina's wide Cheshire Cat grin fearfully as she trailed after her father through the palace.
Chapter 9

THALIA

Days passed in a blur until finally the dreaded day was looming. The day of Annabeth's funeral. Camp Half-Blood was more crowded than she'd ever seen it, veterans flooding in to pay their respects to the revered Heroine of Olympus, and – miracle of miracles – Sally Jackson and Annabeth's mortal family had also been let in. Most of the gods were also present, which shocked Thalia to the core; in usual circumstances, the gods really didn't give two shits if yet another mortal died. They were, after all, mortal. Dying was what they did. They were like ants to the immortal deities. However, by some miracle – maybe they felt that because Annabeth had helped save them twice, they ought to at least show some respect, or because Athena had forced them to (Thalia was betting on the latter) – more than half of the Olympians showed up. Athena, obviously; Poseidon; Artemis; and many minor gods that Thalia didn't even know the names of. Or maybe it was because Annabeth had designed their temples (which most gods loved more than their spouses – not that that was a hard feat to accomplish -), being the Architect of Olympus and all.

Marina exited the bathroom, her eyes red-rimmed and puffy. She was wearing a beautiful black dress, courtesy of Aphrodite herself. Without a word, Thalia enveloped her in a crushing hug, the embrace conveying more than words could ever say. She didn't even care that her dress was getting wet as Marina sobbed into her.

Thalia didn't really remember the funeral. She recalled snippets – many of the campers giving emphatic speeches about how wonderful Annabeth was, how she'd saved their lives, the whispers of where's Percy, Marina's horrible blank look as she stared at Annabeth's body being covered in the slate grey shroud covered with depictions of her and Percy's various adventures, with an image of an owl holding a sea-green trident in the middle. It was laced with greens and blues along with the grey, symbolizing her relationship with Percy, and that nothing could break it apart, not even in death.

When the shroud was set on fire, Thalia glanced beside her at her cousin, but she was gone. Thalia didn't blame her. She was already in so much pain; she couldn't even imagine what it must be like for Marina. She wandered through the rest of the day in a daze, going through the motions robotically but a world apart. She eventually stumbled upon the remainder of the Seven in a huddle among the sand dunes, tearfully regaling each other with tales about Annabeth. Not even about the heroic acts she performed; just the little things. The time she pushed Percy off the Argo II when he teased her; the time she and Percy fell asleep in the stables; the time she taught Frank how to use Chinese handcuffs. They were all laughing amidst tears, and Hazel's and Piper's arms were securely around Marina. They looked like a family, and for a moment, Thalia could picture Annabeth leaning against Marina's chest, contributing her own witty remarks; but then she was gone, and Thalia was left gazing at these six people who'd been through so much, who'd lost so much, but who were so strong and got through it all with one another. This was what family was. And with that thought, Thalia retreated, leaving them to their grief and letting them mend together.

Soon after, the Hunt departed from Camp Half-Blood, their ranks increased minimally with the addition of Arianna, a daughter of Demeter, and Natalie, a daughter of Hecate. Marina had withdrawn into herself when she heard the news that they were leaving, and Thalia knew it must be hard for her to leave behind her second home, but also a burden lifted from her shoulders. She'd asked Artemis for permission to visit her mortal parents, and had elicited promises to come back to either Camp Half-Blood or Jupiter once a month. The rest of the Seven, now Six, had been sad to see her go, with many tearful farewells, but they had promised monthly reunions whenever Marina came back.
Thalia, on the other hand, had left camp with mixed feelings. Chiefly among them: the daughter of Bellona, Reyna Avila Ramírez-Arellano. She'd somehow grown closer to the girl during their stay, as they were often left out – not intentionally, of course – of the tight-knit group of the Seven, and had been drawn together. After Reyna had divulged the fact that Venus had come to her and told her that no demigod would heal her heart, Thalia had comforted her, and asked if she'd like to join the Hunt. Surprisingly, Reyna hadn't declined, nor had she accepted. She'd explained that she still upheld a duty to New Rome as a praetor, and couldn't leave, especially not after a war and with a co-praetor as experienced as Frank, but since she'd been made partially immortal as well, she'd said: "Not now … but maybe in the future." Thalia was trying not to get her hopes up, but Reyna would make an excellent recruit. Strong, brave, resourceful, she was a force to be reckoned with. Especially when Thalia had witnessed her ferociousness firsthand when an Aphrodite boy had tried flirting with her. Reyna had had him on his back in two seconds flat – Thalia hadn't even seen her move, she'd been that fast. Yes, the daughter of Bellona truly was formidable. Thalia hoped fervently that she'd never get on the bad side of her. Lately, she kept getting these weird feelings whenever she was around Reyna. She couldn't decipher what they were, but they left her with a warm feeling, one that confounded her. She brushed them off, thinking nothing of them, but a strange feeling stirred in her gut as she departed from Camp Half-Blood without a backwards glance.

