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**Tales from Mount Othrys**

by *jflashandcrash*

**Summary**

"After losing the war, we faded to urban legends and night terrors. If the only way for us to be remembered is as monsters, then monsters we shall be. And in the night, you will hear us scream." Follow Luke and his camp of misfit demigods as they contend with the forces of Camp Half-Blood and New Rome, fight the Olympians, patch together a home out of broken lives and shattered dream, and skid into madness and betrayal."
Our tale is one of heartbreak and loss. One you know how it begins and how it ends. My friends are faceless ghosts left to be tortured in the Fields of Punishment, forsaken—not for their own sins—but for the neglect of our parents. Our song isn’t the one you want to hear; it’s the one that needs to be told. Losers never write history. They fade to urban legends and night terrors. If the only way for us to be remembered is as monsters, then monsters we shall be. And in the night, you will hear us scream.

Luke Castellan saved my life. Not the way you might expect—and I did die several times later, but the Sisyphean feat of keeping me dead is for another story.

--dictations from the ramblings of Jack Flash

Histories of Luke Castellan:

Uncomfortable Beginnings

(or: Plans Never Go How They Should)

While watching the cop car pull up to the school, Luke chewed on his lip. He squeezed the hilt of his sword, suddenly unsure he should have brought any weapons. He’d tied his orange Camp Half-Blood sweatshirt around his waist to hide the blade and logo with the hopes that the color wouldn’t attract as much attention if he put it lower on his body. Nothing said subtle like traffic cone orange.

Sometimes, he wondered if their camp director wanted them to get attacked by monsters.

“What, kid, getting cold feet?”

Luke was used to people being shorter than him, but his companion, Phil, was barely at chest height.

Luke looked like he belonged to this school. Phil looked like he should be thrown in jail if he got
anywhere near a school. He had an untamed black beard, scraggily black hair, and dark eyes that constantly seemed to seek flaws in every person and institution for some internal mockery.

Another horrific crunch erupted from between Phil’s lips, like an eighteen wheeler obliterated a Smart Car inside his mouth.

“Could you chew with your mouth closed?” Luke snapped, unable to handle the foreboding smash of iron again.

“Can you turn down the sun glare on your hair gel?” Phil asked, removing the metal rod from between his lips like a cigarette. “And maybe your panic? You’re going to attract monsters for a twenty mile radius with how much you’re sweating.”

If Phil hadn’t been such a skilled keeper, and annoyingly right about the sweat, then Luke would have smacked him. Phil was a satyr—horns, tails, and all—and excellent at sniffing out new demigod blood. Unlike many of his counterparts, Phil had learned to use human technology to his advantage to gain access to unexplained incidents in police reports, newspapers, and magazines.

“The cops aren’t exactly inspiring confidence. You think this has something to do with Fai Lan?” Luke asked. He and Phil were waiting by the senior parking lot, by a side exit that Phil said this girl used to skip class. She was running late in her class-skipping, and Luke was wary that the cop car parked in the kiss-and-ride loop had something to do with it.

“Fēi Lín,” Phil corrected again. “That’s a fast way to get to a girl’s heart—mispronouncing her name. And unlikely. She’s not exactly known for getting caught, nowadays. Ah, you gotta love when a young, aspiring vagabond finds her way to proper subterfuge—there’s our birdie, now.”

On cue, someone exited the side doors. The girl was in the middle of taking off a gym shirt, revealing a too-tight, too-short black tank top that a teacher must have made her cover. Her red, pleather pants and black combat boots made him grin. Black bangs and side wisps bobbed around her face as she ran out, head tilting towards the cop car in the kiss-and-ride. She looked like an Asian version of that vampire slayer, Buffy.

Maybe the cops did have something to do with her.

“Remember not to stare at her face,” Phil said, taking another bite off the iron rod and munching.

“Not going to be a problem,” Luke said, though he hadn’t meant to say it out loud. His face warmed. Luke had been around lots of Aphrodite’s cabin members and intimately knew how attractive Selena Beauregard was. Especially with that knowledge, this girl was smoking.

“Just remember: she killed the last satyr that came after her. Do. Not. Stare. At. Her. Face,” Phil emphasized every word.

She turned to examine the main entrance to the school, so all Luke could discern was a hair bun with… with hair sticks? Or stilettos? They glinted like they were sharp. She was only fifteen feet away now.

Luke had to keep calm. He’d lead plenty of people through Camp Half-Blood, getting them comfortable with the fact that the Greek gods were real. This wasn’t even the first time he’d handled someone who had a criminal record. Most of his blood siblings had them. This was, however, the first time he would work with someone that could easily kill him, according to Phil’s research.

It was also the first time he’d reached out to someone before Kronos had gotten into their dreams.
Luke would prove that he was useful without his master’s direction.

“Hey,” Luke said in greeting. He stood up tall, shoved his hands in his pockets, and gave her a charming grin, trying to look as harmless as possible. “Fai Lin Davidson?” He decided to use her American last name, since there was no way he’d properly pronounce her other one.

“Dǒng Fēi Lín,” Phil muttered under his breath.

“My name is Luke—”

Luke stumbled over his introduction. Fēi Lín glanced in his direction. Her eyes were icy, calculating, and panicked, but that wasn’t what distracted him. When Phil had warned that she had scars, Luke assumed her scars would be like his, like the single, massive claw mark that stretched from his forehead down one cheek.

The skin on her face and part of her neck was shriveled, ribbed, and discolored. Her lips looked stretched too thin. One eyelid didn’t look like it should be able to close all the way.

Phil elbowed him.

Fortunately, Fēi Lín didn’t seem to notice Luke’s pause. Her gaze darted back to the front entrance, where two officers escorted someone out.

Although her lack of attention saved him some embarrassment, Luke was annoyed that she ignored him. He, in fact, was the most popular boy at Camp Half-Blood. He wasn’t used to being ignored.

“And I’m his rustic side-kick,” Phil said with a wry smile. “Phil. As a heads up, I’ll gore you if you mention Disney’s Hercules.”

Luke always enjoyed how ridiculous and pompous that movie made the gods look. Though Disney liked to skirt around the whole incest and abuse thing that was rampant in Greek mythology and it made the Titans look like mindless fiends.

She gaze shot back to them. They narrowed at Phil. “You monsters always pick the worst days to attack,” she said, slipping the sharpened hair sticks from her bun. The bun stayed neatly in place, proving they weren’t there for aesthetics. Her voice was a hoarse whisper, almost too soft to hear.

Phil took a rapid step backwards.

This was not how this was supposed to go. Luke put his hands up, but kept one close to Backbiter. “Not monsters. He’s a satyr. I’m a demigod like you. We’re here to help you—”

“If you’re here to help me, get that boy away from those cops before they drive away.”

Luke had to focus to hear her words. Each one seemed to grow softer and softer until she erupted into a fit of coughs.

“Oh,” Phil said, relaxing. He crunched another chunk out of his iron bar. “You’re sick. I guess a charm speaker can’t charm anyone if she can’t speak.”

Her eyes narrowed further.

Before Luke could stop her, her palm struck Phil’s face. The satyr staggered backwards. Iron
spit out his mouth like a Pez dispenser. He barely caught himself on one of the cars, fortunately out of the cops’ line of sight.

“Hot damn, she hits hard!” Phil said, clutching his face. Blood seeped between his fingers.

Luke clutched the hilt of Backbiter, ready for another strike.

She didn’t attack. Instead, she pointed her finger back at the cops and their escort. “Help him, or it’s an auto-no for whatever you want to talk about. Or are you worthless and I need to kill those cops on my own?” Her voice sounded like it should earn a month off school for threat of contaminating everything within a thirty-mile radius. Had he heard her on the phone, he would have thought the threat cute. With those sharpened hair stick in her hands and the ferocity of her gaze, Luke took a step backwards.

Luke didn’t want to get involved with the cops. No one at Camp Half-Blood knew he had slipped away. If his face showed up in the news and Chiron found out, or worse, if they were able to connect him to his mother as a runaway…

Luke hated her wording even more: worthless. He’d felt worthless for years. And then he’d messed up his first mission for the false glory of something that had been done before. All the time he’d spent at Camp Half-Blood: worthless.

“You have five seconds to decide, or I’m coming after you as soon as I’m done with those cops,” Fēi Lín said. Her panicked eyes darted back to the officers. They were almost to their car. Their escort didn’t have handcuffs on. He was just some kid, maybe a junior, who looked dazed as he walked between the cops. “Four…”

Luke did not like being bossed around or being put onto a tight timeline. But, there were so few numbers for the Kronos cause; he needed this girl. Phil said she was incredibly powerful.

‘Three—’ she said.

“Cause a distraction,” Luke commanded Phil. They needed more time to plan.

Phil snorted, pinching his bleeding nose. “Cause a distraction he says. I ain’t going back to jail for this, you know that kid?”[1]

In a motion so quick and precise that Luke couldn’t believe a sick person had done it, the girl grabbed Phil, spun him, and tossed him in the direction of the cops, out into the open. A little more power and she could have gone skeet shooting with a satyr.

“Help!” she tried to call out, but her voice broke. She tucked the hair sticks back into her bun.

Luke picked up on the charade immediately. He would find a way to make it up to Phil later, else he knew Phil would threaten to tell Mr. D about him.

“What makes you think it’s okay to creep on our school property?” Luke shouted, and took a step towards Phil. He really hoped the school’s assigned officer wouldn’t come out to see what the fuss was about. Then they’d have three cops to deal with, and they were dedicated to the act now.

The officers noticed the commotion.

They motioned for their escort to stand by the car, then made their way towards Phil, Luke, and Fēi Lín.
“Hey! Break it up!” one as pale as the clouds shouted. He had a tiny, handmade paper flower attached to his breast pocket, like something a kid might give a dad. If the kid liked their dad and got to see him, Luke thought bitterly.

“I told this perv to get lost!” Fēi Lín tried to say. The words came out a hiss. She stomped towards Phil, though her steps were wavering. Luke couldn’t tell from her disfigured face, but he thought she was sweating from fever.

If Luke had to guess, the officers were rightfully confused. Phil did look like a creep, but, this girl looked way more threatening than the downed satyr.

“What’s going on here?” the other officer, this one with chocolaty skin, asked. This man looked like a heavy-weight boxer with dimples so deeply embedded that they didn’t go away in serious mode. Luke was suddenly unsure if he was okay with Fēi Lín’s comment about killing them.

The cop put his hands up in an everyone calm down maneuver. Meanwhile, his pale companion had settled one hand on his sidearm, at the ready.

The pale officer was closing in on Phil while the other carefully moved to make Luke and Fēi Lín back up. “What’s going on?” he started to repeat.

“What the—”

Behind him, once the pale officer got close, Phil kicked off his boots, revealing two hooves. He proceeded to nail the officer in the head with a solid hoof print.[2]

The cop flopped over.

As Luke and Fēi Lín’s officer went to glance back at his partner, Fēi Lín lunged forward. Within seconds, she had him in a headlock, pinching his neck between her forearm and bicep. Her arm trembled with the effort.

No turning back.

Luke rushed up to snatch away the officer’s handcuffs, radio, and gun. The cop kicked Luke backwards with one solid hit to the diagraph.

Luke stumbled back a step, clutching his chest. This was nothing compared to fighting monsters or demigods, but he’d lost a few valuable seconds to gasping.

The cop fumbled for Fēi Lín’s forearm. When that failed, he thrashed, trying to buck her off. His eyes and forehead vein were bulging when he elbowed backwards.

This guy had at least a hundred pounds on Fēi Lín, but she didn’t flinch when he hit her. His elbow strike nailed her in the ribs. She barely gasped, though Luke didn’t know if that was because of lack of breath from her sickness or because of pain tolerance.

Luke gritted his teeth. Was she really going to kill him?

The struggles became weaker as he collapsed to his knees, then his hands. His eyes rolled up and Fēi Lín gently set him onto the pavement.

“Jack!” she called hoarsely. She loosened her hold, though kept the headlock position. Her eyes frantically traced back to the cop car.
The boy by the car approached them slowly. His steps were uncertain, like he wasn’t sure if he was really walking here or if he was about to fall off a virtual reality platform.

“Call for him,” Fēi Lín said, her voice too soft to be heard at his distance, “Tell him we’re real.”

Phil didn’t hesitate. “Hey! Jak-Jak! We’re real and could use your unexplained help!”

“This is getting stupid,” Luke said. He shoved the gun into his belt, chucked the radio further into the parking lot, and handcuffed the huge cop. Fēi Lín moved to give him access to the cop’s wrists. She unwound a silk ribbon from around her waist and tied it firmly between the cop’s teeth, tight enough that his cheeks and the back of his head bulged.

The boy, Jack, leveled with them. He was probably a junior, maybe seventeen or so. His brilliant, red hair was spiky, similar to Luke’s blond, except Jack’s was long enough to dip against his forehead. His eyes were watery and unfocused like a distant, forgotten dream had left him deeply disturbed. He was as tall as Luke, though unhealthily thin and gangly. The black nails and Coheed and Cambria band shirt gave Luke an annoying sense of nostalgia for one of his old friends.

Slowly, Jack’s gaze focused on Fēi Lín with no recognition of the cops, Luke, or Phil. “You’re sick,” he said in concern. His voice trembled as much as his body did.

If Luke had to guess, these two wouldn’t last long as friends once Jack found out that she was a demigod. Mortals tended to run from their brand of crazy. Or, they were dumb and thought it was cool to almost die all the time and be neglected by your godly parent. Luke didn’t know what his deal was and didn’t care at the moment. They needed to get Fēi Lín and get away from here.

Fēi Lín pointed to the cop Phil had kicked. By now, Phil had sat up and was dusting off his hoof, cursing about ungrateful children under his breath. The pale cop with the flower pin, on the other hand, hadn’t moved. Blood trickled onto the ground from his head. Luke couldn’t tell if it was from his ear or his mouth.

Luke’s stomach clenched. Had they killed someone?

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*Footnotes:


[2] Pax wants to know if satyrs have battle “horse” shoes for this occasion.*
“Sing to this cop. I need them both alive,” she croaked, her voice about to give out.

Jack shook his head frantically. He hugged himself. “No singing,” he said.

“We helped with your friend,” Luke said impatiently. He was uninterested in this cop’s melodic eulogy (Why would she have Jack sing to him?) and more interested in keeping the contents of his stomach inside of his stomach. This was fine. They were going to need to kill people, right? But, these cops had been innocent. They probably didn’t even know who Greek gods were beyond their commercial branding.

“Yea, we might want to get out of here before their backup realizes they aren’t responding to their radio,” Phil grumbled, “Never thought I would wish for a Cyclops in a group, but some mimicry would be fancy right now.”

Luke nodded, trying not to panic. He had to keep it together.

Fēi Lín ignored him. Her eyes narrowed at her friend. “Jack.”

“N-no.” He shook his head again, his hair bobbing with each shake. His vibrant eyes widened in fear.

“Jack, he’s going to die,” she said.

“Oh, he’s already good as dead,” Phil said, “I’ve seen plenty of half-baked corpses in my day.”

Jack dropped to his knees with a crunch that made Luke wince.

Luke was about to yell at them again. If this dude wasn’t going to cooperate, they needed to leave him behind.

Then, Jack sang. The words sounded Latin and Luke caught a few that he thought he recognized, something about, *Lumen Christi*. Jack’s voice sliced through Luke’s anxiety. For an instant, all Luke could do was absorb the vibrations of the falsetto. Aches that Luke didn’t know he had unknotted and turned to putty. Luke hadn’t realized that he’d chewed his lip raw until he felt the skin close over, smooth and unscathed. The sickness in his stomach dissipated.

The beauty of the singer’s range made Luke lightheaded and dizzy: a sensation of euphoric belonging that he’d heard other people describe when going to church.

What little color there had been returned to the pale cop’s face. He exhaled. The pool of blood around his head rippled.

When Fēi Lín wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand, more didn’t appear. She sat up, piercing eyes much more alert.

Jack stopped singing.
They paused for a moment.

“Well, shit,” Phil said, sounding impressed. “Aw, shit,” he said instead when the pale cop pressed a hand to the floor to push out of his own blood.

With how peaceful everything felt, Luke almost didn’t think to handcuff the other cop. The one with dimples had woken too. He seemed a bit more disturbed by the handcuffs and gag.

“Stay still,” Fēi Lín said before Luke could grab the pale cop.

Her voice no longer sounded weak. It was deep, melodious, and commanded a terrifying sense of authority. Although Luke knew he needed to handcuff that pale cop, he couldn’t get himself to move. All he could do was stare at her horrifically deformed face, wondering why his limbs wouldn’t work.

The red-head, Jack, sagged onto his side.

The cops hadn’t moved either. Everyone could only watch as Fēi Lín scooted to Jack, so she could take his face in her hands.

“I’ve never seen a child of Apollo heal multiple people with one song,” Phil said. He was in mid-crouch to rise but didn’t seem able to finish the motion. “That’s some Orpheus-level shenanigans.”

“Child of Apollo?” Jack asked. His chest fluttered rapidly. “What are you talking about? Is—is this real?” His question was directed at Fēi Lín as she forced him back into sitting position.

“Yes,” she said. “Where were you going?”

Jack could still move. He glanced at the abandoned cop car. Luke knew it was only a matter of time before someone came in or out of the school and saw they had one officer bound and gagged and another seemingly paralyzed. He doubted they could smile and wave and say, “Oh, it’s just a drill!”

“To the station,” Jack said.

“Why?”

He swallowed. “Our maid found Mom, Dad, Shelby, and Aston dead in the living room. And—and Charger.”

At the word “maid” anger had flared inside Luke, but it ebbed away at the last part of the sentence and the way Jack’s eyes became watery. Luke didn’t want to admit that the pale-freckles in combo with the boy’s band shirt made Luke want to give Jack a hug. Especially when Jack glanced hopefully at each of them, like someone would say his maid hadn’t found his presumed family dead.

Fēi Lín gently stroked Jack’s cheek. “What happened?”

“I—I—” Jack’s lips trembled. “I think I accidentally killed them.”

“Yea, I tend to mistaken when I kill family members too,” Phil said.

“Shut up,” Fēi Lín said to Phil, her eyes burning. Phil looked like he wanted to say more, but couldn’t. She returned her gaze back to Jack, pity crunching her leathery brow. “Did you tell the
cops that?”

Jack nodded his head, swallowing again.

Fēi Lín exhaled slowly. She released Jack and turned to the cops. They stared at her with wide eyes.

“Cops,” she said, “You will get onto your radios and report that you were attacked by masked assailants while trying to escort Mr. Flash to the station. The assailants pulled up in a van, attacked you two, disabled you, and took Mr. Flash as he struggled and screamed, trying to escape. You now think these are the prime suspects in the deaths of his family. You will have no recollection of me, or these two men. Is that clear?” She didn’t wait for a response, though Luke wasn’t sure they could give one. “Now get up.”

The words were so powerful, Phil stood and Luke felt himself straighten up without intending to. He touched the top of Backbiter’s hilt, relieved he had control over his body again. What Phil had said earlier made Luke tremble. *This girl could kill both of us with a single word.* Luke hadn’t realized how literal that warning had been.

In spite of whatever injuries they had sustained, both cops rose.

There were no bruises on the neck of the cop that Fēi Lín had put into a headlock.

The other cop’s hat had slipped off onto the pavement. Blood smeared his thinning hairline. There were no holes or fractures, nothing to show he’d been kicked by a barn animal. He looked more like something from a low-budget zombie movie.

On the ground, Luke could see the paper flower had fallen into the man’s blood, soaking it to a deeper red.

Both cops shambled towards their car. Neither glanced back or showed any hint of remembering Luke, Phil, Fēi Lín, and Jack were there. The one with dimples didn’t even seem to realize he was still handcuffed.

“I don’t know how long that will work if we’re still here when they’re done reporting,” Fēi Lín said. “We need to get out of here. Let’s talk in my car.” Fēi Lín reached into a compartment on the side of her boot and withdrew two keys.


This time, Luke felt like he had a choice about moving or staying, but a nagging, foreign sensation inclined him to do anything this girl suggested. He was pretty sure he’d start hula-hooping in the middle of a battle if he thought it might make her smile. He chewed his lip, debating if he actually wanted to go. Phil and Jack had already started to follow.

“Woo-ee! Man, I knew you were gonna be powerful, girlie. But an omega two-for-one sale? How do you like ‘em tin cans?” Phil asked.

“Isn’t the expression ‘them apples?’” Jack rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. He stared at Phil’s hooves warily, glancing at Fēi Lín and Luke as if checking to if everyone also saw the shaggy legs or, maybe instead, if Phil was secretly the shadiest of moving garden decorations.

“They’re real,” Fēi Lín confirmed. She led them over to a 1994 Jeep Wrangler in the senior parking lot. She didn’t bother opening the door. Instead, she stepped onto the foot assist and hopped over the door. Luke felt more and more suspicious. He was waiting for Fēi Lín to pull a
mask off and reveal a Charles’ Angel or some other secret agent.

Luke and Thalia had survived years outside of Camp Half-Blood on their own, but they had made it to camp when Luke was fourteen and Thalia was twelve. *If you can say that Thalia made it to camp*, Luke thought bitterly, remembering how often he’d dodged the camp harpies at night to sit underneath her tree’s branches. (Long story.) Anyway, Fēi Lín, and Jack, survived for at least three of four years longer *and* they were still trying to go to school like normal. How?

Luke was terrified this might be some kind of set up by the Camp Half-Blood or that other camp Kronos had mentioned. But, Chiron wasn’t that smart and didn’t plan that far ahead. No one should have known Kronos was rising. Not yet.

Jack went to the passenger side. He used the door like a sane person. “Is he a monster?” he asked, glancing nervously as Phil crawled into the back.

“Yes,” Fēi Lín said.

“No,” Phil said at the same time.

“Don’t get too attached, we might need to kill him,” Fēi Lín said.

“Hey, Pouty Face, you coming?” Phil said with no apparent concern for Fēi Lín’s comment.

Luke had centaurs waiting for them in a nearby forest. While the idea of seeing a satyr ride a centaur again was tempting, he couldn’t think of a way to convince Fēi Lín and Jack to take that alternative transportation. Hopefully the centaurs would be smart enough to follow Fēi Lín’s Jeep. With how often the centaurs enjoyed smashing their heads together, he doubted it.

He did not like the thought of getting into this chick’s car without knowing the plan.

She didn’t wait to hear an answer. Fēi Lín started the engine and shifted the car out of the parking gear.

Luke rushed over and hopped into the back. His pulse rushed, but… something about this felt right. Camp Half-Blood had almost been boring. He’d lost any control of his life, was not allowed to leave when he wanted, and was only able to supervise children and do chores that he hadn’t signed up for.

This was liberating: he was back with people closer to his age—Phil excluded—taking initiative without Kronos’ goading, and unsure of what was going to happen next or where they were going.

When Luke examined Jack’s freckles, bright eyes, band shirt, and painted nails, the nostalgia was overwhelming, like he was back to exploring with Annabeth and Thalia, and Grover, and they didn’t know what adventure stirred over the horizon.

Thank you for reading! I feel like Phil is a little too comfortable with half-baked corpses, but that’s just the kind of partner Luke needs. Ah, friendships based off mutual mental dysfunction <3
“Killing your parents, kid?” Phil asked. “I know how that can be. I’ve killed a good number of cousins in my lifetime.” Phil patted the potbelly peeking out from under his shirt.

“I didn’t mean to kill them,” Jack said and clutched the sides of his head. As best he could with his seatbelt, he curled into a ball. As Fēi Lín pulled out of the school and picked up speed on the country highway, Jack’s bangs whipped around. One of his tears flew back and hit Phil in the eye, making him curse.

Luke should have asked where they were going, but he wanted to comfort this guy first. Maybe he shouldn’t have cared so much or maybe he should have been scared of the supposed murderer, but Jack looked so genuinely distraught and Luke couldn’t imagine a dude this pitiful hurting someone. “Children of Apollo don’t really kill with their godly powers. They heal people,” Luke said. The bludgeoning wind was so loud, he had to yell.

“Why do you keep calling me a child of Apollo?” Jack asked. He sniffed, managing to quell his tears.

Phil snorted. “Lemme guess. You’ve got a step dad. Who was your real dad, you think?”

Jack’s eyes went wide at the assumption. “I—I do have a stepdad. My real dad was some race car driver that my mom met on her last series. He disappeared.”

“Your mom was a race car driver?” Phil asked with a chuckle. “Yea, definitely a child of Apollo. I can’t believe more monsters haven’t come after you when you have pipes like that, and I mean that for both of you.” Phil gestured between the passenger seat and where Fēi Lín had slowed down to pull into a pocket of urban living. Jack glanced down and Fēi Lín gripped her steering wheel, indicating they’d had plenty of scuffles.

“You ever sing anywhere else, kid?” Phil poked the back of Jack’s seat.

“In the church choir and when I go candy striping at the hospital. Mom says—said that people feel better because they like hearing songs about Jesus.”

If possible, Luke felt worse for Jack. It was always harder for people with strong religious ties to accept this stuff for what it was.

Phil choked. “Oh, oh, Holy Comus. Some of my relatives met Jesus. Great guy. But, trust me, he and the man upstairs have no time for the likes of us. Now that you’ve heard Greek gods are real, consider yourself forsaken.”

Jack paled, making his freckles more prominent.

“Say something like that to Jack again, and I’ll make you jump out of the Jeep,” Fēi Lín said.

Phil snorted and shook his head. “All you youngsters and your active imaginations.”
Luke didn’t know how he felt about the God thing. He never had to have “faith” since he knew the Greek gods were real. He’d seen what their interactions had done to his mom and his friends. He’d rather focus on hating something he knew was there, rather than something that could be there.

They needed a change of subject and Luke needed to know more about these two and whether or not he should be recruiting them. He suspected, as Fēi Lín took a few turns around the neighborhood, that he was in too deep to turn back now. “How did your parents die?”

Jack shrugged. “We had an argument last night about…” He stared out the window. “Well, I wished—wished they were all dead. I went up stairs to shower. When I came downstairs, they were. They were covered in sweat and had dried vomit around their mouths and their eyes were bulging.”

“You know, most people would have called the cops,” Phil said, skeptically.

Jack shook his head. “I thought I would go to bed and they’d be better when I woke up, but when I woke up, they were exactly where I left them, except…” Jack clutched at his hair again. “Their skin sagged to the floor and their backsides were bloated and purplish. And they smelled…”

Jack cupped a hand over his mouth. If the poor kid threw up, Luke had to wonder if it would get caught in the wind current and hit Phil. Fēi Lín had slowed for a residential area, so it would probably just land on Jack’s feet.

Luke had only seen dead bodies at a distance. That was the nice thing with monsters: they killed cleanly. Humans and demigods? Not so much.

“I—I thought, if I went to school, I would come home and they might be okay…” Jack finished through his fingers. “But, if all this is real, then they are really dead. They’re really never going to be okay. And I really did kill them. I really—”

Jack sounded like he was about to hyperventilate. Something about this dude still didn’t strike Luke as a murderer. Could someone, a monster, have scoped out his family? Did monsters do that? “Could someone else have killed your parents? Maybe they poisoned them?” Luke asked, not sure if this was making it worse.

At Jack’s inability to respond, Fēi Lín said, “The Fishers were good people. Even though they didn’t like me, they’ve always been generous with Nǎinai and me. Giving back to the community or whatever. It would take a messed up person to want to kill them, but those exist.” Her eyes narrowed in the reflection of the rearview mirror. “It does seem weird that two strangers walk into town knowing my name the day that Jack’s family is found dead.”

Alarms went off in Luke’s head. The sight of those freezing eyes under her shriveled eyelids—he thought about her threat to make Phil jump out of the car.

She rolled to a stop outside an apartment complex, the only one inside the tiny urban sector of town.

This was not how any of this was supposed to go. Luke hadn’t been sure how to do his pitch, let alone convince her that Phil and he were innocent. He should have expected the Fates to give him terrible timing.

Before Luke could think of what to say, Fēi Lín beats him to it.

“Speak candidly and concisely,” as she said the words, Luke could feel them take effect,
burrowing into his subconscious so he couldn’t imagine lying or taking long to answer. His panic mounted, trying to fight off the lulling effect. “If you try anything, I’ll make you cut off your own fingers one at a time.”

Luke couldn’t bite his lip to calm his fear and anger. Although Phil and he should have been able to jump out of the Jeep and disappear into the small strip of shops, they were trapped without any physical restraints. She could stop them before they sat up. Worse, Luke was certain this girl could make them slit their own throats without losing any sleep.

Luke’s heartbeat thudded in his ears when he realized how much they were at her mercy.

Author's note: And, as all of you now realize: Fei Lin. Not synonymous with mercy. Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed. Stay tuned next week for the last part of this short story!
“Did you kill them? Who are you and what are you trying to recruit me for? Us for,” Fēi Lín asked. Luke knew he didn’t need to hide the answers to those questions, but his mind still raced. What if she asked about something else? Something about Kronos that he wasn’t willing to share?

“I’m ashamed to say I hadn’t even heard of Jackie boy before today. Again, embarrassing considering that someone must have written about his healing, even if a wack journalist,” Phil said, putting his hands up in a surrender position. Either that or showing off the ligaments that he might be about to lose. “Though, if he only sings in choir or hospitals, they could have attributed it to God or doctors.”

“Same,” Luke said, his mouth working before he could plan the words. “About not knowing Jack or his family. I don’t read wack journals. We’re recruiting you to help destroy the Olympic gods because I’m mad at my dad.”

Hatred burned in Luke’s chest. He did not like disclosing that last part so casually to strangers. That made it sound so simple; it undermined what he wanted to do to the Olympians and the pain he went through. What Thalia had suffered.

“Smooth, kid,” Phil said.

Fēi Lín tapped the driver wheel, glaring at the satyr. “And you? Why do you want to recruit me?”

“Hey, I’m good at my job, lady, and I’m proud of dredging through your records. People that get in your way, they do things that they wouldn’t normally do to hurt themselves. Recruiting you will put a shiny spot on my record and I’ll get all the fuzzy feels about helping a kid, since I feel like you’ll do way better at Camp Othrys than Camp Half-Blood. And as to why I’m doing this job—do you think all satyrs like being Dionysus’ slaves?” Phil spat out the window. “I don’t even care if we win the coming war and I don’t really care about our boss. I just wanna be a thorn in that bastard’s toe.”

Luke made a mental note about how Phil didn’t care if they won. That could be detrimental later.

Fēi Lín tapped her steering wheel again. “Everybody out,” she said.

Luke jumped out of the car. Phil was half a second behind him. Luke bit his lip. He wasn’t entirely sure if she’d forced him out of the car or if he’d hopped out on instinct.

Jack slowly slid out of his seat, hugging himself.

“Where are we?” Luke finally asked.

“Somewhere you will act respectfully and ask a minimal number of questions,” Fēi Lín said. She jumped out of the car and flicked her keys around one finger, leading them towards a side door that looked more like an entrance to a scene from Scream.
In a small town like this, Luke had an uncomfortable feeling that this girl would know exactly where to hide their bodies.

“The Dǒng residence,” Phil said, “Kid, I know you’re dyslexic and all, but, uh, you can read the files that I slaved over making you, right? They’re in Greek.”

Luke scowled. With the Kronos dreams at night, directing Cabin Eleven during the day, and then sneaking out during his off hours to set up Camp Othrys and gather an army, he thought he deserved some slack. He couldn’t exactly read files on potential campers at the pavilion with all the tiny Hermes hands hoping for some blackmail on each other. “You could also tell me about them on the way over here,” Luke spat back.

Fēi Lín led them through the door and down a hallway that’s carpet might have been cleaner if it came from a dumpster. Lights flickered and water stains seeped down the once-white walls. Each door was a faded color, perhaps originally bright greens and reds. There was a piece of trash here and there and, to Luke’s disgust, a used condom.

This really did look like somewhere she would strap them into a chair and start a very different kind of interrogation.

She stopped at a bend in the hallway, in front of the single freshly painted red door.

Jack perked up and rushed to stand beside her.

Once Fēi Lín finished unlocking the door, Jack reached for the handle.

She paused and examined him. Her stern expression broke. “Jack…” she said in the best we talked about this voice.

Jack gave her the world’s weakest smile. He cleared his throat and his tears. “After you, Ms. Davidson,” he said, his voice shaking as he opened the door for her and gestured the three of them inside.

Fēi Lín’s discolored cheeks lit up. It took Luke a moment to process that she was blushing and to realize Jack and Fēi Lín might not just be friends, or, at least Jack wanted them to be more.

Fēi Lín briskly entered.

Luke swallowed, glancing over her shoulder to make sure they weren’t walking into some kind of trap. Not that she needed to trap him considering what she did to the cops.

He could hear running water and music. The room was brightly lit, nothing like the terror he’d been expecting from the earlier hallway.

Jack continued to hold the door and motioned them forward, that shaky smile probably the least encouraging thing Luke had seen.

Phil walked in without hesitation. Luke followed and also made a mental note to talk to Phil about his willingness to walk into situations that had “death” written all over them.

“Shoes off,” Fēi Lín said, already setting hers onto a floor matt beside the door. She slipped on some smiling bunny slippers. Not what Luke was expecting. “Zài jiā! Zǎo shang hǎo, Nǎinai,” she said, louder. “Jack hé wǒ de liǎng gè péngyǒu yě zài zhèlǐ.”[1]

Phil frowned down at his hooves. He’d already kicked off his boots when he assaulted the
cops. “Anyone got some plastic wrap that I can slap over these suckers?”

Fēi Lín shot him a glare.

Jack took off his neon orange converses and slipped on a pair of dragon slippers that must have been there for him. Luke followed Jack and Fēi Lín’s lead and put his shoes on the floor mat.

The apartment was small and minimalist. There wasn’t a hint of clutter. On the right, there was a small kitchen with plants hanging and nesting in every open space. The windows beside the counter were open and showed off the apartment building’s modest garden. On the left, there was a table with four chairs and a small box TV that looked like it was from the 80’s.

A massive framed mirror lined the left wall, reflecting the window’s view. A tiny fountain gurgled beside the doorway.

There were two closed doorways in front of them, one Luke guessed was a bathroom and the other he assumed was a bedroom. Opera music came from under one of the doors.

Fēi Lín walked to the door with the music and slipped inside, shutting the door behind her without a word to them.

Walking into the apartment seemed to calm Jack. He stepped over to the kitchen and set a kettle on the stove. He hesitated, looking at Phil and Luke. “Um, do either of you want anything to drink? Flynn says that Mrs. Davidson, her grandma, doesn’t really like me drinking soda, since it’s bad for my voice, but…” Jack leaned forward a little bit, his weak grin becoming goofy. “I hide some Coke behind the extra trash bags in the cabinet if you’d like one. It’ll be our secret.”

Phil snorted. “Jeeze kid, the Coca-Cola scandal. How did a goodie church boy like you end up with Ms. Pleather Pants? And coke for the kid. I’ll take a mug if you’re making a pot of tea.”

Jack’s freckled face went bright red. For a split second, it was like nothing had happened to his family. “I—I don’t know. Flynn can have anyone she wants, and does when it suits her fancy.”

Luke stomach twisted at the way Jack said it, though the younger guy didn’t seem to think it was a big deal. Something about that felt very wrong. Luke realized it would be dumb to point out how Fēi Lín’s facial scars might limit her partner choices, especially to someone sweet on her.

One part stuck. “We could have been saying Flynn this whole time?” Luke asked, glaring at Phil.

Phil shrugged, smirking. “I thought a little enculturation would be good for you.”

Jack pulled two mugs down from a cabinet and withdrew two Cokes. He brought the Cokes over to the table. He motioned for them to sit down.


This was proving to be a complicated day. Even though the drink was warm, it felt refreshing after how tense he’d been. Just having a break from Fēi Lín—Flynn?—was nice. How much time had they spent out though? He needed to make sure Mr. D wouldn’t get suspicious. The Stolls, two of his most promising campers, could only cause organized chaos to cover for him for so long.