She could feel excitement and anticipation thrum in the air as they set off, finally on the move once more. All throughout their stay, the girls had been restless, wanting to be doing something, and they were finally getting their wish. She could literally see them all vibrating with energy, excited at the thought of getting to kick some monster butt. She, too, could feel the alluring call of the Hunt, and it made her blood sing. By the looks of it, Marina felt it too; she looked as if the weight of the world had been lifted out of her shoulders (and she'd been there, too), and she'd unconsciously adopted a predatory stance.

For maybe the first time in Thalia's brief tenure as Lieutenant, Artemis accompanied them on their hunt. She wasn't sure if this was normal or not – after all, for as long as she'd been Lieutenant, they'd been at war, so maybe circumstances had warranted different measures – so she didn't speak up, even though she desperately wanted to. Artemis had announced that they were going cross-country to hunt down the remainder of Gaea and Kronos's armies, which elicited a cheer from the girls, thirsting with revenge for their fallen sisters. Marina, in particular, had a malicious gleam in her eye. For Annabeth, her expression seemed to say. Thalia agreed.

The first sign of trouble appeared just after they'd left New York, making good time. The sun was blazing, and they were getting some much needed respite under the shade of some trees. Marina had wandered off to the creek they'd spotted earlier, and Artemis had sent some of their new recruits ahead to scout out a possible camping site.

Suddenly, a brutal roar split the air, as well as petrified screams. Thalia shot up faster than her brain could register, and was on her feet in a split second, spear at the ready in her hand. Artemis, being a goddess, was already a few paces ahead of her, darting towards the sounds like a silver streak. Thalia followed suit, along with the other Hunters, who'd drawn their bows, arrows nocked at the ready. They burst into the clearing to find Arianna and Natalie trading blows with a couple of empousai accompanied by several dracaenae. Thalia cursed under her breath before leaping at the closest monster to her, an empousa too focused on the two girls to notice her. The monster didn't know what hit her; one second she was creeping forward, the next, Thalia's spear sliced clean through her body and she disintegrated into gold dust. Thalia didn't even pause; her spear, carried on by its momentum, cleaved through the body of the empousa behind her before she even had time to blink. She was distantly aware of monsters bursting into gold dust around her as her sisters' arrows found their marks as she slashed and struck, carving a path of destruction. Her spear crackled menacingly with electricity and Aegis cut a terrifying image, making most monsters flinch, which gave her the second she needed to kill them.
Marina materialized by her side, taking Thalia by surprise. Where did she come from? the ADHD part of her mind mused as she whirled on a dracaena that had managed to sneak up behind her. They fought fluidly together, each almost seeming to know what the other would do next. Thalia relished in the feeling of fighting together, of that unbreakable bond between them. She was greatly puzzled, though, by the way the monsters seemed as if they were wading through quicksand; it was as if … time was slowing down. But that was impossible, wasn't it? Kronos was dead. Yet the thought still lingered in Thalia's mind, unnerving her, until it was quickly dispelled as she focused on the battle.

She turned, expecting her spear to meet the resistance of another monster's body, but instead finding that the clearing was coated in a thick layer of monster dust, looking almost like grains of sand. Her spear cleaved through thin air and she barely managed to stop it, almost toppling over in the process. She heard a stifled laugh and glared daggers at Marina, who was snickering at her predicament. She swung her spear at her cousin, who barely blocked it with Riptide, and the two of them engaged in a playful spar. Thalia reveled in their camaraderie, feeling her spirits lifting; she hadn't felt this cheerful in … well, a long time, to be sure.
"AUNTY MARINA!" came the collective voices of seven hyperactive kids as they came barreling towards the raven-haired Huntress. She laughed as they slammed into her with the force of a bear (literally, in the case of Emma Zhang) and hugged them one by one, exclaiming over how much they'd grown and handing out small souvenirs to each fondly. Stepping back, she smiled as she took in her second family. The adults were now in sight, huffing and puffing from chasing after their kids. She laughed as Leo flopped to the ground dramatically and bemoaned his "irrational" decision to have kids while his wife, Calypso, ignored him and scooped up her three-year-old toddler, Esperanza Valdez, who'd been crying because the big kids had left her behind when she couldn't catch up.

"I thought we'd never catch up," Piper groaned, enveloping Marina in a hug with Hazel close behind her. "Who knew kids could run so fast?"

After the Giant War, Piper and Jason had successfully finished high school and had gone to New Rome University. Hazel and Frank, too, had attended the university after their tenures as praetors, as Hazel had been elected after Reyna stepped down and joined the Hunters of Artemis. To be honest, Marina hadn't been that shocked. She'd been well aware of the prolonged time that Thalia and Reyna spent together, had eavesdropped her fair share on their conversations via Iris Message, so it didn't come as a surprise to her when Thalia announced Reyna's decision to join the Hunt soon after she left her position as Praetor, three years after the Giant War. Because there were no rules against girls dating girls in the Hunt, they were happily together, using every opportunity to make Marina puke. As much as she acted like it disgusted her, she was just happy that they were happy. They deserved it.

Piper and Jason had gotten married fresh out of university. According to Piper, he'd made them a picnic on a cloud to propose, but – typical Jason – he was so nervous he forgot to control the cloud to make it solid beneath him and dropped the ring right off the cloud. Piper had laughed so hard she'd almost fallen off too, but luckily Jason had quick reflexes and controlled the wind to bring the ring back to him. The girls had been in fits of hysterics when Piper regaled them with that story during one of their sleepovers. The ceremony had been beautiful – strangely, it went off without a hitch – and Marina had been Piper's bridesmaid. Piper had been ethereal in her simple white gown, perhaps what some people (Aphrodite) would have considered too simple, but Piper looked like a goddess in it, happiness radiating off her. Marina was happy for her and Jason, of course she was, but she couldn't help thinking of Annabeth, robbed of her own chance to shine in her wedding gown. How she would never see her Wise Girl walking down the aisle towards her.

Hazel and Frank, on the other hand, had elected to wait a few years, and had gotten married two years after Piper and Jason. Again, Marina had been a bridesmaid, and Hazel had looked absolutely stunning in her gown, setting off the gold of her eyes. She'd looked so beautiful that Frank had turned into an iguana in the middle of the ceremony. The memory still set off everyone within a mile radius.

Marina's first goddaughter had been Piper and Jason's daughter, Annabeth Marina Grace. She'd cried when she'd heard the name, and had been more terrified of the tiny bundle that couldn't possibly be a person than she'd ever been of any monster, and had broken down the first time she held her in her arms. Annabeth – now seven – had her father's blond hair, but her mother's kaleidoscopic eyes and Aphrodite beauty. She'd inherited her mother's charmspeak and her father's wind powers, whereas
lightning and manipulation of feelings went to her little brother, four-year-old Nathan Perseus Grace. They, like their parents, were also partially immortal, which relieved them, as they wouldn't have to watch their children die. Initially, during the first stages of her pregnancy with Annabeth, Piper had been so stressed and fixated on this problem that she'd nearly suffered a miscarriage. Jason had confided in Marina that he'd spent many nights jostled awake by his sobbing wife, crying out that she didn't want children if she had to watch them die. Luckily, Marina and the Hunters had been at camp, and she spent the night with Piper, comforting and consoling her.