At least Jack would talk, even if he did seem a little absent. Luke imagined finding your family dead would do that to you. “So, you and Flynn?” he asked, unsure if they could uncover anything else about Jack’s family and nervous Flynn would storm out the moment he asked where
she went.

Jack’s blush grew redder. “Yea. Her family was new to town. Everyone around here knows each other, so—uh—she was cool. She saved me from a monster attack. She—she’s so awesome.” His eyes turned wistful as he glanced at the closed door.

The kettle began to whistle. Jack robotically walked back to fill the two mugs. “She told me that I wasn’t broken in the head, that I really could help people. Like…” Jack brought the two mugs over. Again, he conspiratorially leaned closer to Phil and Luke as he set the cups down. “She said her grandmother hadn’t acknowledged anyone since Flynn moved in with her. Sometimes, after I sing for them, Mrs. Davidson will even smile at me.”

Jack giggled in delight, grinning from ear to ear.

“Uh—huh,” Phil said, glancing at Luke. “Kid, you can definitely heal people. I guess I’m just wondering… with Flynn’s record, I take it your parents didn’t like you spending time with her or her grandma?”

It was Luke’s turn to kick Phil’s hoof. This guy had just lost his family. Luke remembered how unstable he was before he found Thalia, when he ran from his mother, and how quick he’d come to tear people down if they criticized Thalia’s clothing after they got close.

Jack frowned. He sat down beside them, his posture rigid. He stared at his untouched bottle of Coke. “Aston told them the stupid rumors going around the school about her.”

Phil leaned back. “Is that what you guys argued about last night?”

Jack fiddled with the bottle. His eyes were so red-rimmed and sunken. “I…. I asked Flynn to prom yesterday, when I was carrying her books to her English class. She gets so mad when I fuss over her.” He cracked a small smile. “But, I like, asked-asked her, not just as a friend.”

Luke took another swig of his Coke. He had to wonder if Thalia would have hit him for asking her to a dance. He suspected she’d secretly be thrilled. He hoped, with everything they planned with Kronos, he’d get to find out one day.

It sucked that Jack asked Flynn the night before his family died. Ways to bum out an occasion.

“I’d been planning how to ask her for weeks—I mean, I didn’t think she would actually say yes with how stupid she thinks that stuff is and—I mean—I’m just a junior,” Jack continued. His bashfulness died with the next comment. “Mom and Steve already don’t like me going out because of my condition, but the idea of me dating Flynn… especially since they don’t like her telling me I’m not crazy…” Jack’s hand shook as he peeled the label off the bottle. “They’re wrong about her.”

For a moment, only the fountain gurgled.

That was a motive for murder, but Luke still didn’t buy it.

Jack set the bottle down, eyes wide. “B—but you can’t tell her that’s what we argued about. I don’t want her to think—”

“Jack.”

Jack’s lips pressed shut and he ducked his head down.
Flynn stepped out of the room, giving them a critical look. There was a duffle bag over her shoulder. She walked over to Jack and held a hand out to him. “Mr. Sunny?” she asked.

Jack exhaled in relief. He fumbled around in his pockets and withdrew a—a weekly pill organizer? Luke blinked. They’d named it?

She snatched it and went to fumble in the cabinets. “This place you want to recruit us to, do they have access to Clozapine, Olanzapine, or Aripiprazole?”

Phil snorted. “Those aren’t exactly interchangeable, but, yea, I can get them for you.” He scowled.

Luke’s stomach took a sharper turn as he visualized the inside of his closet, where lights flickered and his mother’s scream tore into his hiding spot. The glow of her green eyes would still perforate through the cracks of the closet door.

She took pills like that. They didn’t help his mother’s “condition.”

Extra saliva had built up in Luke’s mouth. He swallowed it away. “Do you… see prophecies? Vision of the future” he asked carefully. He never wanted to be near someone that could do that again.

Jack blinked, looking confused. “No. I see monsters,” he said.

“And your parents had you medicated for that?” Phil asked, anger making his voice shake.

“Well, yea. I see monsters,” Jack said.

“Di Immortales,” Phil muttered. “This is why kids should never tell their parents anything.”

Luke’s fingers began to shake around his Coke bottle. This was just like his mother. This is why the gods needed someone to put them in their place. “And your dad just let that happen? Let you think you’d lost your mind and didn’t claim you or send any help?”

Like Hermes did to Luke and his mother.

When May Castellan did take pills and didn’t have a fit, she was practically brain-dead: lethargic, drooling, and dizzy. Luke tried not to picture Jack like that. He wondered how recently the guy had taken his medication.

Jack stared at the table, the red-rims around his eyes growing more pronounced. “Steve was the one who drove me to the doctor. He said a boy my age shouldn’t be afraid of silly things like monsters.”

That must have been his stepdad.

“That’s not who he means,” Flynn said. She brought Jack’s pill box back over. Her duffle bag rattled with his extra pill bottles. “We can’t go back to Jack’s house and this is the first place the cops will look for him.”

For the first time since Flynn had opened her mouth to talk that day, Luke felt back in control. He knew how to do this pitch and now he knew, for sure, that he wanted these two at camp. He’d have to talk to Kronos to make sure Flynn couldn’t usurp control, but Luke guessed that Kronos could easily read through her parlor trick. “The cops won’t find Jack or you with us. We’re small right now, but we’re expanding. There’s food and shelter. We’re working to take
down the gods so this—” He gestured to Jack. “—doesn’t happen again.”

Flynn nodded. She glanced around the small apartment. “I’ll need to come back once a week and bring Jack.” She stated it as a nonnegotiatiable fact.

Luke wasn’t used to demigods wanting to see their family. He, Annabeth, and Thalia had run away from neglect and abuse. If neither of Flynn nor Jack had run away yet, and Jack was this at-home with Flynn’s Nainai—whatever that was, grandmother?—then she must have been alright. Flynn and Jack would have to worry about private investigators and the cops early on, but he didn’t see why they couldn’t orchestrate their return. “We’ll make it work.”

Flynn gripped the strap of her duffle bag so tightly, her knuckles turned white. “So, we join your squad to kill our godly parents. Do we need to wear jackets or something that’ll make us targets to monsters?” She glanced down at his bright orange sweatshirt.

Luke wanted to punch Chiron in the face. “No. We work with monsters that are under a truce. You just need to swear loyalty to Kronos and forsake the Greek gods.”

Jack’s lip trembled. “Swear loyalty to a false god to work with demons?”

Luke wanted to laugh. That sounded like a pitch that Thalia would have signed up for in a heartbeat.

“Technically he’s a Titan.” Phil blew on his tea. “And they don’t really like being called ‘demons.’”

“If you’re swearing yourself to him, what happens to your soul after you die?” Jack asked.

Luke opened his mouth. He paused and glanced at Phil.

“Huh,” Phil said, “I mean, I turn into a daisy no matter how this shit goes down.”

“You swore fealty to a deity without asking what it would do to your soul?” Flynn asked skeptically.

“Once we take over, it’ll all be fine,” Luke said, shaking the thought off. He didn’t know why they were so worried. They were talking about vengeance: here and now. Sorting out the Underworld could come once they had disposed of Hades and his crew.

Jack set his Cola down and hugged himself again. They would definitely need to come back to the whole religion thing later.


“Who do you think is my godly parent?” she asked slowly.

“Oh, with the power in your voice and that physique?” Phil snorted and took a sip of his tea. “Definitely Aphrodite.”

Jack glared at him.

Luke had to agree.

On the wall, Luke had been trying not to look at a picture of a fifth grade girl. Although the distortion of features made it hard to tell, Luke was fairly certain that girl was a younger Flynn. Even at age ten, she looked beautiful and had facial features that would probably have matured to
make her gorgeous.

It took Luke every ounce of self-control not to ask her if a hydra had spit acid in her face before she went to middle school.

   Flynn frowned. She glanced back towards the door with the opera music, her expression blank and eyes hollow. “The goddess of sex and beauty, right?”

   “Yea. Love, beauty, pleasure,” Luke said, remembering how Silena scolded the boys and reminded them to leave the last one out when talking to younger campers.

   Flynn released a laugh, one that contained no mirth and had no smile. Luke felt like he’d missed out on a joke that he didn’t want to hear. His curiosity about her scars vanished.

   “Yea,” she said, “I’ll help you kill my mom.”


   Flynn gripped his hand tight enough to make him wince. “Flynn Davidson.”

   Jack swallowed. Uncertainly, he stood. He started to reach his hand out, flinched, then fully extended it. Luke took it. Jack had a gentle, comforting handshake, especially when compared to Flynn’s. “Jack Flash.”

   Phil stood up and pinched his shirt like he was wearing overalls. “And I’m Phil: the trainer of fucking heroes.”

   Flynn scoffed and nodded to the exit. She made no indication of needing to say goodbye when she said, “Let’s get out of here and fuck up our parents.”

And, with that, Luke formed a partnership that would last their entire (very short) lives. He just didn’t realize how soon after things would start to go wrong.

Thank you for the read! I hope you enjoyed the introduction to Luke’s elite squad! Stay tuned next week for The Versatility of a Guitar String, where you get to see what happened at Camp Half-Blood when Percy was looking for the Master Bolt. Follow Luke and Jack as they go undercover to recruit more half-bloods and Phil gets to juggle a corpse—wait—Phil, that’s unsanitary. Please wear gloves.

Footnote:

[1] I’m home! Good morning, grandmother. Jack is here, along with two of my friends.
“Forget your family.”

*Flynn’s melody murmured in my dreams like the silkiest spider threads rocking a slumberer’s hammock. “You deserve to enjoy this: the start of your new life. Let yourself forget.”*

*Her words cradled my mind in a tranquilizing solace. At the time, the only response I could utter was, “What other family? You’re all the family I need.”*

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When Jack agreed to tear down the gods, he didn’t think it would involve him snorkeling in a toilet.

It did.

Jack thrashed and twisted, barely getting a gulp of air before being submerged again. His orange converses squeaked uselessly against the bathroom’s floor tiles.

The girl shoving his head into the water bowl was much stronger and larger than he, despite being several years younger. Between dunkings, her and her friends’ laughter reverberated off the walls.

This, unfortunately, wasn’t the first time someone had forced Jack to be well acquainted with the most vital part of a restroom. Last time, Ms. Daisy Blackwell, one of the prettiest girls at his church, had taken Jack behind the church after his solo at one of their concerts. She had said she wanted him to sing to her. When Tommy Higgles, her boyfriend, found out that she asked Jack to do more than sing to her, he and his friends cornered Jack in the boys’ bathroom at school.

Last time, Tommy had emptied all of Jack’s medication into the toilet bowl. “That straightening out your memory, freak!” Tom had shouted.

This time, the water was cleaner. Or, at least, it wouldn’t give him an overdose as he choked on it.

Last time, Jack had no idea it was going to happen. Ms. Blackwell had heard Jack “confused” things a lot, and that he was ‘confused’ about her relations with Tommy. But, afterwards, Ms. Blackwell wouldn’t acknowledge him in public, or that anything had happened between the two of them, like the other boys and girls that had taken an interest in Jack at his small high school.

This time, Luke had warned Jack that it was a Camp Half-Blood hazing ritual, one from
which Luke could not spare him. Jack had to either fight off a hulking daughter of Ares or get humiliated.

Despite the warning, Jack felt himself thinking the same thing he had before: *I’m going to drown.*

The water seeped into his lungs during his squirming. Pressure mounted in his chest. There wasn’t enough time to cough. Panic made his heartbeat thud inside his head. His head smacked into the toilet bowl with each thrash.

The worst difference surfaced as he forced his limbs to stop fighting. Last time, Jack knew he would reach eternal salvation if he died the humiliating death of a toilet warrior. This time, as Jack willed his body to give up, he wondered, *Do half-bloods even have souls?*

The fingers clenching his hair pulled his head back, stretching his body in a strained arch.

He sputtered and coughed out the water.

Clarisse La Rue’s sneer loomed in his peripheral. “Had enough of a swim?”

At least there was a toilet directly in front of him, so no one would have to clean up the content of his lungs and stomach. That would be rude to any godly janitorial staff. He hacked, unable to talk for a moment.

Clarisse released him.

Jack barely missed cracking his head against the toilet bowl. Blurrily, he searched around, trying to prop himself up on the cool, slick floor.

The laughter echoed around the room. The massive girl stood.

“Why?” Jack finally choked out.

“To show you the pecking order,” Clarisse said. She and her friends got up and left the bathroom stalls.

Jack trembled. The first time he tried to get up, his legs felt like jelly. Finally, he got to his feet and stumbled to the sinks. He turned one on and dunked his head under, reminding himself that he was in control of the water rinsing him off.

The monsters on the *Princess Andromeda* had been way nicer on his first day. They at least ignored him or said he smelled good.

Someone shook Jack’s shoulder.

He flinched.

“Hey, we’re not really supposed to be in the girl’s bathroom.”

Jack tried to look through the water at his escort: a thirteen-year-old child of Apollo named Ryan. He had tan skin and an athletic build. Once he got Jack’s attention, he crossed his arms and raised his eyebrows.

After a few more moments of feeling the water against the back of his head and his neck, Jack shut the sink off. He let his dripping bangs plaster onto his face and soak his flannel shirt. The top was already drenched. As it turned out, toilet water: not refreshing.
“Why didn’t you help?” Jack asked. To still be there, Ryan must have stood by the entrance the whole time, watching.

Ryan’s expression was skeptical. Like everyone else who had commented on how old Jack was, Ryan seemed disappointed by what he saw. “You think I can put a dent in a child of Ares?”

Jack shrugged. “You could have run to get help.”

“No one is going to help against Clarisse.”

*No wonder Luke hates Ares and his children.*

Although the room felt warm with the climate control, Jack hugged himself. It took every ounce of control not to tug at his hair and to, instead, dig his fingers deep into his ribs. He promised himself he wouldn’t mess this mission up and that meant acting as normal as possible.

Mission? Quest? Had Kronos called it a quest?

This was the exact time Jack should be asking Ryan questions. Phil and Luke both said Jack was perfect for this type of quest, because he was so unassuming and genuinely curious when asking questions. *Charming and harmless,* as Ms. Blackwell had teased him.

“Doesn’t that bother you?” Jack asked. “Were you dunked?”

Jack tried to imagine coming in here as a young kid, before he met Flynn and knew Greek monsters were real. He would have thought this was whole place was a cruel prank or a bad dream.

“All new people get dunked,” Ryan said. He looked impatient. “You get over it.”

Jack felt like his tongue was four times too large. That didn’t seem right, but he doubted saying so would get him any points with Ryan.

*Only twenty-four hours, Jack reminded himself. Twenty-four hours before Luke, Lucille, Lou Ellen, and I need to get out. You can be normal for twenty-four hours.*

He hoped.

Summer solstice was a day away. From what Luke got out of a quick Iris Message and a dream vision with Kronos, some kid named Percy Jackson *should* be starting some massive war with the gods. Percy *should have been* be dragged into Tartarus with something called the Master Bolt. Then, this camp wouldn’t be safe. It would crumble into a battlefield between the gods.

“*Just remember when Clarisse dunks you she’ll be killed in the crossfire. I’ll make sure of it,*” Luke had said.

Jack didn’t want Clarisse and her friends to be killed in the crossfire. He just wanted her to be less mean. Seeing her in person, the former seemed much more likely.

Ryan sighed. “Come on. Let’s see if you you’re as bad at horseback riding as you are with archery.”

Jack shuffled forward. He guessed Ryan didn’t intend to sound so critical, but no one at camp could believe Jack had survived on his own for so long, being a son of Apollo. Although Phil immediately stated that Jack had been claimed—he hadn’t, whatever ‘claiming’ meant—whispers went around that maybe he was supposed to be in the Aphrodite cabin instead.
“At least he’s good for the girls to look at. Don’t think he’ll do much in the coming war,” he had heard Lee Fletcher, his cabin counselor, muttering when Jack accidentally elbowed Chiron in the chest during their archery lesson.

Jack knew he wouldn’t have survived on his own, but Luke had him under strict orders not to mention Flynn or Luke or anything about Kronos. As for that day, they didn’t know each other, which was a real shame. Jack wanted Luke to show him Thalia’s pine tree.

The rest of the training was similar. Fortunately, his cabin mates—isa that what they were called?—and Chiron were too distracted by the fights that kept breaking out between the children of Athena and Jack’s siblings. Something about Poseidon being in the right to take a stand against Zeus? Jack had only recently learned the gods and titans were real. He couldn’t keep the internal bickering straight.

Most people were too distracted and tense to pay Jack much attention for the rest of training, which was a problem. That meant he couldn’t complete his mission either. He hoped Lucille was having more luck in the Aphrodite Cabin and Lou Ellen in the… where had Luke said she’d go?

Luke’s words haunted him. “Either we turn them or we consider them sword fodder. Anyone on the Olympic side will need to die, so you’re doing them a favor if you can show them how corrupt the Olympians are.”

Flynn, Jack’s girlfriend, understood immediately. That’s why Luke had sent her on a mission to a place called New Rome. Luke said that would be too difficult for Jack to tag along.

This quest was a test for Jack, Lucille, and Lou Ellen: a way to prove they were worthy of Kronos’ next world.

Like introducing people to Jesus, Jack mused. He remembered walking through the sterile halls of Botin’s Hill Hospital, how the sick welcomed him inside to hear him sing church songs. Pity he didn’t know any about our savor, Kronos.

Jack frowned. Luke and Phil kept saying he could heal people with his song. But the sick people didn’t always get better when he sang. Sometimes…

“Jake, right?”

Jack flinched. The Apollo cabin was setting up for the campfire. He’d zoned out, watching as the Hephaestus campers stoked the flames. Everyone else referred to the cabins by numbers, but Jack couldn’t keep those numbers straight, so he tried to catalogue everyone by the few gods he did know.

A friendly, blond nineteen-year-old stood beside him. The familiar scar made Jack grin, despite his feelings of being a failure. He shouldn’t want to talk to Luke. That would mean reporting that he’d had no luck converting any of his siblings, or even seeing if they could be converted down the road. The children of Apollo seemed to love their—his—dad wholeheartedly, though Jack hadn’t gotten any specific person’s story yet.


Jack knew that Luke had to pretend they’d never met before, but the convincing, detached quality of Luke’s voice was demoralizing, especially with how he got his name wrong.

Jack managed to nod at him. He hadn’t realized that, when he sat down on the log, he’d pulled his knees up and was rocking.
Almost frantic, Jack straightened out his legs and stopped rocking. Normal for one day. He repeated to himself. Then, he could tell Flynn that he’d done a quest, right? He could show Luke that he’d be worthwhile in his army. Besides, the campfire was all about singing. This is where Jack could shine.

Jack gave Luke a much more confident smile.

“Just keep it together, buddy,” Luke said, his grip on Jack’s shoulder becoming uncomfortable. “I’m sure the rest of your night will be a success—”

Another camper, an Athena boy, raised his voice in middle of a discussion, drowning out Luke. “—maybe because someone needs to keep order in this camp—”

“Oh, can it! You’re still pissed at Poseidon for a rivalry that *you* won. Get over it! There’s no reason you’d be on Zeus’ side otherwise!” one of Jack’s siblings shouted at the Athena camper.

More shouts broke out. The campfire flickered uncomfortable, dark red. The flames looked too low on the wood to still be lit.

Jack felt like something was about to go wrong, something important.

One of the Ares campers shoved the Athena kid—Malcolm? He stumbled, barely dodging around the fire. He slammed into another camper to keep his balance. And—

The movement was too fast for Jack to dodge, not that he would have thought to.

One of Jack’s siblings toppled backwards.

Pain flared in Jack’s throat, as the kid’s—Will’s?—elbow smashed into Jack’s windpipe. Will hadn’t meant to, he’d been trying to pinwheel to keep his balance—

Jack flopped backwards, clutching at his neck. He coughed. Each breath rasped painfully.

Hands gripped Jack’s shoulders. They dug into his skin, dragging him away from the campfire. Another member of his cabin went to pummel Malcolm, even though the incident hadn’t been Malcolm’s fault.

The yells were jumbled. The bodies crashed into a scuffle—they looked more like a random mob of strangers than cousins and siblings. All Jack could think was, *My throat—Dear God—can I still sing?! What if they crushed it? What if they crushed my windpipe?*

A more logical part of him said that his windpipe would be fine. He needed a few minutes to recover. That would be it, right? *What am I without a voice? That’s my only useful trait. Would Flynn want me anymore?*

He wheezed.

Whoever was dragging him pulled him up onto his feet.

The pain lessened, but the panic made Jack clutch at his neck. He tried to talk. His voice came out a squeaky rasp.

He expected Luke to be his savior, to be chastising him for over-dramatics.

The person beside him was a foot too short.
“Come on. We have throat lozenges in the cabin,” Ryan said. He released Jack and started walking back towards the housing.

Jack pointed frantically back to where the campfire had become a battle zone. The Ares and Apollo campers teamed up against Athena. A centaur already stood in the fray, pulling teenagers off each other.

“Chiron will take care of it,” Ryan said, “We plenty outnumber Cabin Six and you’ll be in the way if you stay.” This time, the irritation in Ryan’s voice was unmistakable. “You’re really not cut out for this, are you? You had plenty of time to move.”

Jack trembled. He reminded himself that Ryan, like other kids that had mocked him, was a child of God’s and that all God’s children were…

Something flipped in Jack’s head. They weren’t equal, were they? And God—the gods—didn’t love them equally. Luke said that Percy Jackson—the son of Poseidon that Luke had framed for the thievery of the Master Bolt—that kid could control water. Thalia had been able to shoot lightning. These gods, the Greek gods, didn’t treat them as equal, else Thalia wouldn’t be a pine tree.

By the time Jack got enough of his voice back to talk, they approached the golden exterior of Apollo’s empty cabin. “You seem like such a natural,” Jack said. His voice was raspy, but functional.

A tightness squeezed Jack’s stomach when he examined his little half-brother. Throughout all the training that day, Ryan had excelled.

Ryan sighed. Tension released from his shoulders as he opened the cabin door. He paused. After a moment, Ryan held the door open for Jack. “My mom told me I was a half-blood when I was very little. She knew Apollo was a god, so she set me up with archery lessons as soon as I could pull back a bow. She was a pediatrician and let me play with all of her college text books.” He shrugged. “The other campers think I’ll surpass Chiron with a bow one day, and I’m already a better healer than Will, but I had a head start.”

This is was it! What Jack was supposed to be doing all day! Getting his new cabin mates to open up: about themselves, their feelings about being demigods, their opinions of their parents. For some reason, Jack didn’t feel better about the success. The tightness in his stomach squeezed until he felt his breath going short again. He wanted Ryan to shut up.

“You knew the monsters were real,” Jack said. He hadn’t realized that would be an option. He stepped inside.

“Well, yea, we all did,” Ryan said like it was obvious. The cabin door shut behind them. No one else was around. Ryan walked past the corner stacked with instruments to the medicine cabinet. He withdrew the lozenges and handed them to Jack.

Jack frowned, examining the packaging: ambrosia coated. Even with simple things like pain killers, he always checked ingredients in case they conflicted with his medication. Jack popped one in his mouth and bit down hard.

Everyone knew that you were supposed to suck on lozenges; but, Jack wanted a sharp sensation in his mouth. Cinnamon spiked his taste buds.

Ryan gave Jack a wary look. “Listen, Jack, maybe you’d be better off at home with your
“It’s not that we don’t want you here, I just don’t know if this is the safest place for you with this war brewing. Tomorrow, Summer Solstice, this camp might be about to explode, and you’re not really trained for combat yet…”

Ryan looked genuinely concerned. “We can loan you a weapon from the armory. Since you’ve made it so long without any help, I doubt your aura is that strong or ever will be strong enough to attract monsters. It’s not that we don’t want you here—or that Dad doesn’t want you here. I mean, he claimed you. That’s a big deal. It means he loves you and all, but—”

Jack bit down harder on the lozenge, wanting to crush it. He hadn’t been claimed.

“How soon were you claimed?” Jack interrupted. The twisting in his stomach kept getting tighter. He felt like he was on the cusp of something important and that something would make all the tension disappear. It had to do with what Ryan was saying, but he wanted the kid to stop talking.

“As soon as I stepped foot into camp,” Ryan said. He rocked onto his tiptoes, like he was getting impatient to go back outside. His gaze shifted back to the door as though the eye motion could shove Jack back out.

Jack hugged himself. “Apollo… Dad. You speak really highly of him.”

Ryan glanced at the door again, then back at Jack. He sighed, rolling back onto his heels. “Yea… I—I owe Dad. He’s kinda awesome.”

These campers seemed to know so much more about him. How could you say that a Dad you’ve never met was awesome? Had Ryan met him?

At Jack’s silence, Ryan got a sad smile on his face. “I guess I can tell you about it. My mom never fell in love after him. She said it was impossible after she had a full summer with him—”

A one night stand. A one night mistake, Jack remembered his mother assuring Steve about his conception, when Steven got nervous about the guy before him. They thought Jack hadn’t come downstairs for a nighttime snack. His Mom had never held that one night stand against Jack, had she?

—so I was raised with my cousins like they were my siblings. My older cousin, Cindy, she was diagnosed with leukemia. Mom and I prayed to Apollo every night and I sang to her every night for a week. She… she got better. Way faster than medicine by itself should have allowed—”

The package slipped from Jack’s fingers.

The individually wrapped lozenges scattered across the cabin floor.

“Wow—you okay, dude? You look like you’re about to be sick,” Ryan said. The smile vanished from his face. He knelt down, plucking some lozenges from the ground.

Jack should have apologized. He should have knelt down to help. Normal for one day, echoed in his mind. The thought couldn’t penetrate his other ones. It couldn’t stop his hands from clutching at his hair.

What would it have been like? To grow up with a family that knew what was happening to him, to know he wasn’t crazy. Not to be medicated. Or outcast. No “you’re just confused, sweetie.” No, “All children are equal in the eyes of God.”
In that instance, Jack realized something. People treated life like it was a living thing that chose to be fair or unfair. It wasn’t. It just existed. People were made unequal. They would be treated unequal. These gods, their gods, played favorites.

“Ryan…” Jack whispered, trying not to hyperventilate. “You saved your cousin with your singing. Could you kill someone with your singing?”

His vision had tunneled. All Jack could see was the smaller boy, crouched under the instrument table, gathering a lozenge from a guitar. There were spare strings on the table. When Ryan put his hand on the table for balance, he knocked them to the side.

Then, Jack couldn’t see Ryan.

Shelby was the worst. Her body was sprawled in the middle of the hallway, on top of Charger, their German Sheppard. The other bodies—those Jack could easily pretend weren’t real. But, Shelby, had face-planted in a pool of her own vomit. The bile plastered her black hair around the wooden floor like a drowned victim’s hair splayed into a water halo… She was impossible to ignore. Jack had to carefully edge his way around her and Charger’s bodies, hoping the real one would show up and tell him to stop being silly, and terrified the real one would show up since they might increase his medication.

The day after they found his family, Jack had been too scared to tell Luke and Flynn why he thought their deaths were his fault.

He had been singing in the shower. He was thinking about how angry he was at his family while he sang. Then, they were dead, just like some of the patients at the hospital died as soon as he finished singing to them.

Why could Ryan save people, his loved ones, with his voice, when Jack could kill?

The pressure in Jack’s stomach made him feel like he’d throw up. That tension was wound so tightly, Jack knew it would snap. It was about to snap. He couldn’t stop—

“I guess, in theory,” Ryan said, beginning to rise from under the table, “I’ve never heard of someone—”

There was a loud thwack.

Jack didn’t know he’d cracked Ryan’s skull into the table. Not until the second time he did it. Ryan’s hair felt silky under his fingers. The head under his hand resisted the first time. Not so much the second.

Jack’s heartbeat thudded in his head, deafening. He didn’t hear the noises Ryan made. He didn’t feel Ryan’s head slip from his hands or how Ryan kicked backwards—how Jack’s leg gave out under the kick so Jack was level with the instrument table.

He saw Ryan’s mouth move, to sing to heal or call for help. Some autopilot took over, shut him up. Shut. Him. Up. We’ll make the two of us equal. We’ll play favorites the way that gods do.

A dull ache nagged at Jack’s knee, where he’d collapsed behind his little half-brother. He fumbled for something in the room to gag Ryan. His fingers snatched up something thin, metal, and pliable.

Jack didn’t remember shoving Ryan back to the floor; he must have. The intention was to wrap the guitar cord between Ryan’s teeth. Just to soften Ryan’s screams.
Then the metal cord pinched the skin around Ryan’s neck. The small kid bucked and thrashed. Ryan’s nails dug at metal. Those fingers fumbled backwards, swatting at Jack.

None of his attempts reached Jack. Jack’s knee now pressed into the small of Ryan’s back. The guitar cord was long enough that Jack could pull it taught at such a distance that Ryan couldn’t touch him.

The way Ryan squirmed, Jack’s own screams, the pain in his bruised knee as Jack simultaneously kneed the back of Ryan’s spine while jerking Ryan’s neck backwards: it felt distant, muffled.

Until someone covered Jack’s mouth.

“Be quiet!”

The words brought Jack back into reality. So did the hands that dragged him backwards.

“Holy Hera!” another familiar voice said.

There was a clop of hooves on the wooden floor.

Until that someone removed the hands from his mouth, Jack didn’t realize what he’d been screaming over and over.

**Why does Dad love you more?**

Ryan wasn’t moving.

Dad couldn’t love him now.

Jack trembled. He stared at his hands. Cuts lined his palms, where he had wrapped the guitar string to anchor them. Bruising would follow. His breath tightened. That tension inside him had snapped. He didn’t have any energy left. No anger. Just a sense of queer calm.

That same autopilot took control. Guilt nagged at his consciousness the same way pain nagged at his knee.

“No,” Jack said, “No—no. I—I’m sorry. I’m so sorry—”


Jack clutched at his hair. The strands felt slick with sweat. A sob caught his throat. What was happening to him? Had he just—

“Watch it, Luke.” Someone stepped around the two of them. Phil’s furry legs blocked off Jack’s view of Ryan’s body. “Flynn isn’t going to like it if she hears you’ve been smacking around her Jackie-boy. Now, let’s see. It’s been a long time since I needed to sneak a corpse out of a cabin. You sure like to keep me young and spry, don’t you, Jak-Jak?”

Phil’s comment was light.

No answer would come from Jack’s lips, at least, not beyond a whine.

Phil turned towards Jack and knelt down. Those dark eyes glittered with something that made Jack nauseous: compassion. He put a hand on Jack’s shoulder. “Kid, I need you with us. We gotta move fast. Which blanket won’t be missed if we wrap Ryan in it?”
My betatest was very angry at me for the deficit of hugs and happiness for Jak-Jak. Don’t worry. Part II is more lighthearted. Okay, PHiL says it’s more lighthearted, though that guy could probably say that at a wax clown museum.

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed! Stay tuned next week for the last part of this short! I hope everyone had an awesome Halloween! :D

Footnote:

[1] I’m going to write this one day.
Phil told them to whistle while they worked.

Jack had never been so scared to whistle. Knowing his luck, Apollo would want to wreak vengeance on Jack for killing Apollo’s favorite son. If Jack so much as meeped, all the squirrels in the forest would probably be stricken with sickness and rain from the trees.

While clutching Ryan’s sheet-wrapped ankles, stumbling through the near-darkness of the forest, seeing the ghostly gold glow of Luke’s blond hair as Luke gripped Ryan’s wrists ahead, Jack had to wonder if Flynn was having as much luck on her first mission.

Go to recruit someone?
Kill someone instead.

Phil seemed to think they were equivalent.

“It was a good preemptive shot. This guy would have never turned to Kronos’ side, so you deprived the Greeks of a great healer.” Phil trotted beside them. “And you did it when everyone was shouting at the campfire, so no one could hear. Had Luke and I not been coming over to check up on you, we’d have never known. You’ve got some natural talent here, kid.” He gave Jack’s cheek an affectionate nudge before returning to Ryan’s bag of belongings.

The satyr had already pocketed Ryan’s ID, spare cash, and spare drachma. When Luke demanded why they needed to spend the time to gather all of Ryan’s things, Phil said, “People are less likely to see what’s no longer there.”

Pain ached through Jack’s hands, back, and bruised knee. He wanted to ask Luke if the older boy was alright, but Luke had been terrifyingly quiet during the whole walk. Once, Luke mentioned he could sometimes hear Kronos’ voice when he wasn’t sleeping. Jack feared Kronos and Luke were talking at that very moment, discussing how to get rid of a troublesome new recruit.


By “reigns,” Luke meant “dead dude’s hands.”


There was giggling, some hushed conversation, then a sudden rustling of foliage and more giggling. If Jack had to guess, Luke was playing a game of chase with the dryad, luring her away from their destination.

Confusion crept over Jack’s mind about Luke and Juniper’s interaction and he wanted to ask Phil about it. He was scared this was his typical misunderstanding of the world: where he heard things that didn’t happen or made facts real that weren’t. But, Flynn, Luke, and Phil said
everything he heard was real. After all, the monsters were real.

And anything would be better than focusing on the upturned, inch-long curve along the sheets that must have been Ryan’s wrapped nose. One edge of the sheet had untucked and swayed ominously with each uncoordinated step. Jack was terrified a gust of wind would rip it open, revealing Ryan’s stare. Worse: it would be the same stare that his parents had when he found their bodies.

“I thought Luke was dating Ms. Beauregard?” Jack said softly.

Phil snorted. “If Luke were a god, he’d keep a scoreboard against Zeus. That’s why I’m hoping we can get that Thalia girlie back soon. She’ll set him straight.”

Jack tore his gaze from Ryan’s covered face and to the back of Phil’s head. At camp, the satyr didn’t wear any clothing, so this scene could have been taken out of a Greek play. “So, Thalia is like Luke’s Flynn,” Jack rationalized. “What was Thalia like?”

Phil shrugged, making Ryan’s body tilt. “Don’t know. Luke won’t talk to me much about her.”

That was weird. All Jack wanted to do was talk and sing and gawk over how awesome Flynn was. But, would Jack think that way if she’d been turned into a tree? She’d almost died once protecting him. What if she actually had?

His shivers increased, making Jack almost lose his hold on Ryan’s ankles. He wanted to ask how much further this “Labyrinth” entrance was. His parents always taught him it was rude to ask such questions.

The more he was learning, the less he ought to care what his parents had to say.

“Hey, uh, don’t mind Luke, with him swatting you and all,” Phil said. At first, Jack didn’t know what Phil was talking about. Then he remembered the slight ache at the back of his skull, where Luke had smacked Jack for screaming. It wasn’t the first time someone had smacked Jack for being confused—not for being confused. Jack wasn’t confused. He had to keep reminding himself.

“Luke’s under a lot of pressure. He’s still mad about losing the Master Bolt to Ares—he’s looking at it as his second failed quest. Then, this Poseidon punk comes in, fulfilling his little sister’s dream of going on a quest and taking his satyr along on that quest—” Jack vaguely remembered Luke mentioning that his friends, Annabeth and Grover, weren’t around. “—and proves to be as powerful a pain in the ass as everyone thought he would be. He resisted Kronos’ pull into Tartarus…”

Phil sighed. He let go of one of Ryan’s wrists, letting it dangle limply along the ground, so Phil could make a flippant gesture. “Rumors are betting that Percy can survive having Ares come after him. If he does, that means Luke needs to either recruit or kill Percy. And, I mean, the kid’s under a lot of pressure. I don’t think that Luke’s killed someone in cold blood before. He’s not ready to start.”

In cold blood. Is that what Jack had done to Ryan? Or was that a murder of passion? He couldn’t remember if there was a difference.

Phil must have noticed Jack’s lack of answer. He waved his free hand dismissively again. It looked like the first motions of a musical number with Phil’s fingers reaching towards the sky and
Ryan’s fingers trailing the tree trunks and ferns. “Listen to this old goat chatter. How’re you and Flynn doing? I heard you two lovebirds managed to score a room together.”