Hazel had fallen pregnant shortly thereafter, with now five-year-old twins Emma Marie and Samantha Anna Zhang, who both had creamy cocoa skin a shade lighter than Hazel's and her striking gold eyes. It was soon discovered that both twins had inherited their father's shape-shifting powers after Hazel had nearly torn the house down when she found them missing the year that they turned three and eventually found a pair of gold-eyed kittens in the basement. Later, she'd wistfully remarked that she wished she could keep them as kittens forever. They'd both inherited Hazel's metal-controlling ability as well as a small degree of control over the earth. They had yet to manifest any Mist abilities, but Hazel wasn't worried; she said that it would take time. After all, she had only started to show symptoms at thirteen and in a time of extreme duress.

Leo and Calypso had preferred to focus on their mechanic shop instead of having kids, and only after much deliberation had three-year-old Esperanza Echo Valdez, an impish pyrokinetic toddler just like her father. They'd gotten married three years after the war, and were living out Leo's dream: their very own mechanical garage just outside New Rome, with a branch opening in Camp Half-Blood. They specialized in monster-proof items, such as the Leophone, the first ever monster-proof electronic ever invented. Of course, Leo wouldn't be Leo Valdez without a weird and quirky name, named after himself. Many of the Hunters now owned one, too, and Leo had taken it upon himself to create customized versions for his friends, with the unique ability to come back to them just like Riptide, direct connections to each other, and 3D face-time. Marina had to admit that it was pretty cool and very useful. Her own was sea-green with a gray owl emblem.

Sammy and Emma each took one of Marina's hands and began half-dragging her into the house, the other kids bouncing excitedly, chattering a mile a minute. Marina felt a surge of warmth and love for them, washing away her weariness from having fought a drakon just before their arrival. She pushed her worries away and instead focused on just having fun with her family. It wasn't hard to forget with seven ADHD kids clamoring for her attention.

Later, when all the kids had been put to bed, the adults gathered in the downstairs living room of Hazel and Frank's house. "What have you been up to, Marina?" Piper asked. "Is everything okay? You're back unusually early."

"We've been running into larger groups of monsters," Marina explained. "They've been growing scarce for the past ten years and we thought we got them all, but it turns out they've been regrouping. We ran into a particularly large group just north of here and had to come here because Arianna was injured."

"It's nothing big, right?" Hazel spoke up, her expression worried. "I mean … there couldn't possibly be another war so soon."

Marina didn't blame her friends for having concerns. They'd just about gotten over the events of the past war – they didn't need one now, not when there were kids to think about and the future was just beginning to look bright. She did her best to reassure them. "We're on it," she promised. "I'm sure it's nothing. Probably just a rogue monster seeking fame."

They didn't look appeased, but dropped the topic, not wanting to linger on it for longer than
necessary. None of them were eager for another war, another foe intent on toppling Olympus. Hadn’t they done enough?
Ever since Poseidon had married Sally Jackson a year after Marina joined the Hunters, after countless talks and pestering from her daughter, Sally Jackson had become even more formidable. Hera had presided over the ceremony and had even gifted the newlyweds an Apple of Immortality from her own tree in the Garden of Hesperides, so that Sally could be Poseidon's immortal wife. True to his word, in the fifty years since, Poseidon had not strayed even once, but Marina remained skeptical. Eternity was a long time to spend with someone, even if that someone was as wondrous as her mother. Thus, Marina found herself diving into the nearest body of water and making the trip to Atlantis, which wasn't far at all since she learnt how to vapour travel and travel through different bodies of water, for family dinner. Yes, you heard right. Family dinner, in a cozy dining room that Sally had designed herself, as she deemed the normal dining room "too fancy". Artemis, who, like all the other gods and goddesses – even Zeus himself – had developed a healthy fear of Sally Jackson's wrath, had immediately agreed to let Marina go under her mother's request. Marina would have laughed at their misfortune if she didn't suffer the same, if not worse, fate.

Besides, she would jump at any chance to see her beloved younger siblings. A few years after they'd gotten married, her mother had announced that she was pregnant. Poseidon had fainted from the shock, and Marina had caught it on video. She still liked to flaunt it every now and then, as well as the accompanying video from her mother's second pregnancy. It never failed to make Poseidon turn as red as a tomato, which was a hilarious sight. Cordelia Andromeda, the Goddess of Tides, and Dylan Perseus, the God of Storms, were five years apart in age. Although Marina was at least twenty years their senior, the three siblings were extremely close and told each other everything. She had been given the honour of naming them, while their parents chose their middle names. Initially, she'd refused, thinking she didn't deserve it, but her mother had insisted. "Cordelia" meant "jewel of the sea", which she most definitely was. The merpeople adored their princess, almost more than they did their king, and she, too, loved them in return, treating them like friends instead of subjects, like Poseidon had. "Dylan" meant "son of the sea", which he was, literally. Marina had thought it was fitting. He and Cordelia were both equally adored by their people, and instead of being treated like royalty, they'd both gone to the local mer high school and trained at Camp Fish-Blood along with the other young merpeople their age, and as a result, they were pretty down-to-earth, despite being mermaid royalty. They had also spent brief tenures at both Camp Half-Blood and Jupiter and had become regular visitors, becoming fast friends with the children of the Seven and the new generation of half-bloods.

Cordelia often joined the Hunt to see her sister and cousins, and had been offered a place a few times but declined. She looked like a mirror image of her older sister, but instead of heterochromic eyes, she had turquoise eyes that changed to reflect the state of the sea. As both she and Marina were immortalized in eighteen-year-old bodies, they could pass for twins. Indeed, many immortals often mistook them for twins, with only a few – Poseidon, Sally, Dylan, and surprisingly Artemis and Thalia – able to tell them apart without the telltale giveaway of their eyes. Dylan, on the other hand, looked more like a cross between Poseidon and Sally, with rich brown hair and sea green eyes, like Percy had had. He was the youngest, and was often sulky about it when his older sisters would make a point to boss him around to annoy him. His main weapon was a sword, like Marina, whereas Cordelia preferred the trident like their father. One year, for their birthdays, they'd all been given matching silver bracelets which had two forms: a sword and a trident, which had since become their favourite weapons, with Marina learning to double-wield Riptide and her new weapon, which she
had named ρεύμα (Current).

She travelled to the main gate of the palace, having already undergone the transformation, and was let in without a second glance. In the years since the wars, the palace had been fully refurbished. The grand entrance, throne room, guest wing and formal dining room were still imposing and pristine, but the rest of the palace had glaring evidence of Sally's motherly touch. From the tapestries of Percy, Annabeth, and the Seven's various adventures to the natural light filtering in from the surface, it was worlds away from the hard interior of the outer layer of the palace, made to impress. Here, it had been converted into a proper home – which was nothing less than was expected of Sally Jackson.

"REE!" Her sister's delighted squeal caused her to whip around from where she was nostalgically admiring one particular tapestry of her and Annabeth in the Sea of Monsters. When Cordelia and Dylan were younger, they'd been unable to pronounce her full name, so they'd taken to calling her "Ree", and the nickname had stuck. For them, at least. She'd slaughter anyone else who tried to call her that, brutally.

"LIA!" She screamed back and was almost thrown into the wall as Cordelia crashed into her with all the force of a hurricane. She, too, was in mer form, her tail an aquamarine shade instead of Marina's eddying greens and blues. They hugged and chattered excitedly as if they hadn't just seen each other two days ago, when Cordelia had accompanied them in their hunt for the Nemean Lion. Honestly, couldn't any monsters just stay dead, please and thank you?