The tease in Phil’s tone made Jack blush up at the sky. He let the gentle tug of Ryan’s ankles direct his shambles, hoping he wouldn’t misstep and trip onto the body. Goofiness made his insides flutter away from their current activity and back to that morning, allowing him the tiniest bit of disassociated respite. Although they had been aboard the Princess Andromeda for awhile, sharing a room with Flynn made him giddy, especially waking and looking across their cabin to see her curled up on her cot or doing morning stretches.

“I don’t think boys and girls are supposed to share a room, but Flynn is really good at working around the rules,” Jack said. It took her all of ten seconds to convince Luke about the arrangement.


“Really?” Jack asked. He assumed Luke thought he was a nuisance, especially when he screwed up like he had today.

Phil laughed. Jack couldn’t help but feel like he’d missed out on a joke. “Oh, kid. You’re funny. I’ll bet its nice sharing a room with a daughter of Aphrodite. Makes it easier not having to sneak around your local pastor or teacher, huh?”

Jack glanced down to see Phil quarter turn and wink at him.

Then, the satyr walked into a branch.

Phil cursed in ancient Greek. Jack only caught every few words. The other demigods said he’d catch on quicker to the language the more he heard it.

Heat spread through Jack’s cheeks. He’d accidentally—or, he at least thought it was accidentally on Flynn’s part—walked into the room when she’d been changing. He always knocked and announced himself, but she must not have heard him. Now, he knew she either wore boy shorts or thongs, depending on the pair of pants, and a double layer of sport bras to keep her chest contained for fighting.

He had seen her bras once before, the day she saved him from a monster at school. She almost died by goring. At the time, he’d been too focused on keeping her alive to be flustered over how her tan skin looked against the dark grey fabric.

But, he wasn’t about to say any of that to Phil.

“Oh—we don’t—we haven’t—” Jack sputtered. “She only is—um—with guys that she can command—” What had Phil called it? “—that she can charm speak.”

Phil stopped walking beside a giant pile of rocks. They seemed to creep up out of the forest. The moonlight had easier access to them now, making Ryan’s bed sheet glow. “Not that you would know, but she never charm speaks you?”

Jack’s arms shook. Until they stopped moving, he hadn’t noticed how heavy the corpse was. Maybe that was Ryan’s vengeance: getting heavier with each step, the subtlest of haunting. He tried to focus on the image of Flynn’s face instead of Ryan’s white sheet.

“She knows she doesn’t have to.” Even if Jack sometimes wished she would. “I would do anything she wants. I would die for her. For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings, that
then I scorn to change my state with kings.’”[2]

The first time Jack had quoted that to her, she’d socked him good in the arm. Last time, she had snuggled against that arm. Jack swooned to think about the warmth of her against him.

Although it would be much easier with how stationary they were, Phil didn’t look at him. “Would you kill for her? Like this? All over again?”

Jack’s trembling became violent, jittering Ryan around like a game of Hungry Hungry Hippos. No matter how hard he focused, he couldn’t remember the feel of Ryan’s squirms, or the way his struggles had eased. Why was that memory so blurred? Wasn’t it supposed to scar itself into his mind forever? “Yes,” Jack said, “But I’m not very good at it.”

Maybe he shouldn’t be good at it. Though, was it bad if he was? If there was one thing he had learned from his pastor, it was that everyone had a purpose. Maybe they did in the Greek world. What if his purpose here, the thing he was good at, was—

“I think you’re a real natural. It’s a pity you can’t drag her uncle out of Tartarus. I’d love to see how you’d kill him,” Phil said.

“What?” Jack asked. Had he heard Phil wrong? Flynn had never told Jack about anyone other than her grandmother, and a quick explanation that her father died when she was a toddler. Drug overdose. Why she kept Mr. Sunny, his weekly medicine box, instead of letting Jack carry it around.

Instead of answering, Phil said, “Help an old goat toss a body, would ya?”

Phil made a big show of groaning and swearing as he gestured to a crack between the rocks.

The slit would have been invisible if Phil hadn’t pointed it out. The slit of darkness was so narrow, Jack doubted Ryan would fit inside.

“So, we just shove him back there?” Jack asked.

“Yep. A monster will creep through this part of the Labyrinth and get a free snack. Think of it like… you’re giving some lucky fellow a winning lottery ticket or feeding the homeless,” Phil said.

They propped Ryan’s body against the rock façade, so Phil and Jack could awkwardly shove him through the opening. It would have been easier for someone living to crawl through, especially since Ryan’s body was stiffening and jerked occasionally. Jack told himself it was just his imagination. He was used to ignoring weird details like that, like the absolute sense of calm he kept getting from seeing a dead sibling.

They shoved Ryan’s upper torso through with little problem. The legs were more difficult, requiring Phil to swear and jam and twist them.

There was a sickening crack from one leg and something gave.

Jack tried not to scream.

None of it bothered Phil.[3] He kept pushing. Jack’s last sensation of Ryan was the leather of Ryan’s shoe. Then his dead half-sibling disappeared into the blackness of the crack. And that was it.
Phil had been right. The Labyrinth—whatever it was—seemed to eat him immediately.

With that finality, exhaustion overtook Jack. He collapsed onto the ground outside the entrance, expecting Ryan’s corpse to squirm back through, clawing out of his white sheet.

Nothing.

There was something chilly in his hands that burned against his blisters.

Jack held it up, finding the guitar string still wrapped around one palm. He must have trailed it all the way from the cabin, parallel to how Phil had let Ryan’s hand drag.

Phil frowned down at him, leaning against the rock wall. “You should keep it, as a memento or whatever sentimental shit mortals do.”

Jack swallowed. Slowly, he tied the cord around his wrist like a bracelet. It bit into his skin. He tried not to think of how that would feel around the neck.

Phil sighed. “Listen, kid. Ryan really did need to die regardless. But, you can’t go around killing all your problems. That’s some old-school hero mentality and it isn’t 2,000 BC anymore. Next time you get upset, take a few breathes and come talk to Uncle Phil.” He pointed a thumb to himself. “We’ll discuss if you can or can’t kill the person. And then…” He pointed that thumb towards the Labyrinth entrance. “Uncle Phil can help you with the body and throw a party afterwards.”

Jack nodded. He remembered his mother fussing over his association with Flynn, saying she was a bad influence. She would have called the SWAT team on Phil.

Someone burst out of the woods, making Jack jump and Phil let out a quick shriek.

“Holy Hera, kid, learn to announce yourself! It’s not like we were just petting puppies over here!” Phil snapped, clutching at his chest.

Luke was mid-pulling his shirt back over his head. He combed his fingers through his hair, which looked silvery in the moonlight. Twigs and leaves fell out of the blond and joined the bits on his shirt and pants. He looked much more relaxed than the panic he’d left with. “Everything taken care of?” he asked.

Jack stumbled to his feet and tried to answer. But, “yes” couldn’t be the answer, could it? He’d just killed someone. That wasn’t just “taken care of,” was it?

Phil stood up straight and patted Jack’s back. He slung an arm over Jack’s shoulder, dragging him forward so he could sling his other arm around Luke. The satyr was much shorter than the two boys. “I was just telling Jack that he needs to take the initiative if his girlie is dropping him all these hints. Wouldn’t you agree, Luke?”

Luke’s blue eyes darted from the Labyrinth entrance back to Jack. Jack wished Phil were a bit taller, so he couldn’t see Luke’s critical stare. When Phil tried to corral them forward, Luke wouldn’t budge.

Phil sighed. “And, I’m thinking we need a little celebration. Jack took out Camp Half-Blood’s up-and-coming healer that would have never converted. Beers are on me, kids.”

That broke Jack’s attention. He felt the color drained out of his face. “I’m too young to drink.” And his medicine wasn’t suppose to mix with alcohol.
Almost to himself, Phil muttered, “Kid who committed murder doesn’t want to break the law. He’s too young, he says.” He stared up at Jack, skeptically. “You know, your ancestors were drinking before they came out of their mother’s skirts.”

“Didn’t you just say I shouldn’t be acting like them?” Jack asked, unsure what Phil wanted from him.

Although Luke tried to hide it, he cracked a smile at Phil’s exacerbation.


Luke took a step forward with Phil. “Juniper has no idea you guys were here.”

The way Luke talked about the dryad unsettled Jack. Yea, Flynn had been with other guys when Jack was crushing on her and writing her songs. He wouldn’t be surprised if she’d go off with other guys now that they were dating, but Flynn wouldn’t hide it from him. Jack had to wonder if Ms. Juniper and Ms. Beauregard knew about each other.

Phil led them away from camp, further into the woods. “I know a great bar we can go to. We’ll get the centaurs to take us. We’ll be done in a flash, that way, Luke, you can be back and acting all menacing or whatever. Ha! It’s not like you’re going to be sleeping—”


“—and I’ll take Jak-Jak back to camp, and he can take our advice on his girlie. What do you think, Luke? Should he take the initiative or no?”

Luke took another glance behind them, where the rock pile had disappeared in the trees. He frowned. For a moment, Jack thought Luke might turn to him with the same disgusted disappointment Steve, his step-father, had when Steve had to pick up Jack from school. Those were the days when Jack had “an incident” as Steve called them, when Jack’s paranoia and confusion left him sobbing in a corner.

Instead, the consternation in Luke’s expression faded. He brushed some dirt off his pants. “She’s really into you. I’d say to go for it.”

Just like that, they were talking about girls instead of bodies. Being a half-blood was weird.

“See, Jak-Jak—oh! Hold on!” Phil dramatically tilted his ear to listen. He lifted his hands off their shoulders in a flourish. “I have important satyr things I must attend to, else old Mr. Douche Bag might get suspicious. But, uh, you kids go have some fun on your own.”

He fished the money he’d stolen from Ryan and shoved it into Luke’s hands. Jack hadn’t realized that Phil intended to celebrate Ryan’s murder with Ryan’s own money. Jack couldn’t decide if that was efficient, horrifying, or both. “The centaurs can still take you and I can swing by to pick up Jack in two hours. Now, kids, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

A sentiment that, from Phil, must have meant nothing.

He waggled a finger at them.

With that, he dashed off into the trees.
They walked in silence for the first fifteen paces.

Jack didn’t realize he’d been slowly tightening the guitar string around his wrist. The metal didn’t want to stay taught.

This felt like the times his parents had shoved Jack onto Shelby or Aston, his two little siblings. They would whine, not wanting to babysit their older brother. One time, when Shelby wanted to talk to one of her friends instead, she told Jack they were going to play hide and seek, then locked him in a closet. “To protect you from the monsters.”

“Look… dude,” Luke said, breaking the silence. “I meant to check up on you and Flynn sooner. It’s been busy. And I can’t decide if I want this Percy kid to survive or not, and he keeps doing stuff we didn’t predict. It’s just been complicated, you know?”

An hour ago, Jack wouldn’t have. Now, he thought about what Phil said, about Luke’s best friends favoring Percy, about Kronos punishing Luke for stuff he couldn’t control, and about how naturally talented Percy was rumored to be. Jack loosened the guitar string, examining the way it left deep, dark indents in his pale flesh.

“It’s really hard when someone else has better luck than you. Especially here. ‘Luck’ must really be a product of some divine intervention, right?” Jack muttered. It means some god loves the luckiest the most. “I guess we gotta make our own luck, huh?”

Luke glanced at him, his blue eyes widened in surprise. “Yea. Yea, we do. Um… look, it’s just… With your medication, your smile—you remind me of my—of someone I knew. Especially how you went from being a good kid to—to what happened back there.”

Jack wasn’t sure what Luke meant by the first part, but he knew what he was supposed to say. Queasiness clenched him. “I—I’m sorry. I’ve never done something like that before. I don’t want to—”

The older boy awkwardly patted his shoulder. “No, dude, it’s cool.”

I’m not going to abandon you like the gods would. I’m not going to let them do to you what they did to her.” Ferocity glinted in Luke’s gaze. Desperation crept into his voice. “Phil said you’re not actually crazy. This is reversible. That outburst—it was probably because you’re weaning off your medication, right?”

As far as Jack knew, Flynn was giving him the same amount of medication that he’d been taking previously. There was no way to know if it was still working as well. He still heard voices, saw monsters, and felt an urgent wrongness that left him trembling with no known source. But, he was on a boat for monsters. His family was dead. He’d just found out that everything he knew—that he was crazy, that God loved him in a special way, that violence of any kind was abhorrent and should be punished—was wrong. Maybe that should have been in the demigod orientation program.

Jack didn’t want to talk about it. “Is there a way to turn that Thalia girl back from being a tree?” he blurted. He hoped Luke wouldn’t push it. Whomever he’d been referencing must have been personal to Luke, but Jack wanted an easy conversation. Too much had happened in the last few hours and Jack still wasn’t comfortable with how calm he felt.

Luke smiled mischievously, looking more like his siblings in the Hermes cabin. “I have a plan.”
The air seemed to sizzle hotter, making Jack aware of how much he’d been sweating. They must have crossed the border for Camp Half-Blood. Everything felt like it hopped up by ten degrees. The foliage looked more parched, probably from the erratic weather they’d been having all summer.

Jack jumped as an idea jolted him out of his gloom, far easier than he felt like it should have. “We—we should set up a celebration for it! Thalia seems really important to you—and I’ll bet the monsters and demigods would like something like that. It’s the one thing the Princess Andromeda is missing: a relaxing, fun thing that brings everyone together, something that isn’t competitive that would encourage the monsters and demigods to interact more, like a dance or a concert!”

With how horrible everything had been, Jack hadn’t been getting many exciting ideas. He hadn’t meant to prattle on. He bit his lip, expecting Luke to tell him that was stupid or impractical.

The tiniest part of him had some hope. How nice would it be if Jack got to make up for missing prom by dancing with Flynn at a celebration? Especially if Luke got to invite Thalia and she—what had Phil said?—set Luke straight.


The two stopped walking at a yellow diamond traffic sign posted in the middle of the woods. A centaur was depicted in a black outline, holding one thumb up like a hitchhiker. Jack found himself wondering if there was a centaur transportation system around the whole world that he’d never noticed before.

“You know, if you come up with more ideas like that, I might set you up as the coordinator for morale boosting and demigod-monster relations,” Luke said, jamming his hands into his pockets and kicking at the dirt. “Some of the new recruits have been complaining that the appeal of a cruise ship fades fast when you’ve got monster slime in all the pools. Kinda hard to swim in.”

Jack grinned, bashful. Most people didn’t like his ideas. Even Flynn glared him when he brought up forming a band or making a reality TV show. “I—I would like that. The morale boosting, not the slime pools. I’m not great at fighting.”

“No with a sword,” Luke agreed, eyeing the guitar string unraveling from Jack’s wrist. *Base strings*, Jack realized. *It’s too thick to be guitar string.*

Jack clenched his fists, feeling the sting of his cut palms. He didn’t want to think about what happened or ruin this uncanny tranquility inside of him. “Can you tell me all about Thalia?”

Phil had said that Luke didn’t talk about Thalia much, so the chances were low. Jack still had to try.

Luke shuffled his foot one more time. He exhaled. “Uh… yea, man. We can talk about her.”

The centaurs arrived soon after Luke started describing her. The more Luke talked about Thalia, the less Jack remembered the feel of Ryan’s shoe when he tossed the corpse into the Labyrinth. By the time they got to the monster bar—Jack, a Shirley Temple; Luke, an Irish Car Bomb and three beers—Jack was giddy thinking about this potential party. He could almost look at a crumpled napkin without thinking about the bump of Ryan’s nose under his wrapped bed sheet.

With that night, Jack and Luke set an unintentional tradition, going to the monster bar every
other week. That was the first time Luke took Jack out to celebrate and party after Jack killed a sibling. It wouldn’t be the last. Jack couldn’t care about that. All he cared about was how he’d found himself the perfect friend.

Hey everyone! Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed. (Mel asked how I made murder buddies adorable. They did it themselves.) My brother got married last weekend so sorry for the delay! Stay tuned this Fri/Sat (Wait? Tomorrow—shit! Must. Find Time. To. Edit.) for the intro of a certain set of brothers with a penchant for acrobatics and weasels in Axel’s *Say No To Cruise Ships*.

Footnotes:

[1] Mel (betaeditor)’s one request, “Just don’t change into weird things… and actually, don’t keep a scoreboard.”


[4] My brother said this to me a lot growing up. He also threw house parties when my parents were out of town (my dad liked to double back and infiltrate the parties to freak the partiers out), ended a lot of fights, snuck a lot of girls into the “fort” we built in the woods behind our house, and plenty of other admirable activities. Exquisite role model.

Axel: Say "NO" to Cruise Ships

Say “NO” to Cruise Ships

Note: I know the brothers’ names are confusing for this section. Don’t worry. Nicknames are a’coming. They need to be christened first XD

Axel’s heartbeat thundered so loud, he feared it would deafen him to any movement down the narrow hallway and ruin his focus on the sting of ocean air. Tainted ocean air, he thought. There was an uncomfortable scent to this ship. He could almost taste the presence of an ill omen, and he had only snuck aboard fifteen minutes ago.

The Glock 17 felt heavy in his hands. He kept the handgun pointed low, but ready. When he found his little brother’s note about running away, Axel didn’t have time to raid their father’s armory. He didn’t have access yet. Any requests would have inspired questions about why Axel wanted to be armed. He stole this one from a Miami-Dade county cop, near the port.

Now, despite Axel’s dislike for guns, he wished he had taken the family “picnics” to the gun range more seriously. If he fired and missed in this confined corridor, a stray bullet would rip through these thin walls. According to the cruise ship’s map, these rooms housed potentially innocent passengers.

They were empty.

Axel had never been on a cruise ship before—just dinky riverboats from his hometown—but all the advertisements on the ship showed mass amounts of people smiling and looking happy, like join us, and we’ll give you a free discount on stapling your lips into a grin!

There weren’t families talking about subpar buffet food or children fighting over who got the top bunk. The only sounds were the hysterical cries of a twelve-year-old boy and the laughter of his tormentors around a corner. From their shadows cast on the wall, he could tell Ajax, his little brother, was in trouble.

Axel had been expecting his little brother to be on the top deck, making friends, not dangling from one of his feet, held by someone much larger than him. Then again, Axel hadn’t been expecting to steal a speedboat or sneak aboard the Princess Andromeda. He had hoped, by “running away,” his little brother really meant, “sneak down the street to hide at the local arcade.”

“You ssssmell good enough to eat!” said a voice that should have belonged to cheesy cartoon snake. Axel had hoped he’d turn the corner to find a Disney actor dressed up like Kaa from The Jungle Book. When he beat them up, he’d just have to apologize to any observers that loved reptiles.

Another laughed alongside the first. “Chocolaty. Perfect for dessert.” There was a long sniff. “What kind of half-blood are you? How do we know you’re not a Greek spy?”
“M-M-My m-m-mom—she s-said that I should come here—it’d be safe—” his little brother babbled.

Axel clenched his jaw. As far as he was concerned, nothing good came from that woman except the little half-brother in that hall. And even then, Axel was going to personally whip Ajax when they got home and then ground him from eating Reese’s Sticks for a week.

“Safe!”

The two voices hissed out laughter, though the first one had a more difficult time with the word. Axel wondered if the person had some kind of speech impediment with s’s and if he was allowed to mock them by saying, “here to the ressscue” or if that would be rude.

“You—d-don’t want to eat m-me! I’m stringy! And I just had a full bowl of jalapeño peppers! I’ll be too spicy!”

In the shadow, Axel could see the person holding Ajax move his little brother’s body away in alarm.

This was his chance.

Axel stepped around the outer edges of the corner, coming into their line of sight. He aimed the gun directly at the person hefting Ajax.

“Drop—” Axel choked on “him.”

He expected the man to be tall from the shadow. Not eight feet tall with a furry chest so barreled, you could lay three of Axel’s siblings across and maybe have room for a fourth. Axel had only seen one other person with a snout, animalistic canines, claws, and paws; he knew now wasn’t the time to ask this man where he got the accessories.

“Axel!” Ajax cried in teary-eyed joy.

“Oh! A sssecond ssstowaway!” the other speaker hissed. It was a woman—well, half a woman. Her lower half sprouted a reptilian tail.

Both of them had deep bronze tans, close to Axel’s, though they looked more like they were from the southern Mediterranean or Northern Africa.

Axel had seen some weird stuff in his fourteen years. In the forests outside of their run-down, cramped shack, he’d seen monsters roaming the dense undergrowth and slurping about the rivers and cenotes. But nothing like these two: humanoid and capable of speech.

In punishment for letting Ajax get away, Axel wondered if his father had slipped him hallucinatory drugs and hired actors to show up in monstrous costumes to send him into a panic. Axel gritted his teeth. It wouldn’t have been the first time.

Neither seemed concerned by Axel’s weapon.

Actors would have been.

“Remember what Luke said, Agriussss.” The woman frowned. “We’re not supposed to eat them if they want to join. Remember Jack’sss morning meditation.”

Both closed their eyes, inhaled, and exhaled. “Our demigods are our friends,” they said in
unison, “Not food. Unless they become Ol’Sissies. Then food.”

Hearing the snake-woman try the world ol’sissies was worthy of an Oscar. She was still “ssssss”ing long after Agrius had reopened his eyes.

“I mean it,” Axel said, not liking how little attention the two paid him, like he wasn’t a threat. “Drop him, or I will shoot.”

“Did you just eat a bunch of jalapeño peppers?” the bear man asked.

Axel swallowed. That felt a little offensive, even if Ajax had said it first. The idea of eating jalapeno peppers grossed Axel out, but, with the straightest face he could manage, he said, “Yes. Now drop him.” Axel did not like the way this woman examined him or how Agrius licked his lips. It was more than creepy.

A nagging horror lurked along the edges of Axel’s conscious thought, whispering, It’s about to happen again. You’ll lose someone else you love. And you’ll be as useful as a jammed gun while you scream at them to stop.

The slit V that marked the sight on Axel’s gun trembled.

Axel wouldn’t be worthless this time.

His trigger finger shook too much.

The first bullet was an accident. Once Axel heard the sound, he discharged another three rounds into the bear man’s chest. That was too many wasted bullets on one opponent when there might be a whole cruise ship of aggressors.

Agrius had been holding Ajax off to one side, far enough that Axel could fire with confidence.

At the barrage of bullets, Ajax curled up, folding his body to he could reach Agrius’ arm and jam his fingers into the man’s tendons.

Agrius howled and dropped Axel’s little brother.

To Axel’s alarm, the scream had nothing to do with the bullets, just the tendons. Normally, someone might take a step back when shot, or react in some way. There were no bullet holes. No blood. Agrius didn’t even look at Axel; he glared at where Ajax had flipped to his feet.

From the line of bullet holes in the wall behind Agrius, the ballistics appeared to have gone through him.

Axel wondered if his father had drugged him after all.

Agrius grabbed at his sore arm. He scowled, rubbing the skin. “That hurt!” he roared.

The snake woman laughed uncontrollably.

Ajax sprinted towards Axel.

Agrius made a grab for Ajax’s raven hair. Seeming to sense the capture, Ajax ducked. He dodged under Axel’s elbow skidded to a halt behind Axel’s back.

Before the younger boy could press his face between Axel’s shoulder blades—as he often
hid when bullies at their primary school realized the nuns weren’t paying attention and chose it as a prime time to attack—Axel shoved his little brother to run down the way Axel had come.

Axel could beat up school bullies for his little brother. Anthropomorphic bulletproof humanoids whose only apparent weakness was jalapeños and pressure points? Axel could take a rain check on that one.

Agrius released a second, enraged roar, sounding more like the snarl of a rabid animal. One thing was for sure: this guy needed some breath mints.

Axel pivoted to sprint down the other corridor, hoping Agrius wasn’t as fast as he was big. The mental map Axel had constructed of this ship said they’d have to make it down the full—

When Ajax stopped short, Axel almost impaled his diaphragm on the back of his brother’s head. Axel wanted to scream at him for stopping and, really, for running off in the first place, but the words choked on his lips.

There was a man standing in the hallway—not a man. Axel knew, from his sense of mounting dread, this was no mortal. As Axel tried to focus on the person’s features, they seemed to dematerialize, the ends of his long, black cloak vaporizing into smoke. The ground he stood upon appeared to shift, or was he vanishing and shifting locations?

The man’s eyes, the one thing that bore into Axel’s mind, were a piercing blue. Although Axel couldn’t describe the sharpness of his jaw or the color of his skin, he could tell the smile along those lips was endearing.

*Like Ajax and I are his new playthings.*

Agrius froze in his pursuit upon seeing this creature. His breath raged so heavily, Axel might ask if Agrius wanted an inhaler if Axel was in a position to tease.

“What’s this then?” the man asked.

Axel grabbed Ajax’s arm and dragged the younger boy behind him. Rapidly, he moved as far as he could from either party—into the corner.

Axel felt Ajax pressed his face between Axel’s shoulder blades. “I—I’m sorry. M-m-mom said it would be safe here—” His little brother sobbed, clutching at Axel’s shirt.

When Axel raised his fists into a defensive stance, they shook so violently, it was laughable. It *was* happening again. Not only did he feel small and helpless. He was. The bear man towered over him. The other one—that—that was a god.

His heartbeat thundered so loud again that he couldn’t hear his thoughts to calculate a plan out of this.

The unknown man took a slow step closer to them. When his foot contacted the floor, the rug seemed to ripple. Axel felt his heart rate decrease. He stumbled and his fists drooped down. Everything felt heavy. He shook his head to stay focused, terrified that he was losing what little control he had.

Ajax slumped into his back.

“Come now, we’re missing the main performance. Did you get the goods?” the god in the black jacket asked.
The snake-woman pulled a backpack off to reveal a variety of soda cans inside. Axel wondered if this was a drug running operation. He’d seen his father’s associates tuck contraband into the most unassuming of places.

“Ah, orange cream soda,” the man mused. He held a hand out, and one of the bottles flew straight to it.

The woman frowned. “Now, if you could just do that, why did we have to get it for you?”

“So we could have enough to share. I mean, everyone on the whole ship might have passed out if I released that kind of power,” he said. His voice was warm and comforting, as was his wink. However, one of Axel’s father’s associates winked and smiled like that at Axel and his brothers. That associate liked to lock boys in his basement, according to rumors.

“They’re almost out of fodder to throw at the stage,” the god said. He shrugged. “Incompetent performers, but it looks like we might have two new ones, ready to prove themselves.”

Ajax jerked alert at those words, bumping his nose hard into Axel’s shoulder blade. He sniffled. “You want us to perform? We’re—we’re really good performers!”

The desperation in his voice made Axel want to slap him. Though, really, Axel wanted to ask prove ourselves to what or whom?

The man motioned for Axel and Ajax to follow him. Without checking to see if they did, he turned to walk down the corridor. “I’ll escort you to the techies.”

Axel wasn’t sure what was more daunting: following a god to an unknown stage or fighting off Bear Face.

Without questioning, Ajax darted after the god and scurried at his heels.

Axel glanced at the seething Agrius. “We’ll settle this later,” he told the bear man and raced after his brother.

Agrius snarled something under his breath.

“Thank you for getting us away from Winny the Pooh’s angry relative,” Ajax said. His sniffles decreased in correlation to the increased skip in his step. When Axel caught up, Ajax reached for Axel’s hand.

Axel swatted him away. “No soy Hiro,” he growled.[1]

With their littlest brother, Ajax could pretend he was holding Hiro’s hand because Hiro was scared. He couldn’t fake that with Axel. Axel needed both his hands in case they had a chance to escape the way he’d come. And, although Ajax looked way younger than twelve, barely reaching four feet and five inches when he stood at perfect posture, Axel knew his little brother was too old for that coddling.

“Oh, don’t thank me. I saved you from one losing battle and will be pitting you into a far worse one,” the god told them. His expression softened into pity. “Though, if you survive, you’re sure to find the safe home that your mother promised you.”

Ajax’s mouth dropped open. His hazel and brown eyes widened.
Axel could tell his little brother wanted to ask if this god knew his mother. Instead, he said, “B—but, you said it was just a performance.”

From the way the man gently set a hand on Ajax’s shoulder—roughly the size of Ajax’s shoulder—and the melancholy to those eyes, Axel understood this wasn’t the kind of performance they were originally thinking. And they weren’t going to make it off this boat by running.

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed :D Ah, tiny Axel that thinks he needs to prove himself to Agrius. I’m sure the thought of fighting Axel was unbearable to him. <3 Stay tuned next week to see the Pax brothers’ performance!

Oh! real question guys: Do you want me to label when we shift from book to book? I have context clues burred into the stories, but would you prefer something less subtle? I can invest in neon signposts. With glitter. And those fluttery, streamer dudes. anyway, let me know!

[1] “I’m not Hiro.”
“Everyone has to do something to prove their commitment to the cause,” Chris Rodriguez said. His Spanish accent was raspy, almost nasally, pronouncing every “s” like mispronunciation meant a whipping. Axel guessed his family was from Northern Mexico. The neutrality of Chris’ English made Axel also guess that Chris had lived in the States for most of his life.

Axel was relieved that Chris didn’t ask about his or Ajax’s accent.

Chris towered over Ajax and was about level with Axel’s height. His dark eyes looked nervous. Sweat shined his brow in the backstage’s dim lighting. His hands shook as he sorted through a weapons rack.

The roar of a distant crowd made Chris flinch.

This was their “techie.” Other monsters and humans that they had passed referred to Chris as the “backstage guard.”

Axel wasn’t sure exactly what Chris’ job description was, but one thing was clear: Chris wanted to be here as little as the Pax brothers.

They had passed too many people and were too deep in the ship to make a successful break. From what Axel could tell, this backstage was for one of the ship’s biggest stages. The audience’s engaged screams made it sound like there were at least a hundred people—creatures?—out there.

“It used to be easier. I got grandfathered in back when all you needed to do was recruit another person,” as Chris spoke, he sifted through a pile of miscellaneous armor. Most of it looked like something from Ancient Europe—like from that Xena show. “Then, they would send new campers on quests, but most of the quests available now are on permanent hard mode and they can’t afford to send newbies out.”

Axel turned down a bronze breastplate that Chris tried to hand him and opted for a leather one. The armor and weapons weren’t props. A sickening twist in Axel’s stomach hinted at what was about to happen.

“I didn’t realize we had to prove ourselves to be safe here,” Ajax said, his voice trembling. When Axel refused to take Ajax’s hand during the walk with Morpheus, Ajax had hugged himself. He perked up upon seeing the backstage, somewhere that felt familiar to both of them.

Axel had to remind himself this wasn’t going to be a fun experience. There were so many happy memories associated with the stage. Normally, the giddiness of being backstage would make Axel squirm with anticipation. He remembered how Uncle Frasco would poke Axel to mess up whatever paint or costume he wore while Nilley, his mother, tried to fix them. She would shot Frasco death glares and he’d wink at her. The nostalgia made Axel’s nausea worse.

Those days were gone, forever.

“Safe…” Chris echoed Ajax’s word. “Yea. Well, you came in just in time for the new experiment: fighting.”
Ajax puffed up his cheeks and popped them.

Axel resisted the urge to do the same. The entire Pax family tended to do that when nervous.

This could be good news. Their dad had been forcing them to train for the last few months. Axel and his little sister, Lapis, had particularly excelled. “What kind of fighting?” he asked. Axel picked up a sword, testing its balance.

His father didn’t like swords. It made Axel like them even more and think of them as a hero’s weapon.

“Uh, to the death,” Chris said.

Axel knew it was coming, but he still puffed up his cheeks and popped them at the same time as Ajax.

His little brother’s breath became tight. “Mom didn’t mention that,” he squeaked.

“They just implemented it. This is kind of an experimental round to see what kind of ratings it gets,” Chris explained. He handed Ajax a javelin that was several feet taller than him.

Axel did not like the word “ratings.”

Chris paused, frowning. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Had you come in earlier, it might not have been so bad. Just a centaur or something. But…” He swallowed. “You might want to say your goodbyes now. You’re going to die.”

The regret on Chris’ face told Axel something very useful. There was some hope. Chris didn’t want to be here. He didn’t want Axel and Ajax to die. Maybe, Chris could help them get out.

“And if we refuse to get on the stage?” Axel asked. He pulled his shoulders back to stand as tall as he could.

“Then I will eat you.”

Axel would never admit that he jumped, but the bear man startled him. Agrius stepped out from the stage’s back entrance, where Morpheus had left them with Chris and where Chris confiscated Axel’s gun.

“You’re either with the cause, or you’re monster feed.” Agrius seemed to be reconsidering his opinions on jalapeños. There was a line of drool sliding out of his snout.

“How generous,” Axel said, trying to keep his expression neutral. His little brother might get hysterical if he thought Axel was afraid.

Chris took a step away from Agrius, eyeing him. When his gaze returned to Axel, he shrugged apologetically. “Normally, it isn’t this bad. You just got really unlucky. Like, mother-load unlucky. We were running out of expendable monsters to throw at this guy.”

Someone poked their head around a burgundy curtain hanging against the wall. Even in the dim, backstage lighting, Axel could tell the older boy had brilliant red hair that dangled a little too long against the boy’s long, pale nose and freckles. He flashed them a charming smile. From the dart of his eyes and the quiver of his hand on the curtain, he looked nervous.

“Are you up next?” the boy asked.
Chris answered for them. “Yea, they’re up next—”

“No,” Axel cut him off. He hefted up his sword, hoping the stage props he’d handled in the past would give him some familiarity with the real thing. “Ajax stays here. I’m going out on my own.”

“Uh…” Chris said skeptically.

At the same time, the redhead hopped once. “Oh! You must be good. What’s your name?”

Axel glanced down to where Ajax had burrowed against Axel’s back again. His little brother peeked curiously around to see the newcomer.

Agrius stepped uncomfortably close, licking the drool off his teeth.

Axel didn’t know if he was or wasn’t good. All he knew was that he had to be good to get Ajax out of here. There wasn’t an option. “Axel. Axel Pax,” he said, puffing up his chest to look confident.

“No, like, your stage name,” the boy said.

Ajax leaned further around Axel’s elbow to ask, “What’s the scariest and biggest cat they have in Greece?”

The redhead, Chris, and Agrius all glanced at each other.

“Uh, a lion, I think?” the redhead said.

The temptation to elbow Ajax in the head was fierce. When Axel glanced down at Ajax, he saw his little brother’s desperation. If Axel was going to be the big hero, he needed to do everything right, including have a cool moniker. Just like their old performances, he would have to go out with a bang.

Axel swallowed. “So, this guy, the one I’m fighting, is a big deal,” he said, gesturing towards the curtain containing the stage. “When I defeat him, my brother will not need to prove his worth. When I beat him, it will be admittance for both of us.”

If Axel kept saying “beat him,” he might start to believe it.

The redhead’s smile widened, turning goofy. “Yep. I can do that. I hope you win.”

The older boy examined Axel and his little brother for a moment too long.

Then he disappeared behind the curtain.

Roaring erupted outside.

Agrius shoved Axel forward, towards a different section of curtain.

There was no time to prepare. Axel had meant to give Ajax a hug, or tell Ajax the best route to run if… if something… if he—

Stage lights blinded him.

The typical rush of going in front of a crowd made Axel’s heartbeat increase. Heat washed over him.
One thing solidified: he wasn’t going to let Ajax lose another family member without getting to say goodbye. One more reason that Axel had to live.

When Axel’s eyes adjusted to the brilliance of lighting, he jammed his feet into the floorboards. His breath became short.

There was a massive, doomed cage encasing the center of the stage. It was igloo-shaped. The only tunneled entrance was the one Agrius shoved Axel through. The bars were spaced far enough that Ajax might be able to squeeze between them, but Axel couldn’t, even if he’d practiced more contortionism. The space was maybe thirty feet in diameter with the highest part of the cage ten feet off the ground. Ropes dangled from the rusted bars with swords, spears, and axes, if Axel wanted to reach up and change weapons.