Dylan quickly swam up, breathing hard from trying to chase after his sister, and Marina freed one arm from the hug to ruffle his hair. He scowled at her, but a smile twitched at his lips. "About time you showed up," he said, his mouth lifting in that trademark troublemaker smirk Percy had been so famous for. "The food's not going to eat itself, you know." And apparently he had also inherited the trademark sarcasm. She rolled her eyes and smiled fondly as the three of them linked arms and swam to where their parents were waiting, and for a moment she just pushed all her worries away and focused on her siblings.
Almost a century had passed since Marina had joined the Hunt, and it was flourishing. They'd been kept busy for a while after the Giant War, hunting down residual monsters who had supported Gaia and Kronos, journeying all over the country to find their prey. It had been a welcome distraction for Marina, who, it was plain to see, had still been grieving for her lost love. In those first few decades, she rarely smiled, almost never laughed, but still managed to become beloved to all in the Hunt, especially the younger recruits. Even with her mourning demeanor, she always managed to bring a smile to their faces. But as time passed, she slowly reverted to her old self, her lips turning upward in more than a quirk, progressing to full on laughter, which, the first time she heard it, reverberated in Artemis's head for more than a week. She longed to hear it again, to hear her huntress so happy and joyful at last. But Marina hadn't been just her huntress in a long time, not to Artemis.

Initially, she'd stubbornly denied her feelings, not even knowing what it was she was feeling. She only knew that whenever Marina looked at her, her heart beat faster and a strange fluttering started in her stomach, and she missed her almost physically whenever she was away from her. That had slowly evolved into near-speechlessness whenever Marina smiled at her, to the point where she had to restrain herself from blushing golden from head to toe whenever they made eye contact. It was getting ridiculous, really. Goddesses - especially her, the maiden goddess - did not have crushes! Especially not all-encompassing crushes like this!

She'd only realized the truth about her feelings some twenty years ago. It struck her like one of her father's lightning bolts, in the middle of a battle about to go terribly wrong with a Chimera. Marina, as always, was front and center, hacking and slashing away at it with the most breathtaking expression on her face, so eye-catching that Artemis forgot to reload an arrow into her bow and almost broke the string. Her heart froze in her chest as she watched the Chimera's tail pass dangerously close to her huntress, but she nimbly ducked it and struck out with her sword. Even after all these years in the Hunt, Marina still preferred her sword, Riptide, over the Hunters' traditional bow and arrows or hunting knives. Her lips were pulled back in a snarl, and Artemis's thoughts wandered to how it would feel to press her own lips against Marina's ... which was why she missed it.

Later, they told her that Marina had been distracted by another Huntress about to get skewered by one of the Chimera's heads, and had completely missed the tail swinging straight towards her. But Artemis saw none of that. All she saw was red when Marina screamed, a heartrending, seemingly never ending scream of pain that pierced straight into Artemis's heart like a javelin. They told her that she was off like a blur, abandoning her post, her bow and arrows, streaking straight for the Chimera that had dared to hurt her Marina, who was still trying to stand strong even with the poison coursing through her body. In milliseconds, the Chimera was ashes. It didn't stand a chance against the rage of the goddess of the hunt. The red only started to dissipate when she felt a light touch on her shoulder and turned to see Marina, intact and still standing, looking at her with a slight smile. She didn't even seem affected by the poison.

"How - ?" Artemis began, looking her over but finding not a single scratch on her. She frowned.

Marina laughed, a musical sound that Artemis wanted to pluck out of the air and keep locked inside a safe. Her eyes darkened.
"I can control poison."

She offered no other explanation, seemingly lost in dark memories, and Artemis suddenly felt helpless, a feeling that she didn't get very often. She didn't like the fact that there were still demons plaguing Marina, demons that she couldn't save her from like she'd saved her from the Chimera. But then again, she hadn't needed saving, had she?

That was when she realised that she loved Marina.

Reports had started coming in about half a century ago of monsters that should be dead roaming the Earth again, monsters that she and her hunters had been sent to dispatch. Reports of monsters reforming only days after they had been killed, much like in the Giant War. She tried voicing her concerns, but Zeus would have none of it. He waved it off, like he had half a century before, and assured her that she was just being paranoid. She knew she wasn't, but she also knew that she couldn't argue with her father. But as the reports got more and more infrequent, she convinced herself that her father was right, that she was being paranoid, ignoring the niggling voice in the back of her head. They didn't need another war, not when they'd just recovered from the last two. They - Marina - had been through enough.

But last year, demigods had started showing up dead.

At first it was demigods of minor gods, often overlooked, and so no one noticed. By the time anyone found out, it was too late. Almost every demigod who went outside the borders of either camp would be found dead a few days later, always with strange black markings on their skin and scars branded on their chests. No one could make sense of the symbols, not even the gods.

By the time they thought to issue a rule that all demigods were to stay safely inside the borders of Camp Jupiter or Camp Half-Blood, their numbers had almost dwindled by half. Most of the minor gods' kids were gone. All the other cabins' numbers had shrunk significantly. The demigods lived in fear and terror of the unknown, the Athena kids and Athena herself unable to find answers. After losing a few of her hunters to the unknown enemy, Artemis and the Hunt too had been ordered to go to a camp immediately, and were now residing at Camp Jupiter. She felt confined, like the walls were closing in around her. She wanted to go on a hunt again, to be free, but knew she couldn't risk losing any more of her hunters, who were still grieving after the recent loss of Helena, who had only been with them for a decade. So she decided to go alone, thinking that whatever it was wouldn't dare to touch her, a goddess.

She didn't realize that this very fact was what ultimately trapped her under the sky during the Second Titan War.
Chapter 13

MARINA

Even now, almost a century after she joined the Hunt, there were very few people who knew that Marina Jackson, Huntress of Artemis, was in fact Percy Jackson, son of Poseidon. Right now, only a very select group of people knew: the Hunt (obviously), the rest of the Seven, Nico, Chiron, Lupa, and her family. Initially, she had told her old friends from Camp Half-Blood and even some from Camp Jupiter, but sadly they were all dead now, but not before living their lives to the fullest and dying of old age instead of monster attacks, defying the odds stacked against all demigods since birth.

Clarisse was the first. She went peacefully, in her sleep, at the age of 70, almost four times the normal demigod life expectancy. It was anticlimactic for a daughter of Ares; slipping away soundlessly in her sleep, surrounded by her family and friends, instead of on the middle of a battlefield, dying amidst the clanking sounds of swords on shields. Her siblings and her father thought it unjust, thought she deserved a more bloodthirsty death than that, but Marina knew it was what she had wanted. Once, Clarisse had secretly confided in her that she was sick and tired of the fighting, of the struggle to survive. Marina was glad she'd gotten what she wished for: a relatively peaceful life with Chris and her demigod family.

Clarisse's death was when they finally realized the curse that immortality was. Eternally young, never able to die except in battle, never able to know peace. Having to watch your closest friends age and die around you. After that, most of the Seven distanced themselves from the mortal demigods, not wanting to suffer the pain of loving and losing them.

To most everyone, Perseus Jackson was dead.

Supposedly, he had died at the age of eighteen, two weeks after Annabeth Chase's death. His body was found by a camper in the woods outside of Camp Half-Blood, stabbed and clawed multiple times with huge piles of golden monster dust lying around him, slowly being blown away by the wind. There were whispers that he had done it on purpose; that it was because of a broken heart, the lack of a will to live. The funeral was held a day later at Mount Olympus, with every single demigod, god and nature spirit in attendance. (Personally, Marina knew they didn't give a rat's ass about her; it was probably her dad who forced them to go.) Both the Greeks and Romans grieved, finally united in something. But many wondered why Poseidon, who should have been the most upset of them all, instead walked around with a skip in his step and a boisterous smile, wearing one of his loudest Hawaiian shirts yet.

Marina did not attend the funeral. Well, technically she did - she watched from afar, sat on top of a nearby hill, but they had decided they couldn't run the risk of anyone figuring out who she was. She rolled her eyes at her father's failure of a performance, although she had to admit that everyone else did extremely well. Piper had real tears rolling down her face, Thalia was sparking everywhere and even Clarisse looked sad.