Axel hated cages.

He tried to keep a rhythmic count in his head, to ease his breath and mimic the count. That was what his Uncle Frasco told him to do whenever something scared Axel.

_The cage is a backdrop_, he thought. _Focus on the main event. Focus on the main event or you’ll never make it through the show._

He would have frozen up in fear if someone hadn’t moved in the center of the cage.

The first thing Axel noticed was the armor. His opponent’s breastplate gleamed with pure gold. There were medals of honor decorating his chest. When the man rose to his feet, a tattered, reddish-purple cloak fluttered around his ankles. If Axel had to guess, the man was at least eighteen and six foot three. His chestnut skin glistened with sweat and blood. His dark eyes bore into Axel with the patience of someone who knew they had already won the fight.

“What’s this?!” came a voice outside the cage. The stage extended a few more feet, allowing the redhead to walk along the edge like a show host. “Jak-Jak back here to say: we have a surprise last minute entry against Praetor Julian, son of Mars! Meet Axel the Lion!”

The audience screamed.

It almost drowned out the sound of a cage door slamming shut behind Axel and the way Ajax shrieked in panic, “B-but that guy is huge!”

As Axel staggered forward, struggling with claustrophobia more than the fear of fighting this guy, all he could think was, _That is a stupid stage name to die with._

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed :D
When Axel got within a few feet of Praetor Julian, something became readily apparent: the man was injured and exhausted. Julian rose to greet Axel, but didn’t step forward. One of his legs had a six-inch black spike sticking out of it, staining the end of his pants a muddy red. In one hand, he held a javelin. His other hand was covered—

Axel did a double take. It looked like Julian had ripped off the tail of a snake-woman, gutted it, and slid his arm inside to make a gauntlet.

If Axel had to guess, the man usually had a shaved face and head. A few days without a razor had left him with a thin line of black fuzz in both places. He sighed heavily when Axel paused.

The sound of the crowd died as he said, “You’re just a kid.”

Axel tried not to agree with him. For now, he couldn’t be “just” a kid. Really, he hadn’t been a kid for the last six months, since Uncle Frasco and Nilley had died.

“I’m Axel Pax,” he said. “What’s your full name Julian?”

Axel couldn’t tell if he was letting himself stall or if he wanted to at least know who he was about to kill.

“Praetor Julian Kouadio of New Rome,” Julian said. Despite all of his wounds, his posture was perfect; Axel could envision this man calmly commanding troops. For an uncomfortable moment, Axel realized how much he wished he could mimic this man’s demeanor.

“It’s good to meet you, Julian. I’m sorry I need to kill you.” Axel pointed his sword backstage, where Agrius had a hand on Ajax’s shoulder to prevent Axel’s little brother from running towards the cage. “I’m pretty sure they’re going to kill my little brother if I lose.”

Julian nodded, as though he expected this. “And I’m sorry that I won’t give up because your brother’s life is on the line. You see…” Julian crouched back down. He made it look natural, but Axel had to wonder how long this man had been fighting for and how tired he was. “I have a wonderful girlfriend attending UNR right now and my mom is a fierce former legionnaire. She would be disappointed if I let myself die on a monster ship, especially without getting a warning to the legion about this new threat.”

Julian tilted his javelin towards the crowd. “If I don’t get a message out, hundreds could die unnecessarily.”


Julian narrowed his eyes. “You are a demigod, right?”

Axel clenched his jaw. He knew of demigods. His little brother was one, and it only brought Ajax and the family misery. In a motion Axel hoped the audience couldn’t see, he subtly shook his
Julian frowned.

The crowd rumbled with annoyance. They must have been taking too long.

“Get on with it!” someone shouted.

The redhead, Jak-Jak, fidgeted on stage.

“If—I kill you,” Axel said, trying to sound confident as the sword trembled in his fist, “What message, if any, would you like me to deliver to your loved ones? I—I don’t know this world, but I will do what I can to get the message delivered.”

Julian nodded. “Ari has a letter she knows to open if I die or disappear, but…” The praetor cleared his throat. “If you could tell the Third Cohort that it wasn’t their fault, that they couldn’t have avoided this, I would appreciate that. And you? Your dying wish?”

Axel didn’t want to consider it. His jaw was sore from how tight he clenched it. “That boy. My brother.” He gestured back to the cage entrance. “Do everything you can to keep him alive, and he’ll stick by your side forever.”

Julian laughed. Not maliciously. Axel knew how crazy the request sounded. Yea, I know you need to save yourself, but uh, can you save this helpless parasite too?

When he stopped laughing, Julian leaned on his javelin. “You know what? As absurd as this all is? Sure. You’ll do everything to deliver my message. I’ll do everything to protect your little brother. We could do each other one better. We could team up and rush that bear man.”

Julian gave Axel a ruthless smile and nodded behind Axel.

Agrius still firmly held Ajax. The bear man could break the boy’s neck before they’d make it anywhere close.

What glimmer of hope Axel had died. Slowly, he shook his head.

Julian’s smile turned sad. “I understand. It was worth a try.”

Axel swallowed. From this brief conversation, Axel wondered if he would have been friends with Julian under different circumstances.

Jak-Jak shouted, “Ah! A gentleman’s bout!” From the tremor in the redhead’s voice, Axel got the distinct feeling Jak-Jak was trying to calm the agitated, impatient crowd. “Akin to that of the ancient Greeks! Like Theseus—”

“Theseus was a cheating asshole!” someone shouted.

There was a roar of agreement.

Something shot out of the crowd. Jak-Jak shrieked and dove for the stage. A black spike—the same kind imbedded in Julian’s calf—whizzed to where Jack’s head had been. It sliced through the curtain and continued to smash into a back wall of the stage.

“Stab yourself, Dr. Thorn,” a melodious female voice tore through the laughter like the spike...
had cut through the air.

Someone shrieked in pain.

There was more laughter.

“Enough!”

Axel squinted to see through the stage lights. At the top tier of seats, someone sat on a throne. The voice originated there. Everyone silenced as the male talked, “If a demigod dies, they don’t rematerialize. That’s one less for Kronos’ cause, a loss on your head… now, Jack, continue.”

Jack rose to his feet. His whole body trembled violently. He lifted a microphone back to his lips. “A—A gentleman’s bout. Like one with Teddy Roosevelt!”

There was a pause of hesitation at the comparison.

A begrudging rumble of approval came from the crowd. With that, Jack eased back into a confident announcer. “So, who will win? The sinister, oppressive Roman?”

The crowd booed. Julian crouched there, maintaining eye contact with Axel like there wasn’t anyone else in the room. The longer Axel examined Julian, the more he detected a slight sway to the praetor’s posture.

“Or the newcomer!” Jack shouted, jumping once in excitement. “The underdog! The Lion!”

Now, the shriek of cheers.

It was weird to be the home team favorite when Axel had never been to the home stadium. He understood Jack’s stage cue. Now was the time to start the performance.

Axel aimed his sword at Julian, the way he would a stage prop. As he stepped forward, his sneakers pressed into mounds of dust on the floor. He’d have to remember that it would be slick.

Julian didn’t come to meet him. If Axel had to guess, the injured leg was completely worthless. The praetor rose, tilting his javelin in Axel’s direction. He traced Axel’s movement with the two feet of golden blade atop the spear-like weapon. Axel circled him.

They hadn’t begun to fight and Axel could already feel sweat sticking his shirt to his chest.

The smile on Julian’s face was gone. His dark eyes examined Axel’s movements carefully. This was a man, Axel realized with a tremble of fear, that had as much to live for as Axel did.

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed! Only one more chapter in this short :D Tune in next week for the end!
Axel lunged.

As he suspected, Julian deflected Axel’s sword with ease. What Axel didn’t expect was how quickly the javelin tip redirected to his chest.

The sharpened gold jammed into Axel’s leather armor.

His little brother screamed somewhere nearby.

Axel didn’t feel pain as the muscles in Julian’s arm tensed. Axel stumbled backwards, almost slipping on the mounds of dust.

*Five seconds and you were almost skewered. Exactly how I wanted this fight to start,* Axel thought.

He retreated. His heartbeat thudded when he saw the javelin slide out of his armor. There was no blood on the tip. That had been too close. Reflexively, he grabbed the empty hole with his hand.

He needed to close the distance between he and the praetor. When Lapis, his little sister, had beat the snot out of Ajax in *Soulcalibur*, the range of a weapon mattered. Julian’s weapon was long-range. Axel needed to get close to level the playing field.

Unfortunately, every muscle in his body said to stay far away and have a nice chat from opposite sides of the cage, maybe about how he’d whip his little brother if he lived through this.

Julian warily examined the tip of his javelin. “Tyche doesn’t favor me,” he muttered. “You really aren’t a demigod.” His gaze shifted upward, flicking around the different weapons dangling above them.

Axel didn’t know why Julian seemed to think he needed a different one, but Axel took the distraction.

Ignoring his mounting panic and the way his head thundered with his pulse, Axel dashed forward. His foot dug into the wood of the stage. The screams of the crowd faded into a din. All he had to do was shove the javelin out of the way. Then he could close the distance and—

Axel positioned his sword in front of him.

The leather hilt vibrated under his grip. It should have cued him in that something was wrong, but Julian’s movement was so fast that Axel didn’t see the maneuver. One moment, he was raising his sword to close the distance. The next, Julian must have batted the tip of his sword away. It was aimed at the floor, exposing him. He could only watch as the tip of Julian’s javelin sank into his dominate forearm.

And did no damage.

Like the bullets had phased through the monsters, the golden metal went in and through
Axel like a mirage.

Axel withdrew. His breath switched to pants. He clasped his sword hand with his free one, waiting for blood to gush out or a bone to ache. Had that really happened? There was no blood. No pain.

The screaming of the crowd came back into focus.

Axel felt dizzy.

“What a dodge from the newcomer!” Jack shrieked. Somewhere in Axel’s peripheral, the redhead jumped.

Julian grunted. “Damn it. You appear to have me at quite a disadvantage.” His eyes darted from weapon to weapon dangling above, before settling back on Axel. That gaze dripped of pity. “Double sorry now. I wanted to give you a quick death, but if none of my metal is going to cut you, I’m going to have to beat you to death with the butt of my pilum.”

*Beat you to death.*

Axel tightened his fingers around the sword hilt. His hand was fine. “*None of my metal will cut you.* Focus on that part, would you?

But his brain wouldn’t. His eyes felt moist at the thought of who he’d seen beaten to death. His breath threatened to get out of control.

Axel emitted a growl. *No. I’m not going to be a victim. I’m not letting anyone else in my family be a victim.*

This sword strategy wasn’t working. Julian was too quick with a pilum and could predict Axel’s sword movements.

There had to be something Axel could do that Julian couldn’t predict, something that Axel was skillful enough to pull off and close the distance. He had been a performer; he could do what he, Ajax, and the Tumbling Six had perfected: tumbling.

Axel let instinct take over.

This was not a game. This was not a performance. That didn’t mean it couldn’t look good.

He sprinted forward, positioning his sword like he had for the last two swipes. As he suspected, Julian repeated his prior process. He parried Axel’s blade and repositioned his javelin so Axel would run right into it. This time, though, Julian waited an extra moment to reposition, as Axel hoped. The metal seemed to do no damage, so Julian needed him closer, to hit him with the wood, two feet further down the javelin.

When Axel felt his sword vibrate with Julian’s parry, Axel let go of the hilt. He leaned forward, dropped, and tucked into a roll past Julian’s legs.

As he also suspected, Julian slammed the wooden shaft of the pilum into Axel’s side. An audible *crack* shook his body as one of Axel’s ribs broke mid-roll. *Calculated risk.*

That was his cue that he had rolled close enough, and his cue to where Julian’s weapon was.

Like Axel was reaching for a prop mid-tumble, he shot his hand out. He smashed his palm
against the spike in Julian’s calf, imbedding it further.

Julian grunted.

Axel heard Julian thump to one knee at the same time that Axel finished his roll. Now, Axel couldn’t waste his momentum. The next two seconds were vital.

Once Axel’s feet touched the dusty stage, he sprang upward with as much power as he could put into the jump, extending his hands towards the cage’s ceiling to snatch—

Pain flared in Axel’s chest. The way he’d stretched out his torso and gasped—it felt like someone dug a spade into his rib. The world blurred.

No. Focus! He wanted to scream. Focus on the match—not the rib—not the—

His fingers wrapped around the hilt of a dangling dagger. The icy chill of the dagger’s hilt reminded him of what he had to do.

The rope holding the dagger snapped under Axel’s weight.

While coming back down, he twisted, making his side flare white-hot. Each breath felt like he was inhaling flames.

Julian will be prone. Pin him. Dagger to throat. Say you want him as a prisoner of war. You can both live. Figure out escape later.

Julian had partially recovered from the pain in his calf. He had pivoted his pilum so Axel would impale himself upon falling. Axel clasped the wood with his free hand, using the shaft to aim his fall on top of the praetor. Sword fighting? Unfamiliar territory to Axel. Doing acrobats with moving poles and ropes? Routine.

As Axel hoped, he crashed into Julian. Without having his second leg functional for balance, Julian tumbled backwards onto the ground.

Julian released the pilum and flopped onto his back. Axel landed with his knees on either side of the praetor.

Axel tried to jab the blade at Julian’s neck. Before Axel could get the dagger within six inches of Julian’s throat, the praetor grabbed Axel’s wrist. The man’s callused, scarred fingers looked large enough to crush Axel’s whole hand.[1]

Julian reached his other hand down to his leg—

Axel didn’t have time to dodge the spike. Julian withdrew the six-inch black barb from his calf and jabbed towards Axel’s chest.

Axel did all he could: he twisted.

Someone tried to shriek. Had it been him? There wasn’t enough air in his lungs to make the full sound. He couldn’t tell if it was from the burning in his broken ribs, or the new, horrific pain searing his stomach.

The blow had landed.

Whichever it was, Julian’s stab knocked Axel back, far enough that Julian could lift his functional leg and plant a solid foot on Axel’s chest. Like a cartoon, Axel felt himself lift off the
Sound whirred to a hollow squeal. Sight blotched into colorful, brilliant orbs. Any sense of gravity vanished.

Awareness didn’t return until something cold collided with Axel’s back. He clutched it with his hands and slipped his feet against the curves—the bars—the bars of the cage. They must have skidded closer to the cage’s edge, where the dome was lower. Either that or Julian could kick a man ten feet into the air. What had they called him? Son of Mars?

Weakness made all Axel’s limbs tremble, threatening to shake his hold. Each breath was ragged, spiking pain in his ribs and stomach. A throbbing made his ribcage feel like it was cracking more with every movement and like a little piece of his stomach would slither out if left unattended. His head spun. Below, he could see red droplets drip down to splash Julian, who was rising to his feet.

Droplets. Axel’s blood.

The spike could hurt Axel.

Axel didn’t understand the difference between the spike and the pilum, but Julian had a weapon that could kill him.

Axel wanted to touch his stomach, to see what the wound was like, but he feared letting go of one bar would send him tumbling down, where the praetor could slit his throat.

Through a maddening din of noise, Axel could only discern one thing: Ajax, his little brother, shouted at him in a sobbed mix of Spanish, Mayan, and English. “Axel! Axel, you’re awesome! You’re the strongest! You promised you’d protect me and—and--you’re better than this! Are you going to let this coati break you the way Dad wants to?! I know you’re not!”

The pain dulled alongside the other noises and smells of the stage. A sweat droplet lingered on his lip before slowly cascading down.

Last time Axel broke his ribs—when their papá broke them and Axel’s arm with a cane—Axel had gotten back up without realizing how much pain he was in.

This couldn’t be the end of someone—someone else. If I die, they’ll send Ajax in and Julian will kill him too.

Axel clenched his jaw. He thought about the days after their dad found them, the way Ajax, choking back tears, snuck into Axel’s room with handmade crafts and sketches of their old home and terribly devised jokes, anything that might make Axel smile again. Ajax promised that he’d never stop trying to make him laugh, no matter how bad it got.

Axel would never stop trying to keep Ajax safe, no matter how bad it got.

Julian palmed the spike in his hand. He could barely move on his single functional leg and definitely not quickly. This was someone’s lover, someone’s proud son, an entire troop’s loved leader.

Axel let instinct take over.

There were several weapons dangling from the ropes in front of Axel.
With as much strength as he could muster, Axel lunged off the cage bars. One rope had snapped when he put all his weight on them, but three—

Held. Only one of Axel’s arms would respond. The side with the injured ribs dangled uselessly. He only needed one arm to work.

He swung behind Julian—

—dug his heels into the cage’s bars on the other side, released the ropes—

—and pounced down at Julian’s exposed back. The praetor couldn’t turn fast enough. Axel accepted that Julian would get another stab in. He would have to worry about that later. For now, he had to land on Julian’s back, hoping Julian thought Axel had no apparent weapons—

Axel’s feet smashed into the praetor’s back as his claws dug into the praetor’s shoulders.

All thoughts crashed to a halt when he used the last weapon he had: Axel sank his teeth into the back of the praetor’s neck.

Something popped under his jaw. There was an audible crunch.

Blood went everywhere: up his nose, down his throat, into his eyes. For a moment, that’s all there was. Just the reek of iron and the inability to breath.

Then, they were falling. Something massive smashed Axel into the dusty ground.

Julian wasn’t moving.

Axel choked. He reeled back, trying to disentangle himself from the limp body. Clawing his way out felt hopeless. The thing was too massive, too heavy. One of his arms wouldn’t respond. He couldn’t breathe.

Someone pulled the body back, releasing him.

Axel tried to roll away. Instead, he was on all fours, spilling the contents of his stomach onto the dusty stage. Pain clenched him with each retch of red-tinted bile. It felt like someone was kicking him in the ribs every time he breathed and upchucked. One of his arms wouldn’t move to push him further away from the vomit.

The stage lights felt hot. People were screaming. Cheering? Chanting his name?

Blearily, Axel moved to look around, but his body didn’t want to respond. All he could see was the back of Praetor Julian Kouadio’s mangled skull and brain matter. A man never to return to the arms of his lover. A son never to inspire pride in his parents again. A leader unable to protect his troops.

There was nothing left for Axel to throw up. The pain in his chest was so intense, the world felt light. Had he been stabbed again? How bad was the first wound? He had to get up, to get Ajax out of here, but, he couldn’t feel anything to make his body move, anything but the sensation of sinking his teeth—

Axel hiccupped back his emotions, spiking another wave of pain, nausea, and wooziness. *Focus on Ajax. Move.*

Someone had knelt down beside him. Some desperate, childish whisper in the back of his
mind said, *Tío Frasco?*

But, Uncle Frasco was like Julian. He would never be there to support his family again.

The person’s laugh was just as infectious and jovial. A caring hand gently took Axel’s chin, raising it. He felt a cloth brush away some of the vomit and blood.

It was that lanky, maniac redhead. Jack dabbed the ends of his shirt against Axel’s face, like a father brushing away stray pudding for a child. “Kid!” he cheered, “I’m going to make you into a star!”

The redhead pulled at one of Axel’s arms. Axel choked back a cry. More pain exploded in his torso. His vision was tunneling. He felt a surge of vertigo when Jack dragged him to his feet for a victory bow. More blood dripped to clot and intermix with the dust of the stage. More screams and cheers.

Then the stage lights vanished. A curtain had dropped and the noises muffled.

When Jack gently lowered him, Axel collapsed back to his knees, then his side. The world fuzzed in and out. His breath was shallow and spittle sputtered down his cheek.

Axel could hear the *snap* of latex gloves as Jack slipped some on. Jack took a pair of scissor out of a kit on his belt and began to snip away the ends of Axel’s shirt. The whole time, he was still blathering, “—new home! You’re going to do so well here! I’ll make sure of it. It’s going to be so exciting. I’ll make sure you and your little—”

“Ajax,” Axel whispered.

Jack nodded.

Someone stumble-sprinted to Axel’s side. Hands grabbed his. Familiar sobs made his rasps easier. “Axel! You asshole! You weren’t supposed to get injured while being a badass!”

“… wash your mouth out with sand…” Axel said, unable to get all the words out. He tried to give Ajax a comforting smile, but could only repress a scream of pain.

Jack had jerked something from his side.

If Axel could still vomit, he would have. The six-inch spike was slathered in blood. Jack tossed it behind him carelessly.

The panic in his little brother’s hazel and brown eyes made Axel’s condition clear: Axel was dying.

His little brother’s tears felt cool against Axel’s forehead. Ajax must have pulled Axel’s head onto his lap. “You can’t—you can’t go like Uncle Frasco and Aunt Nilley. I—I won’t—I won’t let you. You’re only here because—”

“Oh, he’s not going anywhere,” Jack said. The older boy put a comforting hand on Ajax’s shoulder. Then, he reached back for Axel’s torso. “I’m adopting both of you, and I can’t very well adopt a corpse. You see, I just found out—oh, sorry Axel, this is going to hurt a lot. I need to find the tip of the spike before I heal you. It broke off. Anyway, I just found out Flynn and I can’t have children unless we adopt, and you two—”

Axel couldn’t hear the next sentence. Someone had pressed something between his teeth. He
wheezed and shrieked into it as Jack must have fished his fingers inside Axel’s stomach wound, like someone was prodding him with heated coils, stretching his skin and organs. Pain made the world go white. There wasn’t enough air.

When Axel could think again, an angelic voice lifted his consciousness to drift in a gentle breeze, easing all of the searing agony. Maybe this was it. Maybe he was losing the fight. But, he couldn’t. He wasn’t going to leave Ajax. He promised to protect him.

The song cut short. Aches spread through Axel’s stomach. He inhaled, relieved at the agony it brought. Unless death left him with the same pains as life, then he was still here. Axel wasn’t ready for a trip to paradise or Xibalba.

“See! He’s doing just fine. There’s a refreshing breath, right? That should stabilize you, my boy. My boys? Can I call you my boys? Oh! I can’t wait to tell Flynn! We’ll have to get you a room adjoining ours—I’m sure we can make that work. Luke will think it’s a great idea—”

None of that made sense. Axel blinked the crusty tears from his eyes. Above him, his little brother sobbed with a smile.

“Axel, can you speak? Your stomach wounds are closed! It’s—it’s a miracle! This guy just preformed a miracle!”

“I’m whipping you when we get home,” Axel said. This time, there was no pain with the breath, just a dull ache. He flexed his fingers and toes. Everything moved, though not much. He felt like he hadn’t slept in three days.

Jack grinned broadly. “You are home!” His smile fell and he waved a bloody, latex-covered finger in Axel’s face. “But no whipping your little brother. This is a house of God, and I don’t condone that behavior.”

Axel rolled his eyes. “The nuns at our primary school would disagree,” he wheezed.

Ajax choked out a laugh, squeezing Axel’s fingers again. His little brother didn’t seem to realize that Axel definitely meant it: he was going to hurt him when Axel managed to stand again.

“Then they haven’t heard the good word of Kronos!” Jack cheered.

Of course. Not only had Ajax found them a cult. He found them a psychotic religious cult. “Why couldn’t you have just run away to the arcade? Or joined a street gang?” Axel said. He rolled his head away.

On the other side of the cage, the bear-man had lifted the praetor’s body.

Axel’s heartbeat raced. “No!” Although there wasn’t any more pain with his breathes, his voice still came out weak. “Drop him!” Axel rasped, “That’s—Julian is mine!”

That’s all he could think of. Despite that, the bear man pretended not to hear him.

“Hey!” Jack said. The redhead stood and folded his arms. “If my son wants to eat his prey, than he has every right to. You put that body down right this second, Agrius.”

The taste of vomit and blood was still too fresh in Axel’s mouth. Eat his prey. That was exactly what Axel wanted to avoid.

The bear man whirled towards Jack and snarled. He dropped Julian’s body, letting it thump
disrespectfully to the ground. Watching the limbs flop without any control was terrifying.

Agrius stormed up to the lanky announcer. The beast towered over him.

Jack’s body began to tremble, but he didn’t back down.

“I just had to let the brats of Poseidon go and that runt of Athena. You’re lucky I don’t eat you!” the bear man yelled.

Jack glared. “Agrius, we talked about this. Remember? You can’t go around threatening to eat every demigod you see. Why don’t we talk about this during our night-time circle ups? We can repeat the calming mantra together. Or do we need to get Luke or Flynn involved?”

The bear man flinched at the last name. He huffed, turned, and stormed off, muttering about “wasted meat.”

Jack relaxed.

Although Agrius was gone, Axel couldn’t get his heart rate to slow.

Axel tried to get up or, at least, to drag himself towards the crumpled heap of Julian’s body. All he accomplished was a grunt of exertion. “Ajax,” Axel said, “Bring me one of Julian’s medals.”

Ajax didn’t ask questions. He nodded his head, brushed some tears and snot off his face, and scurried across the stage.

This wasn’t something Axel wanted his little brother to do—to loot around a corpse. But, Axel could feel a sense of panic mounting in his chest. He didn’t want to kill people the way their father did, like lives meant nothing, like he’d forget about them as soon as the dead person became a name checked off a list.

He wanted some part of the person that Axel could cling to as a memorial; a physical piece that Axel could look at every night and remember Praetor Julian Kouadio of New Rome had a lover named Ari, a mother that had high expectations for him, and a Cohort that Julian cared about. That was all Axel knew about this man and all he could cling to until he delivered the message to the Third Cohort.

Axel swallowed, thinking about what he’d taken from all of those people.

Within a few seconds, Ajax scurried back over, offering Axel a leather crisscross of straps that dangled with at least nine medals.

“Oh! A trophy,” Jack said, kneeling down beside Axel. “I took a trophy from my first kill too.”

The redhead shook his wrist out to show off an intricately braided and knotted metal wire around his wrist.

Axel shook his head. “It’s not a trophy!” he snapped, horrified at the thought. He took the medals from his teary-eyed little brother. The gold felt icy; the leather, rough.

Jack held up his hands. “It’s okay, kid!”

But, what he said wasn’t. Axel’s fingers trembled. One hand clutched the bottom half of the
medals to his chest. The other held the top medals up for examination. There was a repoussed bull running on the largest circlet of metal. Julian’s blood speckled the design.

*What have I done?* Axel thought, trembling.

“I want to remember those that die in order for me to survive,” Axel whispered, his voice threatening to crack.

A sense of instability made Axel dizzy. He and Ajax really weren’t going back to their father’s. He had no idea why there were bear men or snake women here. Some random kid, only a few years Axel’s senior, wanted to “adopt” them and keep them on this cruise ship going God knows where, inhabited by some crazy Kronos cult members that pinned demigods against each other as an initiation ceremony. Their real home wasn’t much better. If anything it was worse, and—if Axel did drag Ajax back—they’d both be whipped and beaten for weeks for running away.

But, Axel couldn’t leave Lapis, Kouta, and Hiro there by themselves.

Tears threatened to choke Axel when he thought about saving all his siblings, dragging them back to their real home with *Chiichi*, their grandmother, and her boyfriend. If they went there, their father would find them and drag them all back to California.

*Don’t,* Axel scolded himself, *You don’t deserve to cry. You couldn’t help when papá took us the first time. You don’t get to cry until you’re strong enough to make sure it never happens again. And you need to take care of Ajax.*

Axel clenched his jaw. Right now, he couldn’t do anything to take care of Ajax. All he could do was try to make idle threats to assure Ajax’s safety before he drifted off to sleep. He tried to look fierce as he glared at Jack. “What are you going to do with us?”

Jack grinned. “I’m going to make sure you get cleaned up, rested a little, then the two of you are going to meet your wonderful, new mother, and we’re all going for celebratory donuts!”

A nervous smile crept on Ajax’s face, one that made Axel groan. His little brother was too easily won over with the promise of sweets. Axel, meanwhile, realized something about their presumed new caretaker: this guy was off his rocker.

At the time, there was nothing Axel could do about any of it. Not knowing if they would be safe or bear-man-food when he woke up, Axel drifted out of consciousness.

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Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed! (I’m sorry I’m running so far behind this week T.T It’s been murder—er—but not the Jack or Axel kind—eh whatever. Take it as you will). Stay tuned next week for Flynn’s short: *Surprised Parenthood.*

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[1] Mel betanote, “He’s like a kitten fighting a bear.” Jack, “Axel would be SO indignant at this. And then I’d have to pet his ears and coo, ‘it’s okay. One day, you’ll grow up to be a fierce jaguar!’ And then he’d bite me.”
Flynn: Surprised Parenthood

Surprised Parenthood (Is this How Gods Feel?)

Part I

Timeline: During the events of PJO 2: Sea of Monsters.

When Flynn saw the sheepish, goofy grin on Jack’s face, the one he got when he held doors open for her or carried around her battle equipment, she knew whatever came out of his mouth was going to be annoying.

Monsters and demigods alike where rejoicing over the double win. They roamed the Princess Andromeda’s halls, chatting, pushing each other around, and generally having real camaraderie for the first time. After several discouraging defeats on the Greek side—Flynn refused to use Luke’s phrase of “calculated setbacks”—her troop’s victory in their surprise attack against the Romans came as a morale booster.

The set up had been too easy: a dozen Romans on their day off inside a laser tag facility that the Romans didn’t know Flynn had taken over. Luke wanted her to convert the praetor. He figured having someone so high ranking would be useful.

Luke underestimated one thing: Romans were much more loyal to their legion than the Greeks were to Camp Half-Blood.

Had one Roman not turned traitor, Flynn was sure the scene would have been a massacre instead of a capture. Most of the Romans got away, but they had gained two valuable pieces: a Roman that the Romans didn’t know had turned spy and a praetor.

And then Jack’s spectacle of turning Julian’s death into a tournament sent the monsters and demigods into a party mood.

She had wanted to congratulate Jack as soon as the event was over. He’d been so sweet and corny about getting her flowers, a card, and making her a poem to celebrate her victory. Even if she thought it was dumb, Flynn wanted to get better about supporting his endeavors too.

Jack had also been quieter the last few times she’d seen him. He got spacey sometimes when his medicine first kicked in, but this seemed different. With anyone else, she’d force them to tell her through charm speak. That was something she swore never to use on him.

All they needed was some alone time. There had been a lot going on with that child of Poseidon and child of Athena sneaking onto the boat with a Cyclops.

First, she needed to find Luke to debrief him on the mission, to see if Lucille really did want to leave the fighting unit after proving herself so capable, to destroy Dr. Thorn for almost impaling Jack during Praetor Julian and Axel the Lion’s fight, and to find the new Roman recruit, Mercedes?, to interrogate her.
Hours later, she found out that Jack had taken a centaur to go offshore. Flynn dug her nails into her palm. Jack wasn’t allowed off shore on his own. If he got the wrong Disney song stuck in his head, he might accidentally play musical chairs with cancer or kill a whole restaurant.

When she asked one of the children of Hephaestus if he’d seen Jack, the blond Viking giggled, “Told you we should have put a tracking chip in his bracelet.”

After thirty minutes of panicked searching with Luke, a centaur ride, and some broken faces later, she and Luke found Jack with that dumb grin.

His red hair acted as a messy flag amidst a line of Cyclopes, snake women, nymphs, and other nature spirits inside the bright interior of Monster Donut.

A giant began to protest when she approached Jack, seething about demigods cutting the line. One look at her companion—Luke—and the complaint silenced.


That’s when she realized Jack wasn’t alone. There was a child holding his hand and another demigod by his side.

Jack turned, saw them, and gave them an excited wave with the hand holding the child’s. The small thing had to go on its tiptoes to accommodate Jack’s height.

“Oh! Oh! And that’s Flynn! That’s your new mother!” Jack said so quickly the average person might not have caught his words.

Flynn stopped in her approach.

She must have misheard him.


“Isn’t she beautiful! Here! You’ll have to meet her—she’s the coolest, and I mean the coolest and most beautiful person in the world! Flynn!”

Jack went to pick the child up from under the arms. Jack seemed not to realize how heavy the kid was and almost tumbled over. By balancing against a bolted in table, he managed to lift the child, Lion King-style. “Oh, aren’t you a tiny ball of muscle,” Jack choked out.

With Jack’s gracelessness, Flynn thanked the fates again that Luke agreed Jack shouldn’t go onto the battlefield anytime soon.

The child went limp, glancing between Flynn and Luke with wide eyes. Flynn didn’t know if it was a boy or a girl. It had one, bright hazel eye and one dark. Its black hair twisted and curled out wildly, a little too short to be a proper female bob, and a little too long to be a messy boy cut. Its skin was pale, with a warm tint that made her think of Central America. It wore a dirty button-down shirt that might have once been red, but looked more like a muddied brown. Based off its height and the soft roundness of its features, Flynn guessed it couldn’t be more than nine or ten years old, too young to have developed any demigod powers.

She had to give the kid credit: when she leaned down to examine it, the child didn’t flinch away from her face. Most adults couldn’t handle looking at Flynn’s mutilated face. She liked it that way.
Instead, this tiny one broke into a massive, dimpled grin. “You have beautiful eyes,” it said.

Jack made a gasping noise. He peeked from around the child’s head to see her reaction.

Flynn flinched backwards, wondering if Jack had set the child up to that. Only Jack was supposed to talk like that to her.

“Jack, what is that?” she asked, gesturing towards the child.

“Our new son,” Jack said, his arms starting to shake. He looked so proud.

The boy beside them stared skeptically, like he was waiting for Jack’s arms to break off.

“Dude, we talked about this. You need to tell someone before you leave the ship,” Luke said, brushing off the comment that left Flynn temporarily speechless.

Jack’s arms finally gave out, and he set the child down. “I told Clops.”

“The Cyclops?” Luke said, “You know that doesn’t count. And where did you get—wait—are you the one who won the fight against the praetor?”

The boy to the side of Jack pulled his shoulders back. His black hair was coarser than the other’s and dangled past his shoulders. There were braids twisted into random locations and a segment behind one ear was shaved. His skin was a rich caramel and his dark eyes darted up to Luke’s with such defiance, she thought he might have been looking for another fight.

He wore a shirt too big for him, one that must have been an extra band shirt of Jack’s. The praetor’s medals sparkled against the blue material. One of his hands rubbed the lower right medal like it might disappear if he didn’t touch it. Flynn considered warning him that the oils in his fingers were going to rust them.

Flynn wasn’t sure what country he was from, though guessed somewhere in South America. Other than a pair of ears he hadn’t quite grown into, he might look conventionally attractive if he cleaned up.

“Yea,” he said, “What’s it to you?”

Jack paled. “Oh, uh, Axel, this is Luke. He’s the leader of the army. We’re nice to Luke.”

Axel tilted his head skeptically. “So, you’re like the cult priest or something?”

Luke’s charming smile twitched. He glanced to the beaming redhead. “Jack… what did you tell our new recruits about us?”

Jack tilted his head to the side, holding out a hand to list things on his fingers. “That there is absolutely no running by the pools, Tuesdays are Terrific Taco Nights, which I figured they might like since I think they’re both Hispanic—are you Hispanic? I guess I should have asked—”

Flynn held out a hand for Jack to stop. He trailed off, noticing her frown. The delight in his eyes dimmed to anxiety.

“What did you call them earlier?” she asked, her tone careful.

Jack swallowed. “Our sons.”

The look she gave him must have been intense. The smaller child took half a step behind the
bigger one.


Flynn glanced further down the line. The space between them and the order counter had cleared of customers.

A frail blonde girl was beckoning them to the counter. Her icy blue eyes shot nervously to Luke and then back to Flynn. “To what do I owe the honor on my first shift?” She gave a curtsey that looked far too delicate in her yellow and pink apron.

“Lucille!” Jack said. He rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand and shuffled the two boys forward. “We wanted to come see how you were liking the new job!”

Although Flynn could tell he was trying to hide it, his voice shook. She reached forward to touch his shoulder and found that her hands were shaking too. What was wrong with her?

She lowered her hand without touching Jack’s shoulder. When she felt Luke’s eyes on her, she scowled at him.

Luke put his hands up in a defensive gesture and mouthed, “Don’t look at me.”

He was right: there was no way Luke could have known about this “son” business. He’d been with Flynn the whole time.

Lucille’s cheeks went rosy with her smile. “We just opened, but we’ve already helped so many monsters. I—” She froze, her eyes trailing back to Flynn. Choosing her words carefully, she said, “It’s a nice change of pace.”

Axel perked up, looking the girl over. “What is this place?” he asked.

The frail girl clapped her hands. “I haven’t seen you around before. Are you new? I’m Lucille.”

“Axel,” he said and stood up a little taller.

Flynn wondered if Axel was about to become one of the many boys, Luke included, that were baffled with Lucille’s sweet, biting disinterest. The two looked about the same age.

“We help monsters here—hold on—Vicky, can you take over?”

Lucille stepped to the side, letting another associate take over the main line before any monsters began to grumble.

She fluffed out her apron. “Like their half-mortal children, gods often abandon their monster children. Mortal children usually have at least one parent that can help take care of them. Monsters often don’t. They’re abandoned to starve in the wild.” Lucille frowned, rubbing her wrist.

Luke snorted. “Yea, leave it to the gods to be the role models for ‘worst parents ever.’”

Axel and the other child exchanged a glance.

“That’s awful,” the tiny one said.
She nodded. “Yes. That’s why we run the Monster Donut shops. They’re charity-based with no strings attached. Monsters don’t need to join Kronos’ army. We just want them to have a safe spot to get a free bite to eat and socialize with each other and friendly demigods.”

Jack nodded. Although his voice kept light, he kept trembling and wouldn’t make eye contact with Flynn. “We wanted an environment where they could see that not all demigods would try to kill them on sight. It’s kinda hard to undo centuries of the ‘who can kill whom first’ thing.”

Axel touched his mouth with his fingertips. “That’s a really cool idea,” he begrudgingly admitted. “Who funds it?”

Luke grinned. “That’s the beauty of these babes. The establishments pop up any time a super powerful monster—in this case a hydra—lends some of its life force to support its brethren. Flynn helped start this one.”

All eyes turned to her, except Jack’s. Everyone else made it sound so complicated. It hadn’t been. She was irritated to realize they were waiting for her to fill in an explanation. “Children of Aphrodite have an easier time talking to monsters that can’t speak as well,” Flynn said, “We just had to make sure the hydra was alright with losing a head to release the energy and start this facility.”

Lucille nodded. “All the materials show up on their own. We just need to bake the donuts and man the register. Now, sweetie, what would you like?”

She winked at the tiny child.

Its face lit up as it hopped up and down. “Strawberry-frosted donut with a jelly donut with a —

“You only get two,” Axel snapped and bopped the little one on the back of the head.

“Ayeeeee!” it whined and grabbed the black locks.

Jack crossed his arms. “Hey! Don’t hit your brother!”

The smaller one stuck out his tongue at the larger one. Axel scowled. They must have actually been brothers based off that interaction, even if they didn’t look related.

“But, you really can only have two. They can’t run out for the hungry monsters, else they might eat you,” as Jack said the last part, he bopped the tiny one’s button nose. He turned to Axel. “And you?”

Axel jammed his hands into his pockets, trying to look disinterested. “Chocolate glazed.”

Jack ruffled his hair.

Axel swatted his hand away. His face went bright red.

Lucille giggled. “How about you, Jak-Jak?”

“A chocolate glazed and… Ajax, what was the other one you wanted?” Jack asked.

The tiny one hopped again. “Bavarian cream.”

Luke and Flynn gave their orders as well. Then, Lucille filled a yellow and pink Monster Donut box for them. Before Flynn could grab Jack’s shoulder and see what he was up to, Lucille
called Flynn back to the counter.

Lucille told the other associate she was taking a quick break, hung her apron, and led Flynn to the girl’s restroom. Flynn wondered if this was some kind of trap. The only person she trusted here was Jack, and he could easily be manipulated into doing the wrong thing. Could Lucille use her charm speak on Flynn? The half-sisters had an unspoken agreement not to try it on each other. If Lucille was about to pull something, Flynn would need to come up with a way to disable her, other than charm speak.

When they got into the stalls, they checked each, one huge, one medium, and one small for the various sizes of monster and demigod customers, to see if they were alone.

“You sure about your decision to work here?” Flynn asked, deciding Lucille wasn’t up to anything malicious. “You didn’t even celebrate the victory over the Romans.”

Lucille had been vital in capturing Julian. On her own, Flynn sometimes struggled to get strong-willed people to harm themselves. Although Lucille’s charm speak wasn’t as powerful, without it, Julian might have been able to fight back.

The frail girl bit her lip, nodding. “Yes—I—change of pace.”

Flynn scowled.

Lucille touched her wrist. “I was nervous that you and Luke were here to say I had to come back.”

Flynn wanted to. Until they got Krios out of Tartarus or Atlas out from under the world, Flynn was stuck leading the Assault and Battery unit. While she liked the unrestrained violence, she hated having others look up to her for encouragement or direction.

Lucille had come here to help people. Flynn had come here to kill people. It made the monsters respect Flynn more and the demigods trust Lucille. Between Lucille and Luke, Flynn would never need to take a leadership role. Now…

If Luke wasn’t such a coward about battle, maybe he could lead the damn group on his own.

“We were just looking for Jack,” Flynn said.

Lucille gave her a fragile smile. “That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Do you remember when we were playing MASH while getting ready for the mission?”

Flynn considered making Lucille slap herself. Eileithyia, the Goddess of Childbirth, didn’t understand why the girls had wanted to play a game that would predict the future of where someone would live, who they would marry, what their occupation would be, and how many children they would have. Why not just ask an oracle?

No matter how many times Lou Ellen, a daughter of Hecate, told Eileithyia that not knowing was part of the point, the goddess got confused.

Lucille put her hands up in a surrender motion. “I swear it’s relevant. I wouldn’t have brought it up otherwise. I respect the oath we took to never speak of it again unless it was important.”

Both of them glanced around, like Orkus, the God of Oaths, might be lurking in a stall. MASH with demigods was serious business.
“Jack heard our conversation. He and Matthias had come by to drop off some extra supplies and he brought a gift for you,” Lucille said, like it was a big deal.

Flynn wished she could charm speak Lucille to the point. “And? I didn’t say anything that he doesn’t already know.”

Flynn thought the game was stupid and opted out of playing. Then, Lou Ellen, someone who didn’t fear Flynn nearly enough, decided she’d fill Flynn’s MASH out for her. There were no options under marriage. The girls cooed that Flynn had to be with Jack, despite several of them knowing Flynn had whomever she wanted whenever she wanted them.

Jack was just her boyfriend. Though, they all seemed to sense the thing that separated him from the other guys: he was the only one that mattered to Flynn.

She’d gotten “apartment” on housing, “20” on children, and “chainsaw murderer” under occupation. Then Eileithyia had killed the joy for all the other giggling idiots when—

“It’s not what you said,” Lucille explained gently.

--Eileithyia said Flynn couldn’t have twenty children because she was infertile. She was too damaged.

And Lou Ellen pointed out this is exactly why they didn’t play these kinds of games around gods.

At the time, all Flynn cared about was that everyone had stopped the stupid game and gotten ready for the mission.

Now, Flynn closed her eyes and exhaled, trying to conjure the audio of one of Näinai’s favorite Huangmei operas to calm herself down. Of course Jack had heard that. Of course he was the one eighteen-year-old that would be thinking about children when we’re at war.

“Don’t get mad at Jack,” Lucille begged. “He just gets—”

“Confused,” Flynn ended, hating that word. Even though she’d gone back to visit her grandmother with Jack that weekend, she couldn’t conjure the music. “Damn it, Jack,” she hissed, her fingers curling into a fist. Now, she had to figure out what to do and possibly how to get rid of her two new “sons.”

Surprise Adoption: consider this for your loved ones this holiday season.

XD Thank you for reading! I hope you guys enjoyed! I’ve had a lot of fun figuring out Flynn’s pov. Stay tuned next week to see how she takes to her new babies!
Ajax, the tinier of the two, twitched as he examined the donut box in Jack’s hands. Like Jack often did, he said no one could eat until Flynn had come back over. The gesture made Flynn sigh and hope he wouldn’t starve if she never came home from battle.

If she had to guess, Luke just finished selling their cause to the older boy. Axel leaned more into his seat, his eyes wide, as Luke enlisted the horrors the Greek gods had committed. A Cyclops and nymph from the next table leaned over their seats to listen. Judging by the kid’s expression, Luke would be much better at recruiting the older boy, and Jack would be much better for the little one.

By the time she was within hearing range, Luke was saying, “And you already started pretty well on combating the corruption of the West. That’s a pretty solid trophy you’ve got there.”

Jack made a slicing motion across his neck to tell Luke to cut it out on the trophy.

Without Flynn around, Jack grinned down at the two boys across from him and Luke, like they really were his babies. She wanted to point out that these weren’t hell hounds. They weren’t Alabaster’s failed “guinea pigs.” These were two teenage boys, one of which must have only been a couple of years younger than Jack.

But Jack looked so happy.

While examining the excitement in his light eyes, the opera’s overture came to her. Jack had painstakingly learned all of the Mandarin words and the intonations of the first act so he could give Nǎinai and Flynn a live performance. His angelic hum echoed in her memory from when Jack tried to replicate a Huangmei singer. He had failed at mimicking the trills, but he still sounded wonderful and made Nǎinai spill some happy tears.

Something in Flynn broke.

She groaned. They needed to set some ground rules on discussing major decisions and, likely, what counted as a major decision. Thank the titans that Jack didn’t have access to a credit card or Ebay. [1]

Lucille watched from the counter as Flynn approached the table.

Jack’s smile fell again. He struggled to make eye contact with her, his brow furrowing in shame.

The smaller boy noticed. His hazel and brown eyes widened as he glanced from Axel, to Jack, to Flynn. His cheeks puffed up and popped in a way that made Flynn think he looked like a chipmunk.

Flynn surprised herself with a laugh.

Jack perked up.
“Everything okay with Lucille?” Luke asked, eyeing the donut box like the others.

She nodded.

Jack opened up the box and shoved them towards the center.

Despite their polite patience before, Axel and Ajax descended upon the treats like there had been a famine. She wondered if anyone had thought to feed the boys after Axel’s fight.

Axel devoured one of his chocolate glazed donuts in two bites.

Ajax stacked all three of his donuts—two of his own and one from Jack—and attempted to bite all three at once, maybe to combo the flavors. Jelly seeped down his cheeks.

The older boy snapped something to the younger boy in Spanish.

The younger boy’s eyes went wider and he scooted further down the chair, holding his donuts close to him, as though he feared Axel might take them.

Axel sighed, lifted his second donut, and munched on it much slower, staring out the window thoughtfully. From what Flynn had seen on their way in, they were somewhere in the bogs of Virginia and the scenery looked as muggy as the air felt.

Flynn motioned for Jack to scoot closer to Luke so she could sit down. Remembering Luke’s question, Flynn said, “Lucille just wanted to talk to me about adjusting to civilian life.”

Luke looked a little disappointed. He kept thinking one of the daughters of Aphrodite would take interest in him.

“You’re part of Kronos’ cause now,” Flynn said to the boys, ignoring the way Luke gave an additional wave to Lucille.[2]

Ajax froze half-way through biting into his triple stack. He glanced at Axel.

Axel shrugged, still staring out the window. “I guess so.” After a pause, he added, “I can get behind helping underprivileged monsters.”

With his performance on the stage, Axel would probably be put into the Assault and Battery unit. There was no way his little brother could be in the same unit. He was too small.

She wondered what they would think when they did the creepy Pledge Your Soul ceremony or if Jack had forgotten to mention that part.

Jack watched Flynn carefully. One of his hands tugged mindlessly at the red locks.

“If you’re going to be here anyway, we’re going to have to keep an eye on you,” Flynn said.

Jack broke into an enormous smile. He reached for Flynn’s hand and hesitated.

She enlaced their fingers. This was going on the ever-increasing list of Things She and Jack Needed To Talk About.


“Next time,” she said to Jack, ignoring Luke as she often did, “Let’s start with a Hell pup.”
Jack’s eyes widened with delight. “Next time?” he asked.

“There will be no next time,” she clarified.

Jack didn’t seem to mind. He beamed at the boys. His right leg started to bob up and down in his excitement. “Did you hear that boys?! Flynn is officially your Mom!”

Luke coughed back a laugh.

Flynn shot him a glare.

He shrugged. “Sorry, Momma Flynn. Just not something I would expect.”

Axel grumbled something in Spanish, keeping his eyes out the window.

The tinier one elbowed him, then paused in munching. He gave them a fragile grin. “We haven’t had a Mom in awhile.” He tilted his head, examining her. “My little brother is half-Japanese. Are you half-Japanese?”

Flynn thought about what the Japanese soldiers had done to her grandmother and deceased aunts that had left her grandmother’s health so fragile, about the things her uncle had witnessed that left him so broken in the head. The things her uncle had passed down to her, through words and action every night before bed, the way some other children got lullabies.

Keeping her tone careful, Flynn said, “I’m half-Chinese.”

Ajax bobbed up and down. “That’s really cool. I don’t know much about China. You guys have a lot of bamboo, right?”

Without looking at his little brother, Axel reached over and swatted Ajax across the back of the head.

Ajax whined, “Ayyyyyeeeee!” again.

“Boys!” Jack said, trying to sound authoritarian. If the tiny one hadn’t set her on guard, she might have thought Jack’s tone adorable.

“My heritage is not up for discussion,” she said. “I’m American. That’s all you need to know.”

That’s all anyone ever needed to know. It was bad enough moving to Jack’s tiny Baptist town where she stuck out like an obsidian chip in a cup of clear glass. At least here, the demigod and monster population was diverse. There was more than one daughter of Aphrodite walking around to be whistled at, though all the boys here knew better. Flynn almost missed hearing people choke up when she turned and they saw her disfigured face.

The tiny one blushed and stared at the center of the table. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. After a pause, he added, “I like your hair sticks.”

Flynn forced herself not to adjust the blades she kept tucked into her hair. She didn’t realize she’d been digging her nails into Jack’s hand.

This kid didn’t know better. She shouldn’t get mad if she wasn’t willing to teach him.

“The boys were about to tell us what they like to do in their free time, that way we can get them settled in properly,” Jack said, winking at the tiny one.
“We were?!” Ajax yipped. He took another massive bite of his donut stack.

“They were?” Luke asked. His amusement wore out. He looked like he wanted an escape and didn’t have one on the inside of the bench. She wondered if there were any important meetings happening right now or if Luke’s dislike for tiny children (other than his beloved Annabeth) was showing.

Flynn held up a hand, silencing Jack and making him look nervous. There was something both she and Luke needed to know before they broke up this bullshit.

“You,” she pointed to Axel, narrowing her gaze to examine his jaw. It looked human. She needed to get something straightened out before Jack became too attached to these two, if he wasn’t already. “How did you have the strength to bite through the praetor’s skull? Not even demigods can do that.”

Axel surprised her with his response. “There are two kids and a Cyclops hanging out along the tree line, watching us,” he said, pointing through the window.


They both followed his gaze outside.

Flynn couldn’t believe no one had noticed the bright orange Camp Half-Blood shirts that poked out of the underbrush and the baby Cyclops stuffing his face with a box of donuts.

A scowl tugged her lips. “I wonder who that could be,” she said.

Jack sat up, mouth dropping open. “Oh! Oh! Is that Annabeth? I—I never got to meet her when everyone else saw her onboard—I was getting the games ready for the Roman—”

Flynn didn’t care about the daughter of Athena. She rose to her feet, touching the blades in her hair.

Luke looked pleased. “Flynn, chill. I told you that I let them go on purpose.”

Flynn took a step towards the door. “I heard about your talk with Annabeth and Percy. I heard it went poorly.” Something she refused to look at as a “calculated setback.”


Axel glanced from Flynn, to the spies, to Luke. He seemed queasy. “Are we about to fight again?”

Ajax stuffed the rest of his three donuts into his mouth.

Jack shrank back into his seat, like he often did when Luke and Flynn disagreed.

“No,” Luke said, “Those demigods are going to do a quest for us, so we don’t have to.”

“A quest that new recruits could do to prove their loyalty instead of fighting a death match?” Axel asked. His tone was innocent.

Maybe Flynn could get behind “mothering” this kid.

“No,” Luke snapped. “Polyphemus is too dangerous and won’t barter. We tried. It ended poorly. I need every soul I can have here.”
“I could easily lead a task force to kill that Cyclops, just like someone who stole the Zeus’ Master Bolt and Hades’ Helm of Darkness should be able to easily take the Golden Fleece from under his nose,” Flynn said. Phil, their friendly satyr with a criminal record, warned her not to push Luke too far. Phil wasn’t here to stop her.

This wasn’t the first time Luke had given her that look, one that said he wished Phil hadn’t tracked her down as a recruit. He knew she didn’t care about his promise of a new world. She just wanted to see this one burn. But, Luke needed her until they got his precious Atlas out from under the sky. Once again, she wondered if he would try to distance her and Jack once Atlas came into the picture.

Flynn sighed and withdrew a blade from her hair. Her locks stayed tight. The blades’ hilts were for show and certainly would have cut her hair if she used them as actual hair sticks.


“To tie up loose ends,” Flynn said.

Everyone in the donut shop went quiet.

Jack jumped and clutched at his hair. When he saw Axel and Ajax looking at him, Jack did something he hadn’t before. He slowly released his red locks, swallowed, stood, and put one hand on Luke’s trembling shoulder while beckoning Flynn with his other. “Hey… hey guys, not in front of the ki—new recruits.” The words switched when Jack saw the glint in Luke’s blue eyes.

A loud crack sounded outside. Flynn glanced to see an elm tree collapse away from the building.

Then, Monster Donuts shook like it had been hit with an earthquake. The lights flickered. Monsters and nature spirits freaked. The Cyclops that had been seated behind them stood and began to run in circles, clocking his head repeatedly into a sign celebrating the shop’s opening.

Luke, Jack, and Flynn were thrown to the ground.

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed :D Were you guys thinking these stories wouldn’t take direct scenes from Camp Half-Blood’s version of events? Stay tuned next week for the final section of Flynn’s short to see what happens to the insides of a Monster Donut shop when the hydra fueling gets—oh, right, Clarisse BLOWS IT UP with a freaking canon. Huh. Not Percy, for once. Anyway, stay tuned! And Happy Saturnalia and Solstice to all you pagan lovers out there!

Footnotes:

[1] Melbetanote, “‘But, they’re for the children, Flynn!’ ‘THEY DON’T NEED TEN NERF GUNS!’” Author Jack’s response, “Flynn’s would be lucky that he didn’t hire professional actors to reenact all of the Disney movies for them throughout their day.”

[2] Melbetacomment, “I have to say, BOY A BIT PATHETIC!” Author Jack, “I like to think Selena is the only daughter of Aphrodite who fell for his shit XD”
“They’re trying to kill the hydra!” Lucille squeaked from the counter. Her voice altered as she commanded, “Don’t panic! Please exit in an orderly fashion. Larger monsters and monsters with better footing, please help smaller monsters and demigods get outside the premise.”

The charm speak worked instantly. Everyone calmed down, despite the continuously flickering lights. A few other demigods in the room looked confused as larger monsters picked them up and carried them towards the exit. Lucille went to organize the exodus at the front while Vicky directed workers out from behind the counter.

Axel and Ajax stumbled to their feet. Jack put an arm around either of their shoulders to push them towards the exit. His fingers twitched to tug at his hair. “Lucille! I don’t understand! Why is this happening if they’re attacking the hydra?!”

Luke broke eye contact with Flynn, grumbling. He grabbed Jack’s shoulder to hurry him and the boys towards the orderly line by the exit. “All shops connected to this one become unstable when the hydra sprouts more heads,” he said.

Flynn slid the blade back into her hair. She stepped back to the boys.

They made it to Lucille stood by the doors. She trembled violently. From her reaction, Flynn realized they were actually in danger. This wasn’t some kind of courtesy precaution that Lucille was directing them out. “The hydra can’t concentrate where its power is going,” she confirmed, pushing all the boys through. “Why do you think Flynn and I had to talk to the hydra about this one?! Now, please hurry your exiting—”

A roar screamed in the distance.

Through the tree line, closer to the river, fire exploded everywhere. Smoke blasted in all directions. The ground shook.

The blast was far enough away that there shouldn’t have been any debris or structural damage. So Lucille’s horrified, “GET OUT!” along with the way she tackled Flynn through the door came as a surprise.

Pain exploded along her back.

A secondary tremble throttled the sidewalk under them. Flynn tried to shove her little half-sister off. Lucille held strong—

Like they were beside the other explosion, a wave of heat and force flattened them. Breath evaporated from her lungs. Like she’d doused her face in gasoline all over again, there was no way to inhale and no respite from the heat.

They must have fired on the donut shop.

Cool air swept over them as the air vacuumed and tunneled back towards the building. Flynn thought, for a horrifying moment, that the explosion had caused some sort of mythological black hole.
Instead, when she opened her eyes, she found a sizzling crater where the shop had been.

Someone’s labored wheezes hissed right into her ear.

Flynn shoved Lucille off, then froze, looking at her.

“Jack!” Flynn snapped. “Jack!” Her eyes darted around.

Jack, Luke, Axel, and Ajax had left the donut shop before them. Could they have been caught up in the blazing inferno?

In answer to her question and what would have been a prayer if Flynn wasn’t an atheist, Jack appeared at her side.

His hands hovered over her face, his mouth moving to form words that she couldn’t hear. There was a ringing in her ears. Behind all of it, she swore she could hear the hum of opera music.

“I’m fine!” she snapped, knowing Jack wouldn’t be able to hear her either and hoping he could read her lips. All of her limbs worked, and she didn’t see more than a few small burn marks. She pointed at the other girl’s collapsed body. “Lucille!”

Jack pulled Lucille into his lap, stomach down.

Flynn’s little sister wasn’t moving.

From what she could see, Lucille’s Monster Donut uniform had melted into the skin on her back. The reek of burnt flesh scorched Flynn’s nostrils. Lucille’s pale flesh was blackened. That smell made Flynn touch her face, remembering how it lingered on her for days.

Lucille’s hands were trembling: a good sign. She was in shock, but she was alive. For now.

Sound slowly returned. Monsters, demigods, and nature spirits alike screamed and cried. The ground crackled with embers. A Cyclops touched some ash at the edge of the crater, and Flynn had to wonder if that ash was its vaporized friend.

Luke shouted orders, trying to organize the survivors. Soldiers carried the injured to Jack.

Flynn’s mind took a moment to process: one of the Cyclopes must have covered Luke, Jack, Axel, and Ajax. Axel held Ajax as they crouched beside Jack, looking stunned at the carnage. There was no damage to the boys. Cyclopes, after all, were fireproof.

Then a wonderful sound soothed Flynn: Jack’s seraphim song.

Sweat gleamed on Jack’s forehead. Tears dripped down his eyes. He cradled Lucille, eyes glancing up to Flynn.

It would have been Flynn burned there if Lucille hadn’t shoved her down. Really, Flynn would have probably been vaporized just inside.

Flynn considered her stomach to be a strong one, but even she felt nausea rock her. Jack peeled off the burned flesh from Lucille’s back, where the skin had cauterized with the fabric.

As they watched, Lucille’s skin went from blackened, to raw-red. Jack danced his fingers across her torso, where her vital organs were. The skin seemed to react like thread pulled by a needle. It stretched into pinkish netting. Jack reached up to his forearm. As his fingers traced it, thin strips of his own skin peeled away like strands of dough. To her horror, he weaved his own
skin into Lucille’s back. While Jack’s lips moved, he trembled. His head began to lull. What color was left in his face drained. His lips turned parched and leathery. The dark circles under his eyes deepened, like his own vitality dripped through his song and skin into Lucille.

The tinier of their “adopted” sons lost the three donuts he’d just consumed and the rest of his stomach’s contents.

The older one looked queasy, not caring that his little brother had accidentally splashed his foot with throw up.

“They—they just—what happened?” Axel asked, dazed.

Luke appeared at Jack’s shoulder. He touched the younger demigod. As soon as Jack stopped singing, his eyes rolled up in his head. He collapsed backwards and would have clacked his own head into the concrete sidewalk if Axel hadn’t grabbed him with his free arm.

Luke glowered at Flynn, daring her to say something about how they could have prevented this if they killed Percy. “They killed the hydra. When the hydra dies, its line of power cuts, so all Monster Donut shops face the same vaporization as it.”

“And everyone inside them,” Flynn muttered, touching her little sister’s exposed backside.

Lucille’s breath had eased. Her vitals seemed normal. The skin along her slender shoulders, the small of her back, and the curve of her butt was pinkish. Along her legs and arms, there were still some first-degree looking burns, but nothing like the charred flesh before.

Flynn heard demigods grew more powerful with age. She wondered, if she and Jack survived until they were in their twenties, if Flynn could command full troops with her voice and Jack could resurrect the dead.

And if Luke would grow more cowardly.

She wanted to scream at Luke. This is why they needed to kill that uncontrollable “weapon,” before he did more damage.

Someone shoved a piece of cloth into Flynn’s hands.

She blinked. Axel had taken off his shirt, handed it to her, and looked away. He covered Ajax’s eyes. “You should put that on Lucille,” he said.

Flynn trembled with rage. She would deal with Luke later. Gently, she pried Lucille from Jack’s limp fingers. The tattered clothing fell away. Careful to avoid Lucille’s burns as best as Flynn could, she slipped Axel’s shirt over Lucille. From what Flynn knew of her, the younger girl wouldn’t appreciate having scars the way Flynn did.

Luke cursed, “Vicky got vaporized trying to help the others in the back get out.”

Struggling to keep her composure, Flynn scowled at Luke. Charm speak enlaced in her words, “When we get back on the ship, you will have Ethel tend to Lucille while she’s recovering.”

Luke’s face crinkled with concentration. Somehow, he’d learned to resist her charm speak. Likely a product of his mind-meddling with Kronos. “Ethel is pregnant and has to take care of a toddler,” he said.
“Exactly,” Flynn snapped. “She’s worthless for fighting practice right now.”

Plus, after what Zeus had done to Ethel a second time, the fifteen-year-old mother couldn’t stand going near any of the male demigods aboard the ship. She’d electrocuted more than one person in a panic, including Luke. When Flynn had scoffed at her, Phil reminded Flynn that different people reacted differently to trauma.

Maybe this could strike two birds down with one stone: Lucille was gentle and mild-mannered. If anyone could pull Ethel from her barbed shell, it was Lucille. And, Ethel was beautiful, else she wouldn’t have attracted the King of the God’s attention twice.

Flynn knew Lucille’s secret and why Camp Half-Blood’s Aphrodite Cabin had mocked her away for being “different.” It was about time Lucille got to spend time with a nonaggressive, beautiful girl.

“Prove your worth,” Flynn snapped to Axel and Ajax. Luke could stay to clean up his mess. Meanwhile, Jack couldn’t do anything else for the wounded. At least his singing appeared to have spilled over to heal some of the minor injuries of those around him.

Axel sat up at attention. Ajax cowered behind his brother.

“What do you need us to do?” Axel asked.

“The stronger of the two of you, carry Jack back towards the ship. The weaker get Lucille,” Flynn said. She stumbled to her feet, her head feeling woozy from the sensation of flames so close to her face. “I’ll trade off with you whenever one of you gets tired.”

She glared at Luke, challenging him to contradict her order.


As far as Flynn was concerned, this was his fault. If he would get over this weird delusion about Percy Jackson, he would still have these soldiers to his cause. Vicky would still be alive.

Luke cursed under his breath. He broke eye contact and turned to shout orders to the monsters.

Axel picked up Jack, slinging him across his shoulders in a fireman’s grip. The lanky, older boy’s limbs spilled limply everywhere like miscolored props. Jack looked even paler against Axel’s tan.

“Ajax,” Axel said.

The smaller boy rushed over to Lucille. He lifted the fragile girl, apparently much stronger than he looked. Lucille’s semi-nudity didn’t bother Ajax as much as it did his older brother.

Flynn lead Axel and Ajax towards the shoreline where she knew a centaur would be waiting to carry them back onto the ship.

So much for Lucille having her noncombat job. She’d be back in the Assault and Battery unit as soon as she was well enough to fight. Despite the brush with heat and the explosion, relief flushed over Flynn. She wouldn’t need to lead anytime soon.

“Um… Flynn?” Axel asked.
She looked down at him. He seemed uncomfortable, like he wasn’t sure what to call her. Both he and his little brother trembled. Their eyes were glazed. The smaller one’s breath panted erratically.

This is when Flynn was probably supposed to comfort them or give them some kind of pep talk. Flynn didn’t believe in those kinds of lies. They’d both seen someone die before: Julian’s fight happened a few hours prior. If they were fighting in Kronos’ army, they would have to get used to violence.

Instead of asking for comfort, which Flynn would have scoffed at, Axel cleared his throat. “Did those kids know what they did? That killing the hydra would make the donut shop explode—or whatever just happened—and kill everyone inside?”

Flynn snorted. She doubted it. Demigods on the Olympic side only learned about monsters to kill them more efficiently. “Does it matter?” she asked. “Will that change Vicky’s death?”

Axel’s gaze narrowed, his eyes coming more into focus. He adjusted Jack, so her boyfriend’s limbs flopped out more. After a moment, he glanced down at Lucille as she breathed shallowly in his little brother’s arms.

“No,” he said, “No it wouldn’t.”

They walked in relative silence for awhile. In the background, moans of the injured and dying fuzzed together with the rumble of the tide. The water was coming into view, along with another blast sight.

Seeing the crater where the hydra must have been bombed, Axel cleared his throat. “I want to make sure this doesn’t happen again. And show them that ignorance doesn’t excuse cruelty.”

When Flynn examined him, she could see fury in his expression.

Flynn snorted again. Maybe she could get behind having two adopted sons after all.

Maybe I should have done a Christmas/Hanukkah special to lighten the mood? XD Regardless of a lack of talking reindeer, I hope you enjoyed! Thank you for reading. :D And I hope you guys are having some awesome holidays/holiday breaks!

Stay tuned next week, when we kick off the new year with Ajax’s Magical Daycare, where you meet some of my favorite characters in TFMO (and some I know one or two of you have been waiting for XD).
Ajax was excited for his first proper day aboard the ship. Sure, the morning had a rough start, as had every morning for the last six months. Ajax had crawled into his older brother’s bunk once he heard his brother’s breath ease into unconsciousness. Good thing too. Thirty minutes before dawn, his brother woke up screaming, terrifying their bunk mates out of their beds and making a panicked Jack kick their door open.

Apparently, their new Mom had vetoed sharing a room with them, so the brothers ended up in a room across the hall.

“What’s wrong? Who do I need to kill?!” Jack shrieked, wielding the porcelain top of a toilet for a weapon. He wore a T-shirt and boxers that might have once been white before dallying with a red sock in a laundry machine.

As Ajax had practiced many times before, the younger boy willed his eyes to get teary. This wasn’t hard. He also had nightmares about losing their Aunt and Uncle, but he didn’t have his brother’s uncontrollable vocal practice upon waking.

Axel was red in the face; his hand clamped over his mouth. His eyes darted around, remembering where they were. He covered his head, muttering in Mayan.

“I had a nightmare,” Ajax said, trying to keep the attention off his older brother. Axel needed to put on his Mist mask before the others noticed anything weird about his face. Fortunately, the room was too dim to see Axel’s ears or teeth, but the light trickling from the hall might reflect off Axel’s eyes.

What Ajax said was true: he had a nightmare. But, he didn’t need to specify that he wasn’t the one screaming.

Jack lowered the toilet lid, exhaling. “Night terrors are common around here. Do you want a glass of milk before you go back to bed?”

Ajax stared at the gangly redhead. It was like this guy had pulled Generic, Background Father Figures: the Manual and pulled lines from it. Did people’s parents really talk like that? Maybe it was an American thing. He was waiting for Jack to clear out the ship’s mini golf course, put a white picket fence around it, and invite Ajax and Axel to play catch.

Ajax, personally, loved it. It was cheesy and simple. As long as Jack didn’t end up being someone who liked to touch boys at night—as Ajax’s older brother speculated—then it was awesome.
Once Axel put on his Mist mask and got his breathing under control, he said, “N-no. Once—
um—Ajax has a nightmare, we can’t go back to bed. We can train—or—or work…”

Under the covers, Axel squeezed Ajax’s arm to show his appreciation. Unlike his older
brother, Ajax had no shame. Since everyone thought he was several years younger than he was and
people typically weren’t sure if he was a girl, they were gentler on his breakdowns.

Jack set the toilet lid down to prop the door open, seeming to realize that lid probably
weighed half of him. Axel said carrying Jack the other day was like carrying a sack of dandelions.

One of their roommates—Chris from backstage—pressed a pillow over his head to block out
the scattered light. From the shadows in the hall, Ajax could guess other kids had gathered around
at the noise.

Jack shooed some of them away. Once done, he leaned against the doorframe, folding his
arms. “I have a morning routine that Luke makes me do for my voice. If I don’t, it, uh, can be bad.”
Jack raised one hand to tug at his hair. “Uh… who is up at this—oh! Oh! I know where to put
you.”

Ajax and Axel hopped out of bed. Axel went to pull his jeans over his boxers and grabbed
for a fresh band shirt that Jack had loaned him. Atop that went Julian’s medals. Jack promised to
take them shopping sometime this week. Ajax didn’t mind. He was so small compared to Jack’s
height that Ajax could have worn one of these shirts as a dress. If he had a belt, he absolutely
would.

Ajax snapped his fingers. He grabbed one of the long band shirts and a flannel button down
shirts that Jack had brought them. Ajax slipped the first on, then tied the former around his waist.

Jack gave him a confused look, but shrugged.

Axel just sighed.

Jack waited for them to brush their teeth with complimentary room toiletries.

They shuffled into the hallway, Ajax rubbing the sleep from his eyes. Axel was in the middle
of pulling his hair into a bun. He startled and almost went for a weapon when he saw someone was
with Jack.

She was probably thirteen or so, a year older than Ajax. Her black, messy curls hung long,
all the way down her back, and she was rapidly stuffing them into some kind of scarf that she
wrapped sloppily around her head. Her skin was a warm olive, speckled with acne. Her eyes were
large, brown, almond-shaped, and fierce.

“Ah! Uh—Sadie—?” Jack said.

“Mercedes,” she said in a curt tone.

“Mercedes,” Jack corrected, giving her an apologetic, cute grin. The girl didn’t seem to
notice as she finished adjusting her hair and scarf. She had to start over, like she wasn’t used to the
actions or needed a mirror to perform it with perfection.

“Do you remember how to get to the lab?” Jack asked her.

Mercedes maintained a blank expression while confidently saying, “Like the blind leading
the blind.” She had a slight accent, one Ajax couldn’t place but felt like he should recognize.
“Perfect!” Jack said. “I’m going to gargle some saltwater. Can you get my boys to the lab? Have fun boys! I’ll come to collect you once I’m done getting my voice ready and checking on Lucille’s wounds.”

With that, Jack took a step back towards his room. Then he paused and turned. “Mercedes? Like the car?” he asked.

She continued to give him a deadpan stare. “Like the opera, Carmen.”

“Huh,” Jack said. As he disappeared back into his room, he softly sang, “Quand je vous aimerai? Ma foi, je ne sais pas—” to a tune that Ajax had heard dozens of times but never knew the origin of. He always assumed it was from a kids’ cartoon.

Without looking at Axel or Ajax, she started down the hallway. “Names,” she said.

“Axel,” his older brother said, taking stride behind her. “It’s nice to meet you.” Although Axel had hated their father’s formality lessons, they showed in his peacock manner.

Ajax scurried to catch up to their longer stride. She was several inches taller than him and had a pace closer to Axel’s.

“Camille,” Ajax said, suppressing a grin. It was the first unisex name he could think of.

“His name is Ajax,” Axel said.

Ajax pouted. Axel wasn’t going to let him play any of his usual Am I a boy or a girl? Or What race am I? games that he and his sister, Lapis, liked to pull on their past tutors.

“That’s too many A’s, too many X’s, and too much awesome. What’s your last name?” she asked.

Both boys too stunned into silence for a moment. She spoke so fast and neutrally that neither could tell if she was mocking them.

“Pax,” Ajax said.

Axel swatted the back of his head.

Ajax whined clutching his hair. He switched to Spanish. “What?! It’s not like dad can find us on a cruise ship. And why didn’t you let me pretend to be a girl? This is the first person our age that I could mess with.”

“I knew you were a boy,” Mercedes said like he hadn’t been speaking in a different tongue. “You were bunked with boys.” There was a distinct pause when a smirk crept onto her lips. “And your manhood is showing.”

Ajax blinked and scrambled to rearrange the flannel shirt to cover his no-reason-boner. In his hurry, he hadn’t realized how obvious it was with the band shirt and no pants. Before he’d run away from home, he remembered Kouta and Axel sitting him down to explain that this was a normal part of growing up, that some mornings and randomly at other times, that part of him would decide to make itself known without any psychological or physical reason.

His older brother looked more mortified than Ajax felt. “I’m sorry—” he said, “He’s—”

“Going through puberty and not used to hiding it yet,” Mercedes ended for him. That
definitely wasn’t what Axel was going to say, and his blush showed it.

Her tone was casual, more like an adult health provider than that of someone their age. Someone that should have been teasing him. “I have brothers at home,” she explained. At the end of the hall, there was a stairwell. They descended the steps rapidly.

In that moment, Ajax decided he liked Mercedes. Most other girls would have thought he was gross for this thing out of his control. His sister had been cool about it. Lapis had gotten her period a year before and he helped her get excused from lessons or chores when her cramps were bad. In return, she helped make distractions when he was in public with this problem.

Lapis also enjoyed teasing Ajax, saying she should have had the no-reason-boners; and he, the period.

Ajax was about to announce that he liked Mercedes—something, in retrospect, he shouldn’t say with his current problem—when she continued, “Plus, I enjoy having blackmail on my associates. Now…” She poked Ajax’s arm. “You go by Pax Two. Guard your first name with your life and only hand it out to those you trust.”

Ajax blinked. Pax? He could go by Pax.

The now-christened Pax Two said, “Why do you cover your hair? It’s pretty.” It had looked wild, like his.

Axel scowled at Pax, like the question was rude. But, if the older boy wasn’t going to make conversation, Pax wasn’t about to let them walk in silence. Axel’s eyes had been scanning the ship nonstop, like he expected a monster to hop out and eat them. That was Axel’s job—to keep them from being monster feed. Pax’s job was to distract Axel from the seriousness of that job. And scout for Axel’s potential girlfriends. And Mercedes was witty and cute.

“Because I prefer nosy, little boys to appreciate my quick tongue and unfathomable patience before my hair,” she said, keeping her eyes forward. The smile on her lips grew.

Pax thought about covering his hair and some of his face with a cloth, but decided that would put too much attention to his eyes. People who didn’t have heterochromia probably didn’t have that problem.

“I like your accent,” Pax said. He still struggled with his. His little brother, Hiro, and Lapis had easily covered their home accent in both Spanish and English. The older two, Kouta and Axel, still had the same ticks Pax did. “Where are you from?”

The silence that followed made Pax scared he’d asked another rude question. Axel told Pax not to freely state where they were from, but Axel was paranoid about telling people his favorite color. (Currently, it was the dull blue of a jaguar cub’s eyes.)

Mercedes hesitated. “Morocco… Fez, Morocco.” She sounded uncertain. Maybe she was as paranoid as Axel. “My brothers are still in the medieval district.”

“Is that… in Europe?” Pax asked. Normally, he got to play this game with others. Not many people could point to his homeland on a globe.

“Only to those who haven’t seen maps of Africa,” Mercedes said with that same neutral tone. She stopped in front of a pair of closed doors that had skulls and crossbones graffitied on it. “Catch.”
She withdrew something from her Scooby Doo PJ pants and tossed the items at them in a spray.

Axel and Pax both reached to reflexively do as ordered.

They startled—she’d thrown a mix of pins and jacks, those tiny metal toys that involved the crisscrossing of metal bars. Things that would hurt to catch wrong.

Instinct took over.

Axel had always been better at juggling, but that didn’t mean Pax was bad at it. The brothers snapped their hands out, working together to catch the four various sized pins and three jacks. One slipped from their reach. Axel caught it on the tip of his foot and kicked it back up.

While it was suspended in air, it was like they were back in a performance. A sly smile crept onto Axel’s face as he glanced away, like he had forgotten the flying projectile.

Pax, meanwhile, jumped to have the tiny jack balance in his hair.

Once accomplished, the brothers gave each other grins. They bowed slightly, Pax keeping his head up so the jack wouldn’t fall off. They presented the items back to her as though she were a queen.

Mercedes stared. “Huh,” she said. “Performers?”

“For awhile,” Axel admitted. He straightened to full height. Seeing Axel relax and stop glancing around the room like he expected a rhino to charge them, Pax hoped that this Moroccan would end up Axel’s type.

“Which of you has steadier hands?” she asked, glancing slowly between their outstretched palms. Neither had scratched themselves on the pins or jacks.

Axel nodded down to Pax as Pax dipped a lower bow. Instead of taking her items back, Mercedes rearranged all of them. She took all but one of the jacks and put them into Axel’s hands and placed all of the pins into one of Pax’s.

“Pax Two,” she said, “This is a pin and tumbler lock.” She pointed to one of the pins in his hand. “This is a tension wrench.” She pointed to another that squiggled towards the end. “This is a rake.” She pointed to the jacks. “These are hex shields.”

“We’re breaking in?” Axel asked. The corner of his lips tugged into the standard Pax boy smirk. Pax’s heart fluttered. Maybe this girl would be Axel’s type.

“We’re interviewing,” Mercedes corrected. She leaned against the doorframe. The motion made Pax think she wanted to avoid any potential explosions that might erupt from the door. “Luke thinks he can do everything around here and I’m going to prove to him that he’s running himself thinner than a piece of paper. Pax Two, take the tension wrench and insert it into the lock. Apply a gentle, consistent amount of pressure. Pax One, if you hear a whisper of voice from anyone other than the three of us, throw that jack at the lock faster than a god chases after a nymph.”

Pax did as told. Axel tilted his head towards the door in a way that Pax knew meant Axel had tilted his ears as well. This was the best set up they could have had: Axel could probably see any weird curses on the door.

The idea of spells made Pax giddy. Hadn’t she said hexes?
Mercedes continued. “From my research since Luke got here, he has the only spy contact in the entire encampment. And he only spies on the Greeks, whoever they are. They need a better spy network in New Rome, and I’m recruiting. Pax Two, take the rake and ‘rake’ it across the tumblers on the top side of the keyhole. Rotate the tension wrench gently back and forth as you do so. Pax One, get ready.”

Pax obeyed. This, he decided, was fun. He’d always loved seeing spies do this in movies. And, he really wanted to impress Mercedes if she thought he could do something. Pax was terrified of fighting. Seeing Axel on the stage—Pax had sobbed uncontrollably, waiting for his brother to make one wrong move against the much bigger, more trained Julian. As much as he’d managed to keep a smile on his face, the image kept popping back into his head—one of Axel’s jaw cracking into Julian’s skull right after Julian stabbed them.

If Jack hadn’t been there, they both would have died, needlessly.

Here, Pax felt the memory ebb. His mind blanked as he listened for a click and jiggled the two picks.

Mercedes gestured to Axel, who kept his eyes on the door. “No doubt they think you’ll end up in the Assault Unit.” She pointed at Pax. “You won’t. I’m recruiting and I might be able to keep you together if you both impress me.”

Something gave under Pax’s fingers.

Before Pax heard anything, Axel launched the jack.

Pax expected an explosion or massive light show.

Instead, a sliver of green smoke emitted in a funnel from the knob. It sank into the jack.

Now, the metal was tinted green.

Mercedes’ hand snapped around the jack before it could physically strike the door. Then, her fingers dipped down to clutch Pax’s in a way that froze him.

Voices erupted from inside, like a sound barrier had been breached.

The brothers looked at Mercedes.

She had the pointer finger of her other hand against her mouth for silence. She flattened herself against the doorframe to make herself as invisible as possible.

Without needing further instruction, Axel flattened himself on the opposite doorframe. Pax scrambled to Mercedes’ other side. He would have felt safer beside Axel, but, here, he could easily receive instructions from the thirteen year old girl. And investigate if she used nice-smelling shampoo or bath wash.

Pax caught the distinct mix of sweet and acrimonious that comes from coffee beans.

Once they settled, Mercedes soundlessly opened the door a few centimeters.

An enraged male’s voice came through the door, along with the clatter of some glass. “I want off this boat, Luke. What are you going to do when the son of Poseidon sends a rogue wave to hit the ship? Do you really think he’s so stupid to never think about that?”
“Wow, Alabaster! Calm down! I’m sure Jack can do something for your sea sickness—”

“I don’t want that maniac anywhere near me.”

Pax glared over the door to Axel. Even if Jack had seemed off his rocker, he was nice, gave them donuts, and sang them to sleep that night. Yea, that normally would have made Axel embarrassed enough to jump out of the boat, but Jack’s voice had been so soothing, it knocked them and their cabin mates out within moments.

Axel kept his gaze on the door, frowning slightly at the insult to their new caretaker.

Mercedes shoved Pax’s face back so he’d lean against the wall again.

“Don’t change the subject. You’re an idiot for letting him live—”

“Torrington,” Luke growled. That must have been the kid’s last name. Or a mythological insult. If it was an insult, it was a cool sounding insult. Pax wouldn’t mind getting called a Torrington.[1]

“No, we’re not going to pretend here. What are you getting at with this kid? First you poison him with a pit scorpion, which took me WEEKS to train and you LET IT DIE, then you don’t finish off the job? All you had to do was follow through, Luke! Then we keep the monsters off Percy’s back all summer like he’ll be grateful and will forget about the whole scorpion thing and how you framed him for an Olympic level theft—and now you THREATEN to kill him again?! Whose side are you on?! Either successfully recruit him or kill him. I don’t care if you’re jealous —”

“I am NOT jealous of Percy Jackson.” Luke’s voice had grown icy. “You don’t need to worry about him thinking of a rogue wave—”

“Or clogging our engines with sea trash and leaving us dead in the water—”

“He’s too dumb to think of that!”

“Ah, and you assumed this ‘idiot’ would know to get the Golden Fleece?” the other boy’s voice became more metered, more critical.

“Annabeth is smart. She’ll figure out that they need the Golden Fleece to save Thalia’s tree. She’s brave and resourceful.” Luke tone was so endearing towards the girl, Pax had to wonder who she was. The name sounded familiar.

“This stupid, convoluted plan again? We could have sent some of our heroes to collect the Golden Fleece on our own. Flynn already offered, as have new recruits. Then you could have used the Fleece on Thalia’s tree without hurting her. But no, so much more noble for you to poison the girl you love—”

There was a loud thwap. Something clattered in the room. Pax knew that sound. Someone had been hit. He trembled, thinking of the times their father beat Axel in front of Pax to punish Pax for doing wrong. Their dad knew his children were more likely to behave when he beat the others.

A shrill female’s voice said, “Don’t hit my broth—”

Then was hushed.

A tense moment passed where Pax realized that he did not want to be caught on the other
side of this door when Luke stormed out of there. He did not want his mother to help him escape one abusive home only to run into another.

When Alabaster spoke again, his voice was tight and muffled, like he spoke through a hand or a clenched jaw. “I’m saying that, if I were someone Luke Castellan unnecessarily poisoned, then I was saved by Percy Jackson’s heroics and I found out that it was only because Mr. Castellan couldn’t bother to do it himself——”

“Al,” the younger girl in the room begged.

“—then I might not be ecstatic to join his cause,” the boy finished, “Especially if I had the temperament of a storm.”

Luke’s voice was low and terrifying. “She will join, Torrington.”

Pax focused so intently on the conversation and keeping himself flushed against the wall that he didn’t hear someone else approach them. Not until a puff of blond hair came into his peripheral.

Pax held his breath. The boy was somewhere between Pax and Mercedes’ age. If Pax were told to bring a baby Viking to show-and-tell (something he’d heard about in American schools), then he would have brought this boy.

He had fluffy, sandy hair that poofed out around his red ears. The only area the boy’s skin didn’t look pale to the point of transparency was on his sunburned nose and cheeks. When he paused in front of the door, he fluffed out a leather work apron, like it was a ball gown. His pale blue eyes were full of energy as they darted from Mercedes, to Pax, to Axel.

The smile on his face twisted to something mischievous.

Mercedes exchanged a glance with Pax and Axel. Her hand had clutched Pax’s arm, about to shove him into action, though he wasn’t sure if it was to jump the baby Viking or run away.

Before she could encourage either, the boy shoved both of the double doors open. “Lord Torrington!” he bellowed as deeply as a pre-pubescent voice could. “I seek your audience at this fine dawn hour!”

The only response was an uncomfortable silence inside.

Mercedes dragged Pax out from the wall. They were still out of sight from the room’s inhabitants, but now it didn’t look like they were eavesdropping. Axel mimicked the motion on his side of the doors. He looked at a loss to get to their side of the hallway. They needed a distraction.

The Northern boy skipped into the room without invitation. “Ah! Luke! What a glorious occasion to see your——”

“This conversation isn’t over, Torrington,” Luke growled.

Pax wondered what the conversation was originally about. He also wondered if he could jump to the ceiling and spider-hang there. They were too slow. Luke rounded the door, his blue eyes narrowed with rage.

The expression froze Pax in his place; the three of them were busted.
Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed getting to “meet” three of my favorite characters from TFMO. I also hope you guys have had an awesome start to the best year for critical rolls XD Stay tuned next week for Ajax’s Part II!

[1] Foreshadowing XD
Ajax: Magical Daycare II

Magical Daycare II

In Luke’s enraged exit, he didn’t notice Axel on the other side of the hallway.

He did almost run into Mercedes and Pax. For a moment, his eyes widened with fury. Then, they relaxed. “Hey! Jack’s boy. And… Sadie?”

“Mercedes,” she supplied.

“Like the car?” Most of Luke’s fury faded to confusion.

“Like in *Call of the Wild,*” she said blankly.

“Huh,” Luke said. “You haven’t been questioned by Flynn yet.” The last part was a cross between a statement and a question.

The dark circles under Luke’s eyes made Pax wonder if Luke had slept since the donut shop blew up. Pax had heard rumors of nightmares. That could make anyone cranky.

“Shall I tell her that I take priority over her sleep?” Mercedes asked. “I’m quite flattered. She seems important to the camp.”

Luke released a shuddered breath, exhaling the last bit of his anger. “She and Jack have a strict morning schedule to get their voices as powerful as possible for the day. I’m sorry. It’s been a long morning. I’m just very impressed by your involvement in capturing Julian.” Luke set a hand on her shoulder.

Mercedes stiffened.

Axel paled at the mention of his first kill. Fortunately, the medals didn’t make any noise when he touched them.

Mercedes artfully kept her eyes off Axel and firmly on Luke’s hand. Pax got the feeling she didn’t appreciate being touched. Pax would bet that she was running through several ways to break Luke’s hand.

She cleared her throat. Her mouth opened, as though to speak, but no sound came out.

Then Luke walked past. He gave them one last charming smile as he waved a hand. “I’ll see the two of you later during sword practice. We’ll have to see how skilled you are with a blade.”

He was gone, having never seen Axel on the other side of the door. He also didn’t seem to realize they had been eavesdropping. Or that the hand he’d put on Mercedes shoulder was discolored from whomever he hit.

For a breath, Mercedes clutched her shoulder like Luke’s touch had been poisonous.

Pax took her hand. Belated, he wondered if she hated being touched in general. “You okay?” he asked.

Mercedes stared at him in a way that said few had dared to touch her hand. She glanced down at the contact. “I appear to have attracted a parasite.”
“At least it’s a cute one,” Pax tried to comfort, wondering if he should let go. Her fingers shook.

Mercedes watched Luke disappear at a bend in the hall. Hollowly, she said, “Earlier this week, I thought there were only Romans in the world and demigods didn’t have a choice: either death by monsters outside or forced servitude in the walls of New Rome. Now, I find out my half-brother on the Greek side is trying to form an army to stop a force as unstoppable as New Rome’s and he is clearly unprepared. Seeing the Greeks exist, feeling them, gives me the creeps.” She sighed. “There is so much work to do. And it starts with getting rid of this parasite.”

Pax almost didn’t catch the last part. She snatched her hand back to shove him into the room.

Axel, who had been listening warily, scrambled to catch up to them.

Pax almost flopped onto his face when he saw the interior of the room.

This room did not belong on a cruise ship. It belonged on a Frankenstein movie set.

There were rows of shelves on one side of the room, containing—Pax blinked in surprise—spice bottles and vials. Others had scrolls and ancient-looking tomes. On several neatly spaced tables, there was laboratory equipment set up for some kind of experiment. In the center was a full fire pit, with a massive, humming suction duct above it. Pax had no idea how it was catching all the smoke—it should have been spilling all over the place. But, Pax didn’t care. What he cared about was the archaic, cast-iron pot above the fire, bubbling with a strange liquid.

Just behind the fire stood the looming statue of three women—or a woman with three heads?—holding lit torches, swords, and other ominous items.

Other tables had skeletons or jars for dissection.

A black cat napped peacefully on the ribs of a massive skeleton. It lazily opened one eye to see the three of them approach.

They passed two metal rods with sparks flying between them. Tesla coils?

By the science equipment stood three other people. One was the chubby, sun-burned boy who had ruined their camouflage. “Come onnnnnnn, Al!”

“Don’t call me that,” another boy said.

The other occupants in the room were clearly siblings. One was a girl, maybe Pax’s age, with curly black hair tied into a ponytail. She was short, maybe only five feet tall. Her skin had a healthy Mediterranean glow to it. Her face was tinted pink, like she’d been crying, and she rubbed furiously at her eyes.

The other was a boy. He was awkwardly tall, maybe close to six feet. Freckles spackled his pale features, ones that hadn’t caught up to the maturity of his height. He must have been older, at least fourteen?, but Pax couldn’t decide how much older. He leaned over a Bunsen burner, using a match to light the bottom. There was a bruise forming under one eye, a product of Luke’s temper.

He and his sister wore burned and stained lab jackets.

Pax’s breath caught at the most startling feature: their eyes were emerald green. For Pax, this made them unfairly hot and obviously witches.
The plump, shorter boy tapped his fingertips together like an evil henchman. From the way his eyes seemed to glitter with ideas, Pax knew he was more an evil mastermind. “But, Al—”

“Alabaster,” the green-eyed boy corrected again. With routine ease, he set a beaker of clear liquid above the Bunsen burner and sprinkled something into it. The liquid twisted dark and ominous.


The younger sister nodded her head feverously. Her eyes blazed with rage. “Matthias is right. We can get back at him!”

Alabaster scowled, sniffing the contents of his beaker. He pinched something out of a vial on the table and dusted it into the boiling container. His eyes focused on the experiment intensely like he feared acknowledging their words or what had happened. Pax wondered if the boy had ever been hit before. Pax wondered what that would be like—to remember the first time you’d ever been hit.

Alabaster’s shoulders slumped. “If anything is used from this laboratory, he’ll know where you got it. I will seek revenge upon Luke on my own time, in my own way. Put the ingredients away, Hanson.”

Matthias Hanson stopped tapping his fingers together. A deep sigh bellowed from him as he slunk a step towards an ingredients shelf. With another prolonged sigh, he set a vial into an empty slot. “Chris bet ten drachma that no one could get it from you.”

When Alabaster refused to acknowledge his pouting, Matthias took a back step towards the exit, where Mercedes, Axel, and Pax had stalled.

The green-eyed girl folded her arms and glanced up to the ceiling. Any hint of previous tears vanished as a smirk lit up her face. “But… we can’t be held accountable if someone were to steal things from the laboratory.”

Alabaster didn’t look at her, though his lip did twitch. “True. But, you don’t have the talent for theft or silence, Hanson. Idiotic, loud distractions? Yes. Not theft. Now, unless you want to try something—”

“I don’t like being a guinea pig, Potter!” Matthias said, putting his hands up defensively. He backed the rest of the way out the door. He snapped his fingers and made finger guns at Mercedes, Axel, and Pax as he moonwalked past them. A loud thump sounded when he stumbled into the door.

Mercedes glanced at a watch on her wrist and shoved the Pax brothers further forward.

The green-eyed girl focused on them, her eyes going wide. She tugged on Alabaster’s sleeve.

If Pax had to guess, that blush had something to do with seeing Axel’s bed head. His ruggedness often had that effect on women and the right kind of boys.

“What are these?” Alabaster asked, not looking up. As he poured some of the beaker’s continents into a vial, he asked his sister, “Lelly, is your Mustela vial ready for trial?”

She snatched something from a drawer and shoved it at him, still smiling shyly at the three of them.
Alabaster set his beaker down, so he could take her vial. Its continent was green and fizzed slightly.

Mercedes snorted and gestured towards the Pax brothers. Axel opened his mouth to answer Alabaster’s question. Mercedes beat him, her response locking the Pax brother’s and Witch Boy’s futures together.

“New guinea pigs, apparently,” she said.

“Ah, what fortuitous timing,” Alabaster said. He straightened and walked up to them. He extended a vial to either Pax brother; Axel, the ominous dark brew; Pax, the fuzzy green one. Reflexively, they took them. “Here, drink this.”

“Ajax,” Axel said, sounding more annoyed than worried.

Pax would show Axel not to worry about him doing something awesome. He popped the cork topper off his vial. When a witch tells you to drink a mysterious brew—

“Don’t!” Axel shouted this time. His free hand reached for Pax’s face, but he was too slow.

Pax tossed the contents into his mouth, excited for some magical goodness.

Thank you for reading! This short is quite a bit lighter than the other ones, and I hope you’re still enjoying! See what Pax turns into next week in Magical Daycare Part III.
It was like drinking Melon-flavored Pop Rocks. In summary, ten out of ten: Pax would drink mysterious liquids from witches again.

What was better: when Axel went to swat Pax’s head, his hand barely touched Pax’s twisted black locks. As Pax had hoped, something spooky was happening. The world was getting HUGE. So was his clothing. The flannel shirt collapsed from his waist. Although Axel always towered over Pax, his older brother looked like a giant now.

“Is there tree nut in that?!” Axel had asked before he realized how small his brother had gotten.

Alabaster withdrew a mini flip notebook from a vest pocket and clicked out a pen. “An allergy? Noted. Tree nuts are the least troublesome ingredient you’ll find in here.”

By then, Axel panicked for another reason.

Or, Pax assumed it was because Pax, himself, was now at Axel’s ankle height. His oversized band shirt had settled in a nice, warm blanket around him. He felt very warm in general and enjoyed the sensation of burrowing. When he glanced around, Pax was elated how easily he could focus on subtle movement around the room: the way Alabaster flicked his pen back and forth, the way Lou Ellen held her hands over her mouth to repress a giggle, the slightest twitch of Mercedes’ lips, and the way the vein in Axel’s forehead pulsed as he demanded Alabaster fix his brother.

Pax reached out to pat Axel’s foot and assure him that he was honored to have been miniaturized in the name of magic. His paw didn’t reach far enough.

Paw?

If Pax could have grinned, he would have. His facial muscles didn’t react. What did react were his short, clawed paws. His body felt different. He tried to glance down and bopped his face into the floor. After shaking his snout, he glanced to the side to find a furry, long, almost-serpentine body.

And, the best thing ever.

He. Had. A. Tail.

Pax jumped. The end of his body reflexively straightened and his short, black-tipped tail followed. Pax turned, sprinting after his tail, and curled in on himself to grab it.

This new body was way more flexible than his boring human one.

“You turned him into a ferret!” Axel panicked.

“Actually, I believe that’s a weasel,” Mercedes said, watching Pax roll on the floor and bat at his tail.
“It is,” Alabaster said. He frowned, crossed his arms, and gave his sister a chastising scowl. “It was supposed to be a polecat.”

The girl sheepishly shrugged. “At least it’s the right family.”

“Genus,” Alabaster corrected absently. As though that was the part upsetting Axel, he apologized, “Sorry, she’s still learning her classifications.”

“I don’t care about—what is in this stuff!?” Axel demanded. He took a threatening step closer to the witches, shoving his vial at them, the one Alabaster had poured from his science beaker.

“Yours is a new brew of tea,” Alabaster said, staring thoughtfully to where Pax tried biting through Axel’s boot. Alabaster swallowed. “I think.”

Axel looked about ready to start throwing punches.

To prove that would be an unnecessary show of aggression towards the two coolest people Pax now knew (and because the black cat had noticed his movement and was doing an excited cat-butt-shuffle with a hunter’s pair of dilated eyes), Pax darted at the girl’s lab coat. He stood on his hind paws, rising much taller than he’d anticipated. As he had hoped, his claws effortlessly dug into her canvas material. Easier than he ever could as a human, he clamored up the front of her jacket.

The girl giggled in delight when Pax sat on her shoulder and snuggled into her black locks. That was not the typical reaction he got when he snuggled against people he didn’t know. Pax wondered, passively, what else he could get away with in weasel form. He smelled richly of cooking herbs and sandalwood. Her brother’s scent was even stronger, almost overpowering, as Alabaster reached to rub between Pax’s ears.

Pax’s heart thudded in his little chest as those beautiful, emerald eyes leveled with the girl’s shoulder. “Huh, her heterochromia remained,” Alabaster said, tilting up Pax’s snout with a bent index finger. Pax was pleased to hear his clothing had confused at least one person today. “There must be some sort of magical interference.”

“Maybe mixed magic in her ancestry or maybe a previous curse?” the girl suggested. The idea seemed to excite her.

“She’s remarkably calm. Has your sister been turned into a weasel before?” Alabaster’s questions were more to himself than Axel.

Axel’s rage melted at Alabaster’s question about mixed magic. Although Pax was preoccupied staring at Alabaster’s emerald eyes, Pax could guess that his brother had paled.

Without waiting for a response, Alabaster glanced at Mercedes. “Where do they come from?”

“Jack,” Mercedes answered. “Their names are Pax One and Pax Two.”

“That’s awfully convenient for records—wait—Jack doesn’t care about new comers,” Alabaster muttered. His eyes focused on Mercedes like he only now registered her as a living thing. “And who are you?”

“Someone who is about to be late for morning prayer. Is there a meditation room aboard this ship?” she asked.
Alabaster’s eyes flicked from her shawl back to her eyes. “There is for people who have names. Unless you’d like to be Pax Three.”

Pax liked listening to the two of them talk. It was quick and dangerous like dangling a stringed mouse in front of a jaguar.

“Mercedes,” she answered, struggling to keep her lip from twitching.

“Like the Count of Monte Cristo,” Alabaster said thoughtfully. “A beautiful name.”

Mercedes opened her mouth. Pax had to wonder if she thought Alabaster was going to make the “Benz” comment and had a witty retort. Instead, she smiled.

Pax wanted to be able to make everyone in the room smile like that. He had a feeling Alabaster and Mercedes didn’t often enough, similar to how Axel didn’t smile often enough. Maybe he and the green-eyed, giggly girl needed to start conspiring.

“There is a chapel on the top floor of the ship, two floors above the deck. You will pass Luke setting up his sword training. He will be in a foul mood this morning,” Alabaster said it like it had nothing to do with him. With Pax’s enhanced eyesight, he noticed the slightest quiver in Alabaster’s hands.

He flipped a page on his little notebook and wrote something. Once done, he tore off the page and handed it to her. “Lou Ellen and I take advantage of the sunlight in the chapel for a small garden. You will find instructions here that say you are to help tend to my sick herbal ingredients five times a day. You will find that not everyone aboard the ship is comfortable with the idea of genuflecting before deities other than the titans. If they do, show them this slip of paper. There are clean towels rolled beside the garden lot that we use for tending. They are not ideal, I know, but can be used if you need.”

Mercedes stared at Alabaster for a moment. Pax didn’t understand most of what Alabaster said. As far as he could tell, he’d just given her a lot more work.

Carefully, Mercedes took the paper from Alabaster’s hands, folded it, and slipped it inside her pocket. “Thank you,” she said. Her voice shook a little. She cleared her throat. “I am quite capable of teaching people tolerance if need be. I’ll set Axel’s sister’s clothing in the corner so Pax can get changed whenever she morphs back.”

Although the motion was fast and subtle, Mercedes winked at Pax. If weasels could grin, Pax would have. At least someone appreciated his game.

Alabaster blushed at the mention of a “girl” being naked around him. Pax liked his blush. With how pale the boy was, it made his face look like a tomato. He waved Mercedes off.

Axel sighed, seeming much calmer after observing the conversation.

She gathered Pax’s things, set them in a corner behind an ingredient shelf, faired Pax One and Pax Two well, and left the room for to wash for morning prayer. Pax would have to ask her what religion she was later. They didn’t have to wash before going to mass—well, unless they got into a fight. Pax’s eldest brother, Kouta, liked to smash people’s faces into the dirt and sit on their backs to get the point across.

Axel nodded after Mercedes. “That was good of you to do that for her.”

Lou Ellen giggled. She shoved Alabaster’s shoulder. “Look at you doing something nice for
someone. Has your opinion on the All Powerful God changed?"

Alabaster snorted. “Praying is wasteful when your god is too cowardly to show his face directly. However, I am not one to tell people how to waste their time if false security comforts them.”

Axel stiffened at those harsh words. Pax wondered if Axel prayed beyond when Chiich or Frasco made them say meal and nighttime prayers or when they went to church. “Would you say that to her face?” Axel snapped. From the sound of Axel’s anger, he did pray.

“Verbatim, but she’s not the one that mentioned all powerful deities. Lou Ellen did. So I’m saying it to her.” Alabaster didn’t seem to notice Axel’s flexing muscles. He gestured towards the vial in Axel’s hands. “Now, hurry up and test that tea, Pax One—”

“Axel,” he growled.

“I don’t know, Al,” Lou Ellen said. Pax clawed at some of her stray hair so he could better see her face. She was blushing at his older brother. Her hand looked enormous when it reached to untangle Pax from her locks. “If his little brother reacted odd due to mixed magic or a curse…”

“True,” Alabaster said. He shook the thought off. “Lelly, that wouldn’t affect how tea tastes.” He looked annoyed.

Her laugh was light.

Alabaster turned back to Axel, tapping his chin with his pen. Those emerald eyes examined Axel with a new interest.

A sense of foreboding made Pax bristle out his fur. He almost slipped off Lou Ellen’s shoulder and had to dig his claws deeper in the canvas to stay mounted.

Yea, these were witches, but they would never be able to undo the Mayan sorcery that Axel had worked—they couldn’t undo what Axel did to his face. Frasco taught him how to do it years ago, and Axel had spent years perfecting—

Neither Pax nor Axel realized what Alabaster was doing until it was too late.

Alabaster snatched Axel’s illusion off his face like it was a physical mask.

Axel reared backwards, like he thought Alabaster had wanted to punch him. When the illusion dissolved under the witch’s fingers, Axel took an additional stagger backwards, like he’d been hit.

“Stop!” Pax tried to shout, but it came out a high-pitched squeal. He reached a paw towards his brother to calm Axel and tell him it was okay. But, his paw only reached out a few inches.

Axel covered his face with his hands. A low growl emitted from his throat as he backed a step towards the door. Pax knew that look. Axel was scared. Scared and humiliated.

“Fascinating,” Alabaster said. He flipped the shimmering image of a normal fourteen-year-old boy’s features in his hands. It looked weird and floppy without Axel’s face to rest against. Pax didn’t know it could maintain itself when not obscuring his brother. “You know how to use the Mist. You know how to use the Mist well.”

“Told you my Mist weakening ward would come in handy,” Lou Ellen said gleefully.
Alabaster poked at the distinct dents in the mask that represented a pair of brown eyes. They looked like contacts sewn into rubber. “Monsters use the Mist like this all the time, but I would have never thought about using it on a human—”

“Give. It. Back,” Axel snarled. As best he could while covering his face, he rose to full height and took a step forward.

Pax needed a distraction and he needed it fast. While his brother was awesome and infallible, Pax wasn’t sure how he’d fair against these two Ravenclaws in a brawl. And he didn’t want to fight with their new friends.

Like the Greek gods had been listening and generous for once, a distraction was exactly what Pax received.

He lunged towards his brother. His intention was to prevent a fight. Unfortunately, weasel paws weren’t as good at propelling forward as human paws. He began to fall short by several feet.

Then, his weasel hind legs slammed into the floor higher than they should have. The fore paws, that he intended to extend between the two parties, reached the full span of both witches. He stood to human height, his butt exposed to the witches and his front to his brother.

All Pax could think about was how everything felt much colder. Why didn’t humans have fur? Fur seemed like such a great idea. Pax realized, belated, that wasn’t what he should have been focusing on.

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed! Pax *ehem* has a bit of a nudity problem. Matthias recently told him nudist colonies were a thing, and now he won’t stop submitting it in Jack’s suggestion box for *Ways to Make Camp Othrys Better*.

Stay tuned next week for the final segment of this short story!
Axel let out a string of cusswords.

“Lou! Get her to the corner with her clothes!” From the shrill in Alabaster’s voice, Pax could deduce three things about Alabaster: he hadn’t realized Pax was a boy, he had never seen a naked girl outside of a magazine, and he was covering his eyes. Either that, or Alabaster had a thing or two to learn about girl anatomy, possibly true if Alabaster had never seen a naked girl.

Lou Ellen took Pax’s elbow. She pulled him towards the shelves. “Come on, before you give my brother a—”

When she quarter turned Pax, she went bright red and burst into giggles. “Oh!” she said.

There weren’t a lot of options on how to react. He could apologize for his nudity and for tricking all of them earlier. He could sprint to the corner and pretend to be embarrassed. (Nudity had never bothered him.) That felt disingenuous. What would Uncle Frasco have done? How could he keep Axel focused on reprimanding him instead of attacking the witches for exposing his face?

Pax winked his hazel eye at Lou Ellen. “My uncle said the best mornings are filled with surprises.” He tried to give her a charming smile.

Pain erupted in Pax’s ear. Axel might have been about to rip it off as he dragged Pax away from Lou Ellen, towards the corner with his clothing. “Don’t be a creep!” Axel snarled.

“Aye!” Pax complained. He switched to Spanish to whine, “I’m young enough; she might have thought it endearing and adorable instead.”

Uncle Frasco said Pax would only have a few more years that he could use age and ignorance as an excuse. Might as well use it.

“Get dressed,” Axel said. The tone cut off any more resistance.

Axel had handled killing the praetor. He’d handled chasing Pax down after Pax had run away—Pax knew Axel would. (Pax had just hoped the rest of their siblings would have been here with them.) Now, one of Axel’s last defenses had been robbed from him. Without the illusion, Pax could clearly see Axel’s massive canines, the gold glint to his eyes, and the way his tufted ears folded back into his hairline, several inches higher than a human’s would have been. Pax wondered if Axel could recreate the illusion when Alabaster was holding the old one or if Lou Ellen’s “Mist” weakening ward would make it difficult.

Without complaint, Pax slipped the huge band shirt over his head and tied the flannel shirt back around his waist. Although now wasn’t the time to investigate, Pax could feel something in the flannel’s front pocket. There hadn’t been anything before. Had Mercedes put something in there when she moved his clothing?

“They just seemed curious,” Pax said. “I don’t think they meant harm.” He was scared of upsetting Axel more. His older brother only ever showed his real features around the circus, where people thought it was costume make up or were performers that didn’t care. When their papa made
a big deal about it, saying it showed favor from the gods, it made Axel even more self-conscious.

“Is she dressed?” Alabaster called.

Lou Ellen’s voice trembled with repressed giggles, “Almost.”

If she let him, Pax would hug her later for continuing the farce on the older boy. He liked making Alabaster flustered.

Now that Axel had accepted his features would be visible, he jammed his hands into his pockets. When the two of them approached the witches’ work table again, Axel scowled, making his elongated canines look more vicious.

Once, when their youngest sibling, Hiro, had cried at seeing Axel’s barred fangs, Pax had grabbed Axel’s jaws and opened and shut them saying, “Nom. Nom. Nom!” It sent Hiro into a fit of giggles. Pax hardly resisted doing so now, though doubted it would ease Axel’s tension.

Lou Ellen gave Pax a wink when they returned. “She’s dressed.” From the expression, Pax could tell it wasn’t a flirtatious wink but a mischievous one. Pax got the feeling she liked to mess with her sibling’s heads as much as he did.

Alabaster had uncovered his eyes to pick Axel’s fake face off the ground. He must have dropped it when Pax transformed. After clearing his throat and pretending his face wasn’t bright red, Alabaster held the illusion up. “This is excellent craftsmanship, though completely unnecessary. Lots of monsters on the ship have a combo of humanoid and animal features.”

“I’m not a monster,” Axel snarled, not helping the claim. Best way to convince people you’re not terrifying: bare your fangs at them.

Lou Ellen’s Mediterranean tan shifted to a deeper red. She seemed more enchanted with him now that she could see the shorter, spotted fur below Axel’s ears, where he pretended to shave his hair. “People have animal features too. You should see our sister, Lamia. What are you?”

The question wasn’t said with a scared or harsh tone, just curiosity. The Pax boys were used to hearing it in so many capacities. Pax and Lapis got it about their gender. Hiro, with his monolids, and Axel with his ambiguous bronze skin, got it about their race.

“Maybe some sort of massive cat?” Lou Ellen continued, not seeming to realize how rude her question was. “You don’t have slit eyes—”

“Large cats don’t have slit irises, Lelly,” Alabaster chided.

Axel cut off their conversation by motioning towards his face. “This was not for the public to see.”

Alabaster’s gaze went from distantly considering Axel’s face to narrowing at Axel’s eyes. He cleared his throat and held the illusion out for Axel.

Axel snatched it from Alabaster and began smoothing the mask of brown eyes, human ears, and shorter canines back to his features. He muttered in Mayan while he worked.

“I—I’m sorry,” Alabaster said, “I let my curiosity get the best of me. I’ve never seen someone tweak just a tiny bit of their face before. Lou Ellen is right though. You don’t need to hide your features here.”
“You’re even hotter with your real ones,” Lou Ellen said.

Pax glanced at Axel to see if the older one blushed.

Axel cleared his throat. His mouth moved like he had a response.

He didn’t.

Pax gave Lou Ellen an appreciative grin. That was the best way to disrupt tension: shocking it out of people.

“You guys are cool,” Pax said.

This time, Alabaster blinked in surprise. “That’s not the typical response we receive when turning people into small mammals.”

Most people, Pax decided, didn’t naturally have the disposition for cute, furry things the way that Pax did.

Pax scurried up to Alabaster’s side. The boy didn’t flinch back when Pax tugged his lab coat sleeve. Pax tilted his chin down and batted his eyelashes at Alabaster, the way he’d learned from Kouta’s girlfriends and some of the prostitutes their dad occasionally hired for parties and business meetings. “Can you really do magic?”

Alabaster stared at Pax for a moment, his brow furrowing in confusion. “As can the two of you, apparently?” his question was directed more at Axel. “Are the two of you children of Hecate?”

“Half our siblings are monsters,” Lou Ellen said, seeming to forget that Axel really didn’t like the M word.

“No,” Axel said.

Neither Axel nor Pax knew what to say about their parentage. Pax didn’t like saying who his mother was. Not with the mini-cult his father had formed around her and the way that cult treated Pax.[1]

Could they talk about Axel’s heritage with anyone on this ship?

Lou Ellen tilted her head to one side. The black locks of her ponytail tumbled against one shoulder. “Are you even Greek?” she asked. “You two have some other magic that interfered with my vial.”

Alabaster appeared to forget Pax for a moment. “I haven’t read of cat people in Greek mythology. Maybe—Egyptian? Though I suppose that would be your full head. Mesoamerican?”

If Alabaster were throwing at a map of the world, he would have been hitting way too close to home. Axel flinched, like each of those metaphorical darts could blow up the country of Belize. To be fair, Pax thought, Belize was a tiny country.

Something high-pitched chimed.

All four of them jumped.

After a moment, Pax realized the sound had come from a ship’s intercom in the corner of the room.
Alabaster sighed. He went to write something on his flip notebook. “I want to test your magic and how it interacts when combined with Greek magic,” he said. “They’ll want you on the top deck to test you for sword prowess, combat training, and knowledge of mythology. I’ll be up shortly to help with the assessment. They’re split into specific skills afterwards. I expect you to report back here during that time.”

When Alabaster tore the piece of paper out of his flipbook, it glowed green. Axel hesitated to take it. At his pause, Pax snatched the sheet.

He couldn’t read anything on the page. As they always did, the letters looked like abstract art to him. The sheet itself felt warm. “We get to come back!” Pax asked. He failed at keeping the excitement from his voice.

Alabaster gently removed Pax’s other hand from his lab coat. The motion wasn’t angry, just awkward, like Alabaster wasn’t used to people touching him. Him and Mercedes. Pax vowed to give them both more hugs. “Willing test subjects, especially in their rarity, are always welcome back to the lab.”

Pax wanted to say that Alabaster could test on him all day. He rather liked turning into a weasel and was excited at whatever else the witch boy might have up his white lab sleeves.

Instead, he grinned at Alabaster’s emerald gaze.

Axel took Pax’s arm and pulled him from Alabaster’s side.

Alabaster shook his head, his expression unreadable. “Surely, if you were capable of killing the praetor, Luke will be most enthusiastic to assign you into the Assault and Battery unit. However, it would be a waste to exclusively delve into the sword with talent like that.” He motioned towards Axel’s face. The bitterness to his words reminded Pax of the conversation they overheard between him and Luke. The sentiment was so strong, he almost overlooked the compliment.

Axel grunted. “Don’t touch my illusion next time.”

Pax gave them a shy wave goodbye. Lou Ellen giddily waved back as Axel backed them towards the exit. Pax wanted to point out that the two witches could have turned them into weasels easily, and that Lou Ellen was much more likely to do so to have Axel transform back naked than for any other malicious reason. But, since Uncle Frasco and Aunt Nilley’s murders, Pax knew there wasn’t any reasoning with Axel’s paranoia.

Once outside with the lab doors shut, Axel relaxed.

“They were awesome!” Pax said, “And they want us to come back! They—”

Axel snagged Pax’s ear. “Do NOT drink something without asking what is in it. What would you have done if nuts were in there? Did you even think to bring an EpiPen from home?! And what if they’d wanted to drug you?!"

“Your imagination is boring!” Pax whined. He didn’t want to consider the idea that his new friends could be bad people.

“Yea, and if they were going to drug you, they would, like, totally slip it into the cafeteria’s fountain machine,” someone said directly beside them.

Axel jumped and dragged Pax behind him.
The blond, sunburned Nordic boy stood outside the doors, exactly where they had been eavesdropping before. His grin was so wide, Pax thought you could sell advertising space on it.

“Matthias Severe Hanson,” he said and extended a hand.

Both Axel and Pax stared skeptically at the hand. It clearly had an electric buzzer strapped to the palm.

When neither bit, Matthias lifted his hand, shook the buzzer back and forth in their faces, and tapped his fingers together. Pax wondered how often Matthias shocked himself with the device if he tapped his fingers together so often.

“You two are good. Pax, right?” He pointed a finger gun at Pax. “Did you get it?! That Mercedes Benz chick said that you got it.”

For a moment, Pax didn’t know how to respond. This was the first person to properly introduce themselves, but he’d glazed over the introduction so rapidly, Pax was still back by “Matthias Severe Hanson.” But hadn’t this boy already said that he knew his name?

“Got what?” Axel asked.

The answer hit Pax with a bead of sweat. He puffed up his cheeks and popped them, reaching into pocket of the flannel shirt tied around his waist. As he feared, he withdrew a vial.

Axel was going to kill him.

Matthias bent his middle and ring finger down in some weird hand motion. “Awesome!” he cried.

Pax darted to the side when Axel went to slap him across the head. “Ajax!” he snarled. “When did you even have time to grab that?! You were a weasel!”

Pax dashed behind Matthias as the blond pointed out, “Actually, that’s kind of weasels’ thing.”

“I didn’t!” Pax squeaked, “Mercedes!”

“Yea right,” Axel growled.

She must have slipped it into his pocket when she moved his clothing. He’d unwittingly been part of a smuggling operation. And he’d just stolen from two witches. He knew what happened to people who stole from witches. “These aren’t…. drugs, are they? Am I going to be cursed?!”

Matthias laughed again, snatching the vial from Pax’s fingers. He didn’t seem to mind his meat shield status between the two brothers. “Na, man. This is the perfect thing for a prank! Ohhhhhhh!!!! Chris is going to owe you some drachma!”

“No, he won’t. You are going to owe Alabaster and Lou Ellen an apo—”

Axel never got to finish his sentence.

Someone threw an arm around Axel’s shoulder.

Like any normal teenager would, Axel judo-flipped Jack over his shoulder and onto the floor. Jack’s butt and legs smacked loudly against the carpet. He clutched at the arm Axel had
mangled. “Ow—holy titans, kid! That was—”

Axel paled.

He and Pax scrambled to help Jack up.

“Don’t sneak up on me!” Axel said. He puffed up his cheeks and popped them. Clearly, losing his face once today had left him on edge.

Jack gave him a pained grin as the brothers each took an arm. “We finished up our vocal practices and wanted to check on how you boys were doing with your caretaker. You got your dad good.”

“You’re not my—” Axel bit back his own comment. Pax could tell Axel didn’t want to both physically and emotionally assault the redhead within minutes of each other, especially with Jack’s eyes watering the way they were.

A few feet behind them, Flynn stood. She was in the middle of slipping her hair blades back into her bun. Pax realized, in alarm, she must have withdrawn them to use on Axel if things got out of hand. Their new mother was terrifying. Awesome, but terrifying. “You’re late to sword practice,” she said, crossing her arms.

Pax tried not to feel disappointed. He would rather help with the witches all day. Unlike Lapis and Axel, he never did as well during fighting practice, though he did excel at evasion and running away. Running away was his favorite, next to eating Reese’s Sticks.

During their altercation, Matthias must have slipped the vial into his pocket. He’d taken a few steps back, to stay clear of their new parents.

“Are you coming to sword practice?” Pax asked.

Matthias grinned. “If by sword practice, you mean lay down and prostate myself…? I find it discourages people greatly from stabbing me.”

Flynn scowled at Matthias. Unlike most other people Pax had seen, Matthias didn’t cower away from her.

“He doesn’t have to come to this training. He makes the traps for it,” Flynn explained.

Matthias pinched his thumbs and forefingers at his collarbone, like he was wearing suspenders. He rocked forward. “I’m a mechanic.”

Pax’s mind buzzed with ideas. He could be part of this violent cult and not fight? That sounded awesome. Mercedes mentioned the Spy Unit that she wanted to create, but how long would that take to make? “How do I become a mechanic? Or a witch?!”

Jack choked on a laugh. He ruffled Pax’s hair. While talking, he shooed Axel and Pax towards the stairs. “Be a child of Hephaestus or Athena, usually. Or Hecate for the other. There are some people that are naturally skilled at it—”

Matthias scurried alongside them. He, like Pax, struggled to keep up with Jack’s long strides. “Ximena is a daughter of Ares and she’s really naturally adept with engines, so she helps us a lot.” Matthias bobbed his head to unheard music and tapped his fingers in the air.

Pax’s shoulders sagged. His mom definitely wasn’t one of those gods. He liked to sew and
draw; he’d never been good at fixing the beat-up cars that their Chiich’s boyfriend brought back to their house.


From what Pax had seen of Axel’s fighting, his older brother would be genuinely curious. Axel always wanted to learn more so he could better protect Pax. After seeing how powerful the witches were, he probably wanted a confidence booster.

Jack beamed at them and looked at Flynn, his bright eyes wide. The way he whipped his head made his red locks flop into his eyes.

“I run them,” she said, staring ahead as they twisted up several flights of stairs. Pax wished he would have counted how many they descended so he could make a countdown going up. “And, since I can’t show favoritism towards our… children,” she said the word with distaste, “I will need to be harsher on the two of you.”

Axel beamed at the thought. Leave it to his brother to be excited about a good ass kicking.

Jack grinned back. He poked Axel in the chest and nodded to Pax. “Before Flynn beats you up, you two are in for a surprise today.”

They finally crested the last flight of stairs, to a pair of glass sliding door. As their sensors went off and they automatically slid open, allowing a burst of warm air to blast Pax in the face, he almost squeaked.

Waiting outside the doors was a smirking Luke.

He tossed a sword to Axel, then Pax.

Matthias, seeming to sense the gravity of the situation, bolted.

“You’re getting private lessons with me today,” he said.

Remembering what Alabaster said about Luke’s mood and the way he’d struck the witch, Pax swallowed. They were dead.

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed :D Next week, I’m taking a short break, but I’ll come back the week after with Luke’s two-parter Big Boy Conversations.

[1] Mel betanote: “cults everywhere!” Jack, “Now you get a cult! And you get a cult!” the Greeks will be so pleased XD
Timeframe: Several months after the last short. After Sea of Monsters and before Titan’s curse.

“Kronos has been waiting thousands of years. He can wait another decade.” The witch boy glowered.

“No—Camp Half-Blood now knows,” said the servant of the Titan Lord. “We need to find another way to accelerate his rise.”

-Overheard in the Captain’s Quarters

For the first time in what felt like years, Luke had a full night’s rest. These days were becoming rare: days when his thoughts were his own. No shrieks of Kronos. No passive mutterings about the bitterness of existence (other than his own bitter mutterings). No hisses about how weak Luke was—a demigod, pathetic for needing to sleep, for needing to eat, for needing to do anything other than the mission, for caring for his old friends for—

The tip of Axel’s sword would have slashed across Luke’s chest guard had he not pivoted backwards.

Luke tried to shake the whispers from his thoughts. Those weren’t useful when sword fighting. Kronos wasn’t in his head right now. The last thing Luke wanted was Kronos’ internal cheerleading when the Titan wasn’t around.

Especially when it meant that Luke would lose his sword.

The motion was so quick that Luke didn’t have a chance to disengage. He’d gone to lunge for Axel, only to have Axel arch his blade, locking Luke’s, and disarming him.

There was a pause.

Luke’s sword clattered onto the deck.

For such a short moment that Luke wasn’t sure if he’d imagined it, Flynn paused in drilling the younger recruits to scrutinize them.

Then she was barking orders again.

Axel froze.

The jaguar boy’s tufted ears tucked low to his hairline. His golden eyes went wide, flicking—as Luke learned they often did—to figure out where his little brother was before returning to Luke. (His little brother was sparring with Mercedes.) He kept his sword in a defensive stance, the tip shuddering, like he feared Luke would blast him off the ship with some hidden Sith Lord power.

Fear, Luke realized. Kronos would have been thrilled that Axel’s reaction to winning a bout was fear. Axel may have won this, but he still knew his place.

Either way, he should have been excited, if not proud, that Axel had bested him.

The sight of Axel’s fear made him sick for another reason. It reminded Luke of his nightmares about Thalia’s eyes, wide and brimmed with horror upon seeing him. That was the last thing he wanted from her. Those nightmares, like Kronos’ cheerfulness, were distractions while training.

Luke gave Axel a smile, hoping it didn’t twitch. “Nice disarm, dude,” he cheered. Sometimes, he forgot how to make his voice sound encouraging.

Several people had stopped at the sound of his sword. When Luke laughed, picked up an iced towel from a bowl filled with them, and threw it directly into Axel’s face, everyone relaxed.

Pax—Axel’s fluttery, excitable little brother—braced to run to Axel, probably to tackle hug him. As soon as he exposed his back, Flynn rolled her eyes. She made a hand motion and Mercedes—Pax’s partner—immediately tackled the tinier boy to the deck.

Luke picked up an ice towel for himself and wrapped it around his shoulders. “You’re improving fast,” he said.

Axel tossed his sword onto a designated weapons mat. Sweat soaked the loose strands of his bun to the back of his neck. When he and Pax trained, they rejected dirtying shirts unnecessarily. This definitely distracted most of the girls, some of the boys, and quite a few monsters.

“Thanks,” Axel said. He wiped his chest down with his towel. From what Luke had heard, Pax and Axel did a separate training regimen to maintain their skills as acrobats. It showed on their muscle tones, and Luke wondered, passively, if they’d let him join. Or if Kronos would let him. The Titan Lord might consider it a waste of time.

“Axel, what are you doing for the rest of today?” Luke asked. He glanced around the deck. Everywhere you looked, demigods were attacking dummies, practicing with monsters, playing in the pool, or shoving at each other. Jack provided background music with an acoustic guitar.

Nearby, Lucille, a friendly daughter of Aphrodite, helped their youngest pledge pick up her first sword. Charlene, or Charlie as everyone called her, was five years old. Everyone loved her, including the monsters. While her mother, Ethel (though everyone called her Echidna), was cold and distant, Charlie was outgoing and feisty. She’d be a strong warrior one day, and—from the amount that she could already shock others—a powerful child of Zeus and granddaughter of Summanus.

Too young for the prophecy, the voice of Kronos cooed inside of him.

Luke shook his head.

He wanted to be excited that Charlie was picking up her first sword and being taught by her step-momma. He didn’t want to be excited that Charlie could one day slay a sea cow to rule the cosmos. No wonder Zeus rebelled against Kronos if he wanted to give those kind of bedtime stories.

This was one of their days off. After practice, everyone would have free time. Morpheus had
lulled Kronos’ sarcophagus essence into a daze, claiming it was good for his regeneration and Luke’s sanity. These days were becoming rare. Normally, Luke would take Jack to the *Monster Mash* club to throw back a few beers, but they were on the wrong coast for that. Feeling the warmth of the breeze, he realized they were probably along the wrong continent.

Axel looked uncertain. He picked up one of the water jugs that Ethel and Charlie had set out for the training troops. He nodded his thanks to Ethel. She leaned stiffly against the pool railing and scowled at the ground by Axel’s feet. Axel had, gently, been encouraging her to make eye contact with men without electrocuting them.

“Um, we’d have to ask Jack,” Axel said. Luke shook his head.

You asked Axel if he had free time.

Jack scrambled over alongside them, playing a short, mysterious tune like a theme for his arrival. Whenever Flynn was busy, Jack hovered around Axel and Pax to scold them or give them encouragement, like ‘a proper father.’ Luke had originally assumed Jack would forget this whole parenting thing within a few months, lost to another one of his crazy ideas. With the continuous doting, Luke now wondered if Jack and Lucille would start an Adopt-a-Demigod club. Most of the demigods aboard had such fucked up histories; a Big Brother and Sister program to mentor tiny demigods would actually be a good idea. He shuddered to think of Jack enacting it. Jack would add Adopt-a-Demigod family hour before the morning Demigod-Monster meditation sessions.

“Yes?” Jack sang. He almost his balance as he leaned backwards with his acoustic guitar as though it were electric.


“Do we have music practice today?” Axel asked.

“Band practice,” Jack corrected, his broad smile exuding excitement. He set his guitar to the side. “We’re another month, a keyboardist, and band name away from our first concert, Mr. Guitarist.”

He went to ruffle Axel between his tufted ears, but Axel swatted his hand away. The boy tried to look annoyed. Those ears gave him away, perked up and alert. “You’re not my dad. And, if you were, you couldn’t be both my dad and the lead singer of our rock band.”

“I can and I will,” Jack said, “I’ll be the coolest dad in history.”

His incessant cheeriness and attention had been wearing Axel’s moopiness down over the last few months. Jack’s attitude also helped Luke when doom and gloom of everything got to him.

Maybe this was why Axel and Pax worked so well with Jack. It gave him two toys that had to follow through on all of his crazed ideas. Sometimes, they were even excited about the odd plans. It definitely made Luke and Flynn’s lives easier.

“Yes to band practice. You won’t become the best guitarist in mythological history without practice!” Jack said.

In his peripheral vision, Luke could see Lou Ellen steal Mercedes’ nose. Well, he guessed Lou Ellen was trying to steal Mercedes’ nose. The young witch came away with Mercedes’ chin instead. Alabaster was still working on her precision.

In this chaos, Pax managed to crawl out and scurry over. He tackle-hugged Jack. Although Jack towered over him in height, the younger boy almost plowed him over. “Do I get to play the
“drums again?”

“Yep,” Jack said. He struggled to lift Pax. Axel sighed, reached subtly for his little brother’s foot, and helped lift Pax into the air. The motion was so slight that Jack probably thought he’d managed on his own.

“Do I get to practice rap-screaming?!” Pax asked.

“Only if you take the proper precautions to protect your vocal cords. We need a screamer, and I don’t have the right set of vocal cords for—”

A spear lodged into the deck between Jack’s feet. He shrieked, dropping Pax. Pax and Axel found their footing easily. Jack almost fell over.

A tall boy with black armor and grey underclothing walked over, jerking the spear from the ground casually. “Sorry,” Alabaster said, “Someone had a bad throw.”

For a split second, his glittering green eyes narrowed at Luke. Luke would bet that one of Hecate’s brats had been aiming directly at him, likely under Alabaster’s orders.


A new recruit nearby giggled, “Draco should learn some honing spells.”

Alabaster was already walking back towards his siblings, like he hadn’t heard.

“Witch Boy gives me the creeps sometimes,” Jack said, dusting himself off.

“Or maybe he’s just had time to bewitch you two,” Jack said. The grin returned to his face.

At some point during the altercation, Pax dove behind Axel. He poked his head past one of Axel’s arms, intently watching Alabaster return the spear to an empousa. The lovely girl with the donkey foot winked at Luke. She giggled to Lou Ellen, who was now limping. Mercedes must have taken her chin back from the little witch and given her a warning of what would happen next time she took it.

Lout Ellen stuck her tongue out at them.

Jack reached around to pinch Pax’s ear. “The Witch Boy has definitely bewitched one of you. Or was it Lou Ellen that did that?”

Luke was so intent on keeping his troops trained, setting up everything for the rise of the Titans, and keeping up with the goings in New Rome and Camp Half-Blood, he often forgot how much drama and gossip happened on the ship. With the thought of Thalia turning back from a tree, he couldn’t get himself to talk to anyone about their crushes. Jack just… prattled about Flynn. But, it was nice to hear Jack talk. Maybe he should have paid more attention to the politics aboard the ship, if it meant the Witch Boy was gaining more loyalty.

There was that fear again. Luke’s gut twisted to realize that Pax hid when Luke raised his voice against Alabaster.

That’s not what Luke wanted right now.

Luke gave them a calming smile. “Hey, Jack and I were going to dock and hang out on the cliffs later tonight. Wanna come?”

“I would need to find a babysitter for Ajax,” Axel said, reaching behind his shoulder to pinch Pax’s ear.

“I can’t come?” Pax’s question sounded disembodied. He’d completely vanished behind Axel’s torso. Luke had to wonder if one of their acrobatic practices was pretending to move as one person since Pax could vanish whenever he wanted.

“Nope. We’ll bring you when you’re older. We need to have big boy conversations,” Jack said.

That brought Pax from around Axel’s back. “Could I play Mortal Kombat with Matthias?! Or watch TV?! Or—or—” His voice dropped to a hopeful whisper, his cheeks rouging again. “Do you think Alabaster would let me help in the lab?”

Jack raised a mischievous eyebrow. “We can make Alabaster let you in the lab.”

As they decided Pax’s fate for the night, Luke thought over Jack’s understatement: “big boy conversations.” What Luke needed was a set of people he could trust, ones that wouldn’t gossip and would do anything for him, even if that meant killing him for his own good.

Yea. Big boy conversation.

______________________________

Sorry for the delay! I hope you enjoyed regardless, and as always, thank you for reading! :D I should have part two/the final part of this short out next week!

They couldn’t meet up until the sun was setting. As usual, things around camp got in the way: settling fights that broke out, making sure the mortal cleaning staff didn’t go on strike with all the monster ooze, getting Helios and Morpheus to stop playing matchmaker. This last one was particularly difficult. The former sun driver believed he could still see all things and knew what was best for people and Morpheus could subliminally message potential matches in their dreams.

Very annoying.

By the time the centaurs dropped Axel, Luke, and Jack on the cliff’s edge with a cooler full of drinks and snacks, the stars had risen into the sky.

Luke handed the centaurs a six-pack of low-alcohol beer to appease them and make sure they didn’t get too drunk. Riding with an intoxicated mount? A terrible idea. As soon as the centaurs found out that half-bloods could buy alcohol for them, Luke and Jack had to set regulations about RWI. Riding While Intoxicated.

Axel wasted no time. He took a water bottle from the cooler, sat down on the edge of the cliff, criss-crossed his legs, and closed his eyes.

Jack twitched. As happy as he was that Luke agreed to work on his mental health with Axel’s help, Jack couldn’t sit still for meditation. To keep himself from distracting his friends, he would hum, sing, or play an instrument. Tonight, he’d brought a sitar.

Luke was disappointed to see Axel immediately go into meditation mode. He wanted to talk to these two about something. “I’m not going to be able to focus today,” Luke decided.

Axel cracked an eye open. Up here, he never looked at Luke with fear or suspicion. Probably because he could shove me over the cliff faster than I could say, “Zeus sucks.”

“Your life would be a lot easier if you could get along with Alabaster,” Axel said, as always, a little too on the mark. “Though, his hatred does have some merit. Keeps you on your toes during training.”

Jack snorted, strumming a calming tune on his sitar.

That was why Luke started meditation in the first place. Luke had hit Alabaster. Not during training and not at a time that Alabaster felt he could hit back. Luke hadn’t meant to. He hadn’t remembered doing it until he saw the welt forming on Alabaster’s cheek a day later.

Luke wondered how many of his troops he’d hit in a blind rage. When Luke expressed this to Jack, scared he’d hit Jack, Jack had suggested talking to Axel. Apparently, Axel’s biological father thought Axel had anger management issues. Despite Axel’s resentment when discussing his father, it was obvious he liked the meditation.

“I’m tired of him saying my plan won’t work. He doesn’t know Thalia and he doesn’t know Annabeth. Neither of them will fail us,” Luke said. Instead of joining Axel in his criss-crossed stance, Luke picked two beers out of the cooler. He offered one to Axel.

Axel shook his head. He stretched his legs out in front of him and dangled them over the edge. After a moment of fishing around in his pockets, he withdrew a cigarette and lighter. “I don’t drink,” said the fifteen-year-old as he cupped his hand over the cigarette to light it.
Jack paused his strumming. He held the sitar by the neck so he could fold his arms. “Where did you get those and who started you on them?” He reached to grab the cigarette from Axel’s lips.

Axel swatted his hand away, a dangerous game so close to the edge. “The convenience store. Santiago. Buzz off.”

Santiago was Axel’s blood father. That ended the conversation. Jack withdrew his hand and returned to strumming. Now, the tune was sadder. ‘Think of what those will do to your vocal cords,” Jack said.

“Didn’t you want me to be the raspy background singer?” Axel said. He glared at his “dad” and blew a puff of smoke straight at him. The wind whipped it up the coast, twisting the swirls away before they reached the son of Apollo.

Luke frowned, thinking of what little he knew of Axel and Pax’s biological father. A month ago, when the boys were joking around in the upstairs pools, someone—Matthias?—commented how cool it was that Axel and Pax already had tattoos: Mayan hieroglyphs that peaked out at their hips. When asked how their parents had been cool with it, Axel left without a word.

Twenty minutes later, Alabaster and Pax ran to grab Jack, saying Axel had peeled off his tattooed skin with a hunting knife. Jack had panicked to Luke that one of his boys had hurt himself. When asked, Pax would only say that the tattoo reminded Axel of his biological father.

Luke shook off the memory, focusing on the conversation at hand.

Once Axel was sure that Jack wouldn’t comment on the cigarettes again, Axel turned his attention back to Luke. “It’s good to have people that are willing to point out potential problems in a plan,” Axel said with a shrug. *The Witch Boy. Right.*

Luke downed half his bottle. He sat beside Axel on the ledge, scowling off. He admired the fact that Alabaster was willing to criticize anyone, including the Titan Lord. That pissed him off even more. “It’s not hard for Alabaster to be ballsy about it. A third of the army is related to him. And that trust-fund bastard owns half the ship. He knows he’s untouchable.”

Meanwhile, Luke had… what? Friends who didn’t believe he was doing this to help them? That didn’t know what was the best for them? A mother driven to insanity by his asshole of a father, neither of which could or would do anything for him. His mother had barely been able to give him a blessing for… for what he had to do.

Besides, with his money and his relation, it didn’t matter how Alabaster acted. He could be the creep that lurks in the lab and no one would notice or care. Monsters, gods, and demigods alike were watching Luke, looking for a weakness, for something to mark him as unworthy.

*You are unworthy.*


Then, why didn’t Kronos pick someone else?

He shook off the thought, trying to keep calm. He took another long swing, tossed his beer bottle to the side, and grabbed the one he’d pulled for Axel. They would get to that, to what he really wanted to talk to them about. For now, he wanted to pretend they were just hanging out. Had he ever had that with friends? Been able to hang out when he wasn’t on the run for his life?

*Or sanity,* that voice cooed.
“And then he talks about Thalia like he knows her,” Luke said, remembering where they’d left off. *Alabaster being an asshole. Right.*

Luke’s hesitation hadn’t gone unnoticed. Axel narrowed his golden eyes. Jack played a few tense cords. “He thinks the plan with Thalia will fail,” Luke continued, like he didn’t sense their concern. “But, Thalia, she’s strong. After all her Dad put her through—put *us* through—she’ll see the way. I’ll bet she’s just biding her time to convince Annabeth. Annabeth was fed their lies for years, so she’ll need some persuading. She’s so stubborn.”

He laughed, thinking about the bounce of her curls. As Axel tapped some ashes into the whipping wind, Luke shoved Axel’s shoulder. “What about you? What girl is keeping you from exploring the beauties we have here?”

Jack had been whining for weeks that Axel didn’t have interest in anyone. Although Pax was silent around Luke, apparently the little brother was the opposite, babbling about the awesome and gorgeous demigods and creatures aboard the ship.

Axel shrugged and frowned slightly. His gold eyes drifted off to the distance. Out on the water, they could see the bright lights of their cruise ship, docked offshore.

“You spend a lot of time with Mercedes,” Jack said lightly behind him.

Axel cracked his neck. His expression went blank. “The only mistress Mercedes has time for is her spymaster project. Her eyes are only on Ajax and me because we’re useful.”

Jack made an indignant snort over the sound of his sitar. “That’s not enough for my boy—”

Luke reached backwards to slap Jack’s foot. If Jack wanted the Pax brothers to open up to him as a friend, he had to stop the dad talks.

“I doubt that,” Luke said. “Though, hard to say with that girl. She’s such a stiff.”

Axel covered a smile by taking a drag on his cigarette.

Despite the number of times Pax swore to others that Mercedes was a prankster with an evil sense of humor, Luke had only seen her strict, curt, dry, and tense. She’d spent the last few months rubbing it in Luke’s face how badly they needed a spy unit in New Rome and how shitty their defenses were against enemy spies. Humor or no, she was proving her worth. Though, Flynn would be livid if Axel became a spy instead of a member of the Assault and Battery Unit. Assuming Axel had time to be part of anything with Jack’s crazy projects keeping him busy.

Luke blinked, realizing how popular this kid had become.

“Come on, man. You’re really good with the girls. Even Ethel likes you. And that prickly Echinda doesn’t like anyone,” Luke said.

The smile vanished from Axel’s face. “It’s because I meet her on her terms. You can’t rush her. She’s… she’s still recovering. You gotta let her decide how close she wants to stand and you gotta remember not to block her exit from the room.” Axel pulled his knees up and leaned his chin against them. “That miscarriage was insult to injury for her. And don’t even get me started on separating her from Charlie. Child of the Big Three or not, Charlie is five. The kid should keep using the Hyperborean giants as a jungle gym, not being prepped to replace Thalia and Percy if they fail.”

Luke gritted his teeth. He didn’t know Charlie, the daughter of Zeus, had been told she could
be the child of the prophecy. He wondered if that was Alabaster’s work or one of the other Titans.

“You seem to know a lot about how to work with people like Ethel,” Luke said carefully.

Axel puffed up his cheeks and popped them. The smoldering on his cigarette had burned down to the filter. Casually, as though he was going to press the butt into the ground, he lowered his hand, then pressed the hot tip under his shirt, into his hip and the scar tissue of the former tattoo.

Axel didn’t even flinch.

Between Jack and Axel, Luke wondered what it said about him if he preferred to befriend crazy people.

Jack must not have noticed Axel’s movement. He continued to play his sitar, adding a soft hum into the breeze.

Axel released the cigarette and hugged his legs tightly. “It’s hard for me to accept that the women around me aren’t being paid or threatened to enjoy my company, or that they don’t want something from me,” he muttered, “I don’t like to talk about it.”

The music stopped again.

Luke frowned. *Why can’t we have a normal talk about hot chicks?* He didn’t even want to think about what had happened to Axel and Pax to give Axel that impression.

Jack hopped down beside Axel, keeping his legs as far from the cliff’s edge as possible while also sitting beside him. He slipped an arm around Axel’s shoulders in a comforting gesture. Luke expected him to say some meaningless dad cliché. Instead, Jack said, “Luke, you should show him that picture Silena gave you of Thalia and Annabeth.”

A grin twitched back onto Luke’s lips. He could tell Jack the same stories about Thalia and Annabeth every night for a month and Jack’s eyes would still light up with delight. That’s what they often did at the Monster Mash bar, to the point where the bartender, Dean, got tired of them and would kick them out.

Luke fumbled for the photo he’d kept in his wallet for the last few months, since Thalia returned to camp. He had to make a copy to keep in his room, because this one’s edges were so crumbled.

The picture was at Camp Half-Blood, outside Cabin One. Thalia looked confused at the photographer. She still wasn’t used to the idea of a camera phone. Annabeth looked so happy.

“It’s weird to see Thalia look so young,” Luke said, grinning, “I kept thinking she’d come back looking older. She’s actually nineteen, I think.”

For a panicked moment, Luke couldn’t remember how many years had passed. The times he’d displeased Kronos, when the Titan Lord showed him centuries of pain during moments of sleep, time stopped having meaning.

“She’s cute,” Axel admitted, staring down at the picture. His brow furrowed. “She’s my age. And Annabeth…”

“She’s growing into a beautiful girl. Give her a few years.” Luke couldn’t wait to tease her about it, imagining the way she’d scrunch up her face, all annoyed and adorable and fierce. “We just need to
remind her that the world needs to be rebuilt, and she can rebuild it to fit her wildest dreams. We’re going to be in high demand for a good architect. Then, she’ll be happy. That’s all I want.”

Axel’s tone was careful when he said, “She looks closer to Ajax’s age.”

“She’s older than Pax,” Luke said. He struggled to remember their ages. Pax looked so young and Annabeth looked older than she was.

“By what, a year?” Axel snorted.

“She’s mature for her age,” Luke snapped. Why did Luke feel so defensive? Awhile ago, he’d stopped referring to Annabeth as a little sister, but she was still young, right?


Axel slapped away Jack’s hand.

She was like a little sister, right? Luke just wanted to make a world that she would like and to protect her. He could never think of Annabeth like that with Thalia around. Weirdly, he guessed it was how Flynn felt with the Pax brothers. She may have had whomever she wanted, but, with Jack around, she would never want or need to think of Axel and Pax as anything more than their obnoxious children.

“I’ll bet Thalia and Annabeth wouldn’t approve of how you’re getting information from Silena,” Axel said.

Luke shrugged, folding up the photograph. “We need a spy. It’s hard to trust her though. I mean, she’s a daughter of Aphrodite. She must know I’m not in love with her. I’ve never said I was. And she’s beautiful and a camp counselor; she can’t be that deprived of attention that she needs it from me.”

Luke frowned, remembering how Silena was thrilled with the dove broach Beckendorf had made her. She had unabashed talked about it when he’d found it fumbling with her clothing.

Luke refused to feel guilty. He wasn’t the one cheating a new crush. He wasn’t the one cheating his camp. All he could assume was that Silena really wanted the Olympians to burn, but she didn’t have the heart to leave the camp. She’d heard the stories about him poisoning Percy and about poisoning Thalia’s tree. He’d never denied them. She was the one choosing to ignore them.

Axel stretched out his legs, straightening them completely over the cliff’s edge to show off the animalistic arch to his calves. He cracked his neck to one side. “Hey… Luke, Jack.”

Both boys perked up.

The wind whipped Luke’s face harshly. He thought he could hear someone shouting aboard the boat, their voices carried up with the breeze. Axel waited long enough that Luke could count enough stars in Centaur constellation to get angry at Chiron.

“Someone who slays the Ophiotaurus… if they have the power to destroy the gods, wouldn’t they have the power to take out the Titans too?” Axel asked slowly.

That was a dangerous question.

They remained silent as they inhaled the salty air. Luke tossed his empty bottle to the other
one. He fished into the cooler for a third, wondering if it would be unwise to speculate.

Axel couldn’t pledge his soul to Kronos. He wasn’t Greek. That made Kronos think he was untrustworthy. It made Axel one of the few people Luke felt like he could trust. But, what if Kronos mucked through Luke’s memories? Could he? How pathetic was Luke if he feared speaking against Kronos when Kronos wasn’t around?

Luke bit his lip. He wondered if he could have handled criticism from other people, like Alabaster, before Kronos poisoned his thoughts. He’d handled criticism fine from Thalia and Annabeth and even Chiron before all of this. Was that pride his? Or Kronos’?

Queasiness warned him not to take another sip of his beer. *I’ve only had two*, he scolded himself. The sense of helplessness made him gulp until his head felt light.


Axel and Jack were waiting for an answer, like Luke knew everything about the universe. He didn’t. He didn’t know anything without Kronos. He was just some pawn piece abandoned by his father and his friends. *Kronos’ puppet*, Alabaster had said, *only worthy of Hermes’ attention when you’ve become a threat during your temper tantrum.*

*Thalia will join*, he told himself to shake off the nausea. *She’ll join, and she’ll help you remember who you are. We can fight this war together, even if that means fighting the Titans later.*

“Hey… guys…” Luke said. It was something that had been on his mind, lurking in the background when Kronos wasn’t around, something he’d wanted to bring up but… he’d been too scared. With the light buzz in his head and the way his chin wanted to droop, he found some courage. “If Kronos erases me, if I try to hurt Thalia or Annabeth, will you kill what’s left of me so I can’t hurt them?”

“Luke!” Jack squeaked. His voice sounded near tears. “You—you saved me. You gave me a world where I wasn’t just confused—”

Luke was about to force a laugh, to change the subject like he’d been joking. His lip began to bleed where he bit it. He should have known Jack was too soft to handle the thought, let alone the action.

A hand clamped over Luke’s shoulder. He glanced into Axel’s golden eyes. Axel’s other hand had clamped over Jack’s mouth, shutting him up.

“I will,” Axel said. His gaze was steady. “I would hope you’d do the same for me if I ever hurt my family.” He swallowed. “The family I choose.”

This time, it was Jack’s turn to slap Axel’s hand away. “Axel Jackson Pax!”

That wasn’t Axel’s real middle name, or Luke certainly hoped it wasn’t. When the Pax brothers refused to give their middle names, Mercedes had supplied them with that, her face stern as usual. Luke wondered if that was a custom in… where was she from? Morocco? To take the father’s name as the middle?

Whatever it was, Jack loved it and decided the two Hispanic boys really had the middle name of Jackson.

“You lay a finger on Luke and you’ll have the worst case of chicken po—”
Luke was happy Jack’s shrieks would cover his response. He gripped the hand Axel had on his shoulder. “Thank you,” Luke said.

Axel nodded and released him, looking uncomfortable with the display of gratitude. Luke could guess why. He had just said thank you for offering to kill him. Probably not a common topic amongst friends.[1]

“And you won’t be able to walk with the spinal meningitis—”

“Jack, you could never intentionally make someone sick,” Axel teased. “You’re always panicking about doing it on accident.”

Those words silenced Jack. Luke wondered if Axel thought it was a rumor that Jack had killed his whole family with a song.

Luke stretched so he could casually lean forward to check on his friend. The redhead toyed with his bracelet: a braided electric base string. His brilliant eyes held that distant glint, the one he got when he forgot to take his medicine. Flynn and Phil had been pretending Jack didn’t need his medicine anymore. Luke struggled with the fact that they were lying to him.

Jack wasn’t like his mom. The medicine did help, right?

Pushing the old anxiety out of his head—he didn’t need to worry about Jack on his day off—Luke leaned back, taking another swig of his bottle. He couldn’t really taste it. Since Kronos had infiltrated his thoughts, simple pleasures like eating and drinking seemed to deteriorate. One day, there will be nothing left.

“What did you really bring us out to talk about?” Axel asked, folding his legs criss-cross style again. “Since you’re clearly so interested in breathing exercises.”

Luke wanted to say it was girls: Thalia, Annabeth, Flynn, and whomever had stolen Axel’s heart. It wasn’t.

His heart rebelled against his mouth. They needed to have this talk. Somehow, it was harder than asking them to kill him. He took another gulp of beer, feel the carbonation fuzz against his tongue.

“In order to…” his words failed him. He didn’t want to think about what would happen if Thalia failed them or if they couldn’t capture the Ophiotaurus. He didn’t want to admit that this was one more thing Kronos was making him do, another thing he had no control over. “I need to get the Curse of Achilles,” he said finally.

Neither boy spoke, waiting for Luke to elaborate.

When Luke took his time to inhale the dulled scent of salt water, Jack whispered, “Aren’t curses usually to be avoided?”

Luke wanted to laugh hysterically, but knew that would worry Jack. “To get it, I need to go to Hades,” he said in response.

“I hear you’re not exactly popular there,” Axel said.

Luke nodded. “And I need to bath in the River Styx. I want people I can trust to go down with me, some of the best fighters and best healers. However, I need Flynn here. She’s one of the only ones that can keep order. The Titans respect her.” Luke bit his lip, tasting the slight twang of
Sometimes, she’s respected more than me.

Axel puffed up his cheeks and popped them. “I’ll have to find a way to convince Ajax to stay here.”

Luke knew that would be a complication. The littlest Pax would die on a trip below. Jack pointed out the bigger problem.

“I won’t be able to convince Flynn to let me go. And none of us can lie to her.” The redhead frowned. Jack couldn’t lie to Flynn by choice. The rest of them would have the truth forced out of them under her melodious wrath. If Luke really wanted Jack along, they would need to kidnap Jack without prepping him, claim it was Kronos’ idea, and accept any punishment she’d unleash upon them after they returned.

“How soon do we need to go?” Jack asked.


What if they say no? Luke trembled at the thought. He could order them, but he wanted them to come of their own volition. They were his friends, right? Or are they only your friends because you’re Kronos’ puppet?

Axel laughed.


The youngest of the three clutched his stomach. “Alright, alright, right, Jack?”

Jack joined in on the crazed revelry. “What else are legendary heroes for? And you’ll definitely need a bard to lighten the soul when you go somewhere so gloomy.”

Luke wondered, for a second, if this was a surprise attack from children of Dionysus. They were agreeing to go through laughter?

Axel patted Luke’s back again. “You’re a demanding guy. It’s not every day I have a friend ask me to kill them, then follow that by asking me to go to Hell and back for them.”


All of them laughed.

“I have one request,” Jack said. His voice shook with repressed chuckles.

The other twosettled down to listen.

“Next time we come up here, let’s just talk about girls. We can invent a really hot one for Axel to fancy. It’ll make Lou Ellen and the other girls all jealous when the rumors spread.”

Luke loved that idea: not just that they could torment the girls crushing on Axel, but that he’d be himself again soon, able to differentiate Kronos’ thoughts from his own. That these days won’t become less and less frequent. That what makes me me won’t dissolve. He tried to force the worry out of his head as he, Jack, and Axel flopped back onto the ground to stargaze.

Thalia will join, Luke thought. She and Annabeth will see that it’s better to start the world anew, to make a beautiful place where we can all be happy without living under the massive shadow of
Staring out into the brilliant constellations, Luke thought, *My friends won’t abandon me again and together we’ll make an unstoppable team.*

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed! Stay tuned in two weeks for a little novella where Pax and Lou Ellen show why you can’t leave younger siblings unattended.

(Sorry for all the breaks between shorts! Thank you for all of your support throughout my pauses. <3 It really helps to keep me going!)

[1] False. Author Jack and friends had frequent conversations about who would be willing to murder whom in the event of a zombie apocalypse or entrapped starvation. Author Jack is gangly and would not be good pickings for cannibalism, but would also likely starve first, so frequently oscillates in line for cannibalistic choices.
“Can you believe that he expects me to stay?” Pax whined as Mercedes untied the dangling bells from each of his joints. This was a practice exercise for both of them. He’d done awesome this morning—she even told him so. He had to break into the captain’s quarters, dodging or flirting through the guards until he, without ringing a single bell tied around each of his joints, climbed through the side window, took pictures of a particular file, and climbed back out undetected.

Once Mercedes discovered Pax’s illiteracy, after several months of Pax claiming he couldn’t remember documents that she kept sending him to practice on, they had settled on this method. He would bring the information back and she would sort through it.

Then came part II: Mercedes untying the bells from his wrists, elbows, knees, ankles, waist, and neck. She also wasn’t allowed to make the bells ring. She had instructed him to think of them like sleeping fairies that will eat your flesh if you wake them up.

She said he would be ready for a mission to New Rome soon.

Pax tried to focus on that and his anger at Axel for leaving, instead of how seamlessly she removed the ribbons from his ankles.

Each segment of bells was attached to the one above—the ankles to the knees and the knees to the waist, so none would slip down. The wrist ones were attached to the elbow and then to the one around his neck. Because no one else could see them during their exercises, they had taken to tying them under Pax’s clothing.

To put them on or take them off, Pax had to stand in his underwear, alone (other than Mercedes) in the room that she had been allotted to train her spies.

He swallowed, trying not to notice how pretty her Mediterranean skin tone looked against her olive hijab.

“As you should,” she said, delicately setting his ankle bells into a small wooden box without the slightest ring.

Pax blinked, his mind scrambling to remember what he’d just said to her. Right. Axel wanted Pax to stay while Axel went off on some secret mission of awesome—as if Pax couldn’t figure out where his brother was going.

“How am I supposed to train a proper spy if he can’t work under the duress of a quick response?” she said. Her dark, humorous eyes flicked up to him as she collected the bells from his knees and hips.

Pax wanted to pout at her. Instead, he glanced up at the ceiling, struggling not to think of her eyes and hoping the only thing rising in him was a blush. He tried to think of things that would
keep his head cool—like seeing Morpheus disco. That could kill any engine. Someone needed to remind the gods that disco died decades ago.

“He acts like I should want to stay,” Pax mumbled.

“As you should,” Mercedes said, setting the next four bells into the box without a sound. “You’re the inner softness to his hard shell. If something were to happen to you, he’d be coarse and hollow.”

This was a topic that Pax tried to ignore. It was something both Mercedes and Chris had mentioned, around the same time they began to avoid being alone with Axel.

The Pax brothers had both been terrified Axel would be called back for another cage match. The cruise ship still buzzed about his battle against Praetor Julian.

He had been.

Pax hadn’t been allowed to go to the next one. Axel forbade it. Pax had been locked in Alabaster’s laboratory while the Witch Boy watched him kick, scream, and sob at the door. Axel could have died without Pax getting a chance to say goodbye or getting a chance to save him. No matter how many times Lou Ellen tried to distract him with magical vials or Alabaster pointed out he’d be more of distraction if he were there, Pax had shrieked.

Since then, everyone referred to Axel as a natural born killer. As if it was a good thing. As if he had no remorse about whatever demigod he’d had to murder on stage. They didn’t know Axel’s nightmares had gotten worse. They didn’t see how he carefully shined Julian’s medals and polished the new charm bracelet, muttering prayers in Mayan that their souls should safely make it to their afterlife.

“I’m surprised Luke thinks he can sneak Jack out too,” Mercedes said absently as she untied the bells from Pax’s wrist.

Pax wanted to be happy for the change of subject. Instead, he jumped, making his neck bell jingle. “What?!”

Mercedes gave him a smirk.

Pax whined. Once he proved he could move around soundlessly with the bells, they had a running bet. Whichever of them jingled in their training owed the other a favor. Pax owed Mercedes a lot of favors.

She set to undoing his elbow bells. “Didn’t you notice that Luke was suddenly concerned about having backup mediators for Jack’s monster meditation classes and other nonsense, ‘in case he got sick,’ even though Jack can’t physically become ill with his power? And how Jack complained that some of his clothing has gone missing—specifically stuff he might use for travel? And how Flynn is shockingly overbooked this week?”

Pax stared at Mercedes as she removed his shoulder bells. “You’re good,” he said.

“I strive to have my spy worthiness validated by a munchin,” she said.

Pax sighed dreamily. “I hope I can talk like you and Alabaster when I grow up. Maybe I’ll absorb it off of you, assuming neither of you starting chasing me out of your wings, although I’m pretty sure Alabaster already wants nothing to do with me.”
Pax liked to think he had two wings of the ship to enjoy and two wings to carry him: one, Alabaster’s laboratory; the other, Mercedes’ spy barracks. As far as he could see, Alabaster tolerated him on his good days. On his bad days, he chased him out of the lab.

“Maybe Alabaster and I share something in common. His mistress is his lab. Mine is the spymaster unit. It just takes a little parasite to shake our focus.” Mercedes stood up. The last bell was around his neck. She folded her arms, tilted her head, then reached out a hand and flicked his bell.

The metal rang.

Pax swallowed. If it were anyone other than Mercedes, he would have thought she was flirting with him.

“Now, the favor owing is negated for today,” she said, her face businesslike. “I do this in exchange for you not being stupid and running after Pax One.”

“That sounds like you’re calling in another favor,” Pax complained, trying to spot how she pinned her head covering. She tucked the pins so well.

Pax was in the process of making Mercedes a fancy, brown headscarf with pink and yellow embroidery along the edges. As Pax had never embroidered before, and had to sneak a hijab from their spymaster so he could get the proper size, the process had been slow going, much slower than when he’d made Flynn hair sticks with little pandas attached to them. (He didn’t find out until later that she hated pandas. Who would have thought a girl from China could hate pandas? She still wore them sometimes, so he was skeptical when Jack slipped up about that information.)[1]

Pax hoped Mercedes would wear the headscarf. She always wore simple, plain clothing, no makeup, and no jewelry. What if she didn’t like something ornate?

Mercedes’ dark eyes felt like they were burning into his soul. “Fine. Use it as a favor, Pax Two. I don’t mind being down two out of a hundred.”

“It’s not at one hundred!” Pax cried, hoping she wouldn’t notice how he dodged the agreement. There was no way he was about to let Axel rush off on some secret, dangerous mission that only involved Luke and Jack. What if he got in trouble? Or met a hot chick and Pax didn’t get to see the blossoming of their romance? He’d miss months of potential teasing!

Her gaze narrowed. “I mean it Pax Two. They’re going somewhere you shouldn’t follow.”

Pax tried to give her a charming smile. Mercedes should know better. Those were the epic words used to warn someone away from an awesome quest. Pax was okay with doing an awesome quest, especially if it meant helping out his brother. Or annoying him. That would also work. He just needed some company questers.

Author’s Note: Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed! This is Part I of a Ten Parter about Pax not… thinking things through… So, just a short story of the essence of Pax XD (All shorter chapters and fairly light hearted) Anyway, this entire story hasn’t been betaread, so I hope there aren’t too many mistakes! (I didn’t want to bother my friends with it >.<) I hope you guys are having an awesome weekend!
As you may have noticed: tiny Pax? Struggles with stereotypes. Older Pax? Struggles with nudity—okay wait. That doesn’t change. Well, at least he unlearns one bad habit.
II

Lou Ellen was better at sneaking out than he was—something he found obnoxious since he was the one trained in stealth. She had recently learned to cast an invisibility spell. However, it sputtered and flickered when she giggled. This happened frequently enough that Pax claimed there must be a haunting as he walked around the ship.

Pax, meanwhile, could turn into other people. He mostly kept this a secret. Only Alabaster, Lou Ellen, and—of course—Axel knew about it. They’d even been nervous about telling Flynn and Jack. Axel thought Flynn would send Pax into enemy territory, something far too dangerous in Axel’s eyes.

What did Axel think Mercedes was training Pax in? Basket weaving? At some point, Axel needed to realize that Pax grew bored being useless and would start to do less-than-useful pranks if left to his own devices. Matthias was always full of ideas that sparked his chaotic side.

Pax hadn’t wanted to be around when Flynn found out that Jack was missing. As such, he needed to find someone that could leave the ship without asking anyone’s permission.

Pax thought he found the perfect person until a woman’s voice hissed, “You smell odd, Witch Boy.”

They were making their way to the Centaur Exit Port. (Pax preferred to think of the centaurs as emergency pods.) He resisted the urge to make mechanical docking noises as they approached.

Pax froze at the woman’s voice. He tried to keep calm. Acting was one of his specialties. What would Alabaster say? “I have a name,” Pax growled.

Not perfect, though Alabaster was sensitive about people calling him by his full name.

He turned, fingering the golden apple in his pocket the same way that Alabaster would finger a spell pouch. A golden apple appeared in his pocket every morning, a gift from his mother. Each apple granted the ability to shift into another person for a short period of time, assuming his intention in that time was to cause some mischief.

Beside him, he could hear Lou Ellen inhale sharply.

The women who spoke wore the dark dress of a mourner. Her eyes glowed the green of a child of Hecate. Serpentine slits made her eyes unique. Beautiful, Pax thought. Her clenched fists had nails hardened to claws. From the way she ground her jaw, Pax could see crocodile teeth between her lips.

Lamia, Alabaster’s sister. Pax almost choked. This woman had publically challenged Alabaster multiple times for control of Hecate’s children. Alabaster had beaten her each time. Afterwards, though, Pax had helped dislodge ice blades from Alabaster’s skin and treat the burns of magical wounds. Luke was bringing a stop to the challenges, since he couldn’t afford to have two of Hecate’s most powerful children injured. Plus, while Luke and Alabaster argued, Alabaster supported Kronos’ army. Lamia might not.

Pax might look like Alabaster, but he certainly couldn’t use magic to stop Lamia if she chose to attack.
Lamia took a step closer to him, uncomfortably close. Her eyes were terrifying at this distance. With Alabaster’s gangly height, they were almost level to Pax’s. Although a scowl wrinkled her face, Pax could tell she was gorgeous, having the elegance of a full-grown woman. If Pax didn’t look like Lamia’s half-brother and they weren’t trying to sneak off the ship, he might have given Lamia a kiss on the cheek, just to annoy and fluster her.

Then again, Lamia was a few centuries too old for him.

She sniffed. “You smell odd.”

“That’s a riveting observation,” Pax said, mimicking Alabaster’s slow, wry speech. Again, not perfect, but close. Hopefully close enough.

She snapped her jaws at him.

Pax used all of his will power not to flinch. Alabaster would not appreciate if he looked weak to this woman.

“If you don’t mind,” Pax said, nodding towards the centaur docking bay.

Lamia snorted. She turned towards the origin of Lou Ellen’s earlier gasp. “Lou Ellen, you’re sparking,” she said reproachfully, “Someone—” Her eyes shot to Alabaster. “—should be teaching you better.”

Lou Ellen released an indignant snort. Pax could imagine the way her face screwed up in anger.

Blindly, he reached out, meaning to grab her shoulder in case she went after Lamia for the insult to Alabaster.

Instead of grabbing her arm, he grabbed her hair. He had forgotten he was so much taller when he looked like Alabaster.

She squeaked. “Pax!”

Pax immediately released her. “Sorry!”

Realizing how not-Alabaster that was, he coughed and gave Lamia a glower.

Lamia paused, examining them. “I see,” she said. Her expression twisted to one of amusement. Slowly, she walked away.

Pax released a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding. Something told him that Lamia wouldn’t have smiled like that if she thought he was Alabaster.

They turned to a waiting centaur—or Pax assumed they both did. He didn’t hear Lamia scream from Lou Ellen casting some semi-successful spell.

A centaur with a brown and cream spotted coat, bronzed skin, and massive ram’s horns stared at Pax and the spot that was sparking beside him. “Oh… kay…” he said skeptically.

Maybe Pax was better at sneaking than Lou Ellen. He hadn’t noticed the sparking before, but what Lamia said to Lou Ellen made her spark like it was the Fourth of July.

Neither of them planned this part through very well. The centaur would likely notice if an invisible girl hopped on his back.
Before Pax could come up with something, Lou Ellen tugged at his lab coat, making the material billow. “The explosion is going to happen soon,” she said, sounding ill. A tremble in her voice cued Pax in to her smothered giggles.

Pax snapped his fingers. Everyone feared the children of Hecate’s magic when it went haywire.

“We need off the ship,” Pax said.

The centaur looked nervously at the sparks. “I didn’t hear anyone scheduled for a departure.”

Pax had never considered that there was proper paperwork to fill out to disembark. Alabaster, Luke, Flynn, or one of the Titans always organized disembarkment. He just assumed you were supposed to jump on a centaur and shout, “Fly like the wind, Bullseyes!”[1] and they would charge over a rainbow.

He made the most annoyed sigh he could manage. “When Lou Ellen’s spell wears off, it will blow a crater the size of this ship. Do you want to be around when that happens?”

Lou Ellen stifled another giggle.

The centaur paled. They had him.

________________________________________

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed! Stay tuned next week to see who busts these two red-handed. Er, well, red-headed in Lou Ellen’s case and red-hipped in Pax’s? It’ll make more sense when you see all the blood—I mean paint. *ehem* Nothing bad ever happens to these characters in my story, right?

(I almost posted the entirety of what I’ve written [all ten parts of this short, a Luke single, and the start of another] on here unedited. I apologize for all of you missing out on the self-cursing, massive question marks, and highlighted areas where Pax isn’t nonsensical enough.)

________________________________________

[1] This movie hadn’t come out yet according to the real time line. I don’t care. I’m willing Pax to have premonitions of Toy Story.
After a quick bus ride where Pax and Lou Ellen played cards and iSpy (Watch Out for Romans edition), they arrived in front of DOA Recording Studios.

Lou Ellen figured out the Underworld’s entrance much quicker than he could have. And, she knew where Luke, Axel, and Jack had snuck off to.

When Pax asked, she giggled. She took off her invisibility spell off as soon as the centaur left, allowing him to see her smile. “Alabaster thinks I don’t hear him cussing about doing research for Luke’s missions. He might fight with Luke, but the two work together really well.”

That was a relief to hear. The idea of the top two badasses on the boat actually hating each other—that sounded like a formula for smithereens instead of a functional boat.

Lou Ellen also came prepared for their up-in-coming deception. A few muttered words and she had a convincingly caved-in skull with blood in her hair. The sight upset and disturbed Pax. He and Matthias had sneaked into too many zombie films to see one of his friends as a perfect WWZ mascot. On a more personal level, he’d also seen his dad kill too many people he knew. You know, for important reasons. Like when they messed up taking out the trash.

Lou Ellen twirled, making her hair flutter around her. The locks didn’t poof out enough, being weighted down with fake blood. “How do I look?” One of her eyes was completely busted and the other had red veins streaking the white.

Pax swallowed, trying to give her a grin. “Like you’ve been hit by an 18-wheeler.”

She rubbed her hands together, a little too close to Matthias’ signature move. One hand looked like it was covered in road rash. “Ready to join me? We’ll have it look like a nice pipe went through your chest.”

Pax perked up. This part would be awesome. He closed his eyes and hopped from foot to foot in anticipation.

She spoke a few magical words.

Pax didn’t feel different, though his ears popped, the same way they did when Axel used magic.

When Lou Ellen burst into giggles, he cracked his eyes open. “Lou Ellen!” he complained.

“I—I’m sorry! It was supposed to be your chest!”

Pax now had a massive, see-through hole in his groin. His pelvis looked like the residue of flirting with a giant.

“Now people really won’t be able to tell if you’re a boy or a girl,” she said, gleeful tears streaming out of her bloodshot and missing eye. The watery socket made her disguise less convincing, something Pax probably should point out.
He felt the corner of his mouth twitch. “Do you think the Grim Reaper will get angry if we mess with him?”

They did some quick exercises to stop laughing. Mercedes had given him tips on how to stop. Sometimes, she’d sit Pax in a chair, bring Matthias in, shove some chop sticks into Matthias’ nostrils, and inform Pax that she’d tase Pax if he laughed.

It was easier since he and Lou Ellen could move around until they were out of breath. During the training exercises—watching Matthias try to bat a stick out of his nose?—that was horrible.

After some jumping jacks, they entered the lobby of DOA Recording Studios. Lou Ellen said this was the most conventional way to get to the Underworld. Pax wondered what unconventional ways there were. Inside, there were other dead people—real dead people—wandering around or sitting on black, leather benches. Muzak played over a loudspeaker. Everything was grey, like the interior decorator had intentionally made the place as drained of life—as would make sense, being Death’s Doors.

There was an elevator on the far wall.

In front of them, towards the center of the room, was a podium. Atop it, stood a handsome, African American man with bleached-blond hair. He wore a silk Italian suit that was such a dark red, it was almost black.

The suit made Pax freeze. He hated suits like that. His father wore suits like that. So did the men that worked for his father.

His throat constricted. There was no way his father’s influence reached this far, did it? Could his father have bribed the ferryman of the dead? That sounded like something his father would do.

Fortunately, it was the wrong shade of red. Papa liked burgundy. Pax tried to ease his breath, and tried to laugh along when Lou Ellen burst into another fit of giggles at the hole in his groin.

Charon, the Grim Reaper, looked very confused by their laughter. He sighed and continued to write something in a small planner.

Lou Ellen marched up to his podium. She bit her lip to cut off the giggles. “Hi, Sir Grim Reaper,” she said. “Looks like we’re in the right place.” Supposedly, this would go faster if they called him sir.

The man slowly set his pen down. He glanced up at her through a pair of sunglasses. He looked skeptical. “You seem awfully calm and happy to be saying that.”

Pax slipped an arm over Lou Ellen’s shoulder, beaming at Charon and trying to ignore that red suit. “We’re Goths. This is like, the ultimate experience. And we died together.”

Lou Ellen slipped her hand around Pax’s waist. He feared she would accidentally tickle him. “What’s not to be calm and happy about?”

Lou Ellen would never be into Pax like that, nor he into her. They had an agreement: if he helped her get alone time with Axel, she would help him get alone time with Alabaster. Nothing had happened from it yet, but they could wear the opposing older sibling down.

That’s a… unique perspective,” Charon said, “How did you die?”

“Car accident,” they said in harmony.
Charon looked bored. “You’re too young to drive.”

“Duh, why do you think we’re here?” Pax put a devilish twist on his smile. “Sir.”

Lou Ellen shoved his shoulder. “Pax!” she cried. She turned back to Charon. “He’s just messing around, sir. I’m sure our chauffeur will be here any minute.”

They had no chauffeur, but Charon didn’t need to know that.

Charon stared at them for an uncomfortable period of time. Pax struggled not to jump from foot to foot. Charon pointed his pen at Lou Ellen. “Cracked skull.” He turned the tip of the pen to Pax. “How specifically did you die?”

Pax sighed, stepped back from the podium, and glanced down. “Crushed pelvis. The shock killed me before the bleeding.”

Charon winced. “I am… so sorry,” he said.

Pax hoped this scheme wouldn’t come across as a challenge to the Fates. He would rather keep his pelvis intact. There were some hot guys and girls out there, but none hot enough to die from a crushed pelvis.

Charon’s terrifying gaze bore into them. “We had a security… issue recently. You two seem awfully calm for being dead, Goth or not. Are you sure that you’re deceased?” He set his pen down, folded his fingers, and leaned forward.

From what they heard, Percy, Annabeth, and Grover snuck into the Underworld a year or two back. Pax and Lou Ellen were prepared for this skepticism.

Lou Ellen grinned. “If I wasn’t dead, could I do this?” She reached for her nose. Though she was trying to remove that, her chin dislodged instead. She really needed to work on her aim when manipulating the Mist.

Charon glared and pointed to a sign on the podium. It read:

_No playing with disembodied limbs in the waiting room._

“Oh,” Lou Ellen said. She sheepishly shoved her chin back onto her cheek. “Sorry.”

“Lou Ellen you put that back where it belongs, you disgrace.”

Someone reached over to rip her chin off her cheek and deposit it properly at the bottom of her face. That person then slipped a hand around either of their shoulders.

Pax felt fingers lightly touch his ear, like a reminder his ear could be ripped off as easily as whomever had altered her chin. The scent of sandalwood and incense made Pax’s head dizzy. Pax glanced down and almost gagged. A line of intestines dragged along the floor, leaving red smears along the grey tiles. All he could think about was linked cartoon sausages dipped in BBQ sauce.

There was no way Pax could eat BBQ any time soon.

Pax’s gaze shifted to the blood soaking the boy’s pants and shirt. The skin was ripped clean off the boy’s arms, exposing tendons better than any biology model. Nausea hit Pax’s stomach when he saw the face. It was sickly white. The brown hair was slicked to the boy’s forehead with blood or sweat. Alabaster’s glimmering green eyes and scowl were the only part recognizable.
“You must be the chauffeur,” Charon said amicably.

“It appears to be so,” Alabaster growled. His fingers pinched Pax’s ear. From the whine in Lou Ellen’s voice, he had pinched her as well.

“You’re barely old enough to drive yourself,” Charon said.

“Yes, hence the car accident,” Alabaster said. He released Pax and Lou Ellen to fumble around a flap in his shirt. His hand accidentally jammed into his ribcage. Finally, he produced a plastic-wrapped container and tossed it on the podium.

Charon didn’t touch the blood-soaked package. “What is this?” he asked, taking a step back and checking to assure no blood had gotten onto his shirt sleeves. Pax doubted it would show up on the red. He often wondered if that’s why his father picked burgundy.

“It’s our payment,” Alabaster said, “We’re in a bit of a hurry.”

Charon raised an annoyed eyebrow. “We’re in a bit of a hurry, Sir. I don’t take—”

After examining the package for a moment, his jaw dropped. He glanced from it to Alabaster suspiciously.


Pax was too stunned by Alabaster’s appearance to fully understand what he said. From a quick glance at the package, it looked like some kind of clothing.

“You’ll have to wait until the next elevator,” Charon said. He drummed his fingers on the podium. From what Pax could tell, Alabaster had Charon in the bag with whatever article of clothing that was.

Alabaster opened his mouth as though to argue. Then he threw a hand up to his lips. He coughed once.

Blood splattered around his fingers.

Charon flinched backwards. He tried to snatch at the plastic wrap, but wasn’t fast enough.

Even with his new ailment, Alabaster grabbed it. Once the suit was in his hands, he took another step back, the hacks becoming more violent.

“Oh titans—oh titans!” Pax cried. “What’s wrong with him?!” He grabbed Lou Ellen’s shoulder, shaking her. Pax’s mind was at its limit. He hadn’t processed what Alabaster looked like. He couldn’t handle seeing Alabaster’s exposed organs tremble with each cough. This was supposed to be a fun jaunt to the Underworld to annoy his brother. It was quickly becoming a nightmare.

Her mouth hung open. She shook her head. “I—I don’t know. I’ve heard rare stories of—”

Blackish red liquid gushed between the Alabaster’s fingers. His whole body shuddered.

Charon took a panicked step backwards.

“—spirits that don’t handle being incorporeal well so will—”
Lou Ellen didn’t get to finish her explanation.

Alabaster dropped his hand to clutch at his leg. He threw up. That blackish liquid splattered all over the grey floor.

Pax trembled all over. “What do we do?!” he demanded. Thoughts froze. Alabaster always knew what to do. He was the witchy one and the one who knew more about undead. Pax and Lou Ellen were learning from him. But, if he had some kind of ghost sickness—could ghosts get sick—?

Alabaster took in a rattled breath. He raised a shaking hand to emphasize his hold on the clothing. “Let us down right now, or I’ll use this bag as a vomit bag,” he threatened.

Charon’s flinched. “Don’t!” He began to fumble with some keys on his belt. “We—we have an emergency ride that—”

Pax didn’t hear the rest of Charon’s sputters. He slipped an arm under Alabaster to help steady him. Although Pax’s shirt sleeve was dusted from Lou Ellen’s undead effects, he used the end of one to wipe blood from Alabaster’s mouth. Underneath the wheezes, Pax thought he saw Alabaster smirking wickedly at Charon.

Glancing at the blood smatters on the floor, Pax suddenly wasn’t sure which person to feel bad for.

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed and I hope you and your families are staying safe! Stay tuned next week for Part IV to see what ails Alabaster (likely having to babysit two monsters….)
Once they were aboard the Ferry of the Dead, riding down the River Styx with Charon in his proper *creepy and grim* black robe, Alabaster stopped vomiting. The ship was an old Greek vessel, something Matthias could have identified immediately. They sat as far from the stern as possible. Apparently this boat was usually brimming with ghosts, but Charon had shoved the three of them aboard in such a hurry, less ghosts had flooded the space.

This gave them the room to sit on the edge of the boat so Pax, Lou Ellen, and Alabaster could stare off at the inky, polluted river. They wanted to be as far from the ferryman as possible. Charon was cursing under his breath, something about children being electrocuted in bathtubs and getting into car accidents.

Maybe, in a normal tour, Pax might have been excited by the black stalactites and terrifying horror movie set. For now, all he could do was rub Alabaster’s back. Lou Ellen sat on his other side, pulling one finger off and putting it back in a different one’s place, frequently messing it up. This was her way of acting concerned.

After he was certain Charon couldn’t overhear them, Pax whispered, “You *died* coming after us?!”

Before now, he couldn’t process what was happening enough to ask. The sight of Alabaster with his intestines dragging on the floor and blood spewing out of his mouth—it was enough to make Pax tremble more. And he was already trembling pretty hard in this cold cavern.

“Of course I *died!*” Alabaster’s voice rose, making Pax and Lou Ellen flinch. “How else would I be in the Underworld?!”

Tears threatened to spill down Pax’s cheeks. He could hear Lou Ellen sniffling. Crying would *really* make her missing-eye illusion less believable.

Alabaster sighed. Pax thought he was reaching for something in his pocket.

Alabaster wasn’t. He grabbed the end of his intestines dragging on the floor and blood spewing out of his mouth—it was enough to make Pax tremble more. And he was already trembling pretty hard in this cold cavern.

“He’s a zombie!” Alabaster snarled. Softer, he grumbled, “And Mercedes thinks you can keep it cool in enemy territory.”

Pax wanted to point out that enemies (hopefully) wouldn’t be ripping off pieces of their organs. Was that a thing they did in Camp Half-Blood? Did Percy Jackson, in fact, an organ-eating zombie?

Before Pax could withdraw his hand, Alabaster shoved the chunk into Pax’s palm.

Pax almost screamed again. Maybe this was an experience he should have smiled upon—after all, it isn’t every day that your crush tries to hand you an organ, granted, a heart might be
“I knew you idiots wouldn’t bring enough snacks,” Alabaster hissed, shoving another chunk into Lou Ellen’s hands.

“Oh my mother…” Lou Ellen whispered.

Pax didn’t want to watch as she held up the chunk for investigation