Knowing Zeus's extreme paranoia and tendency to smite first and ask questions later, they had concocted a plan. A fairly believable one, if Marina did say so herself, since before Thalia had approached her with the proposition to join the Hunt, she would have gone through with it. As luck would have it, barely two miles out of Camp Half-Blood, they encountered a relatively large monster patrol which they quickly disposed of, ensuring to use swords only and plenty of Marina's water powers, as arrows would have raised too much suspicion. After all, Percy was known to be the worst
archer in Greek history. Then they had asked a daughter of Hecate in the Hunt to create an illusion of "Percy"'s body and left it there for the campers to find.

They had all bought it. Hook, line and sinker.

And fortunately, in the years since, no one had looked too closely at a daughter of Poseidon in the Hunt, one which bore a startling resemblance to her deceased brother. They were all too afraid of Artemis's arrows.

So Perseus Jackson remained a legend and a mystery, and a boy who died too soon.

"Marina? MARINA!"

She was jolted out of her thoughts by her sister, waving a hand in front of her face. Abruptly, she shot up, barely managing to keep her balance as the younger daughter of Poseidon giggled and evaded the wild movements of her tail.

"What were you thinking about? I've been trying to get your attention for the past five minutes," Cordelia said petulantly, folding her arms over her chest and raising a finely arched eyebrow.

"Nothing. Just ... stuff." Marina waved her hand in the air vaguely, a blush colouring her cheeks.

Truth be told, lately all she could think about was a certain goddess. She always tried to banish the thoughts as soon as they came, but it would never quite work, and she'd be left daydreaming about bright auburn locks and gleaming silver eyes. And even though she knew it was wrong and she constantly reminded herself of Annabeth, she just couldn't seem to stop herself. She mentally congratulated herself on concealing it so well, though; nobody knew except -

"Thinking about Artemis again, are we?" Cordelia rudely interrupted her thoughts once again.

- her little sister, who knew her far too well. Ugh.

She scowled at the other mermaid, who was wearing a smug smirk, her head tilted to one side. "I was not!"

"Liar, liar, pants on fire," Cordelia sang, the smug smirk still on her face.

Marina blushed red. Cordelia, like most little siblings, could be so annoying sometimes. But she loved her anyway. Just not when she was teasing her!

"I don't like her like that! She's a maiden goddess, for gods' sakes!"

Cordelia rolled her eyes. "Oh come on. Why can't you just admit it? This had been going on for the last decade!" she moaned dramatically, putting a hand on her forehead.

Marina bit her lip. "It's not that simple, Lia! Again. She's a maiden goddess -"

"So? You're not a male anymore, are you?"

Marina was at a loss for words. Her sister had kind of got her there. But still - "Yeah, but she's still sworn off romance - and she probably doesn't like me either -"

Cordelia just frowned at her. "I don't think it's any of that," she said suddenly, cutting her sister off. "You're afraid that by doing this, you'll be betraying Annabeth."
Marina just looked away. "I promised to love her forever," she whispered, her voice breaking. "I just can't - it feels wrong to even be thinking about it."

Her sister sighed, moving to sit beside her on the bed and taking her hand, turning Marina to face her.

"Ree, you know she just wanted you to be happy," she began gently, running her thumb over Marina's hand to calm her. "She wouldn't want you to constantly be moping because of her. She told you to move on, remember?" Her eyes held compassion, but just a hint of exasperation. She'd lost count of the number of times they'd had this conversation over the years. Every time she thought she was getting through to her stubborn sister, she was always proved wrong.

"I - I know, but I just ... I just can't," Marina sighed, running a hand through her hair. "I used to think I could never be happy without her, but ... now I feel so guilty for being happy without her. I keep thinking she should be here, she shouldn't have to miss out on all this ..."

"She wanted you to live your life. Be happy. Even if it was without her," Cordelia said. "She understood the perils of your lives, Marina. She knew that any one of you could die at any given day and she still chose to be with you. She cherished the time you had together. I'm not saying you should forget her. I'm just saying that if you really want to treasure her memory, then you need to let go and live. For her."

Marina lifted her eyes to meet her sister's, unshed tears gleaming. "I ... I'll try."

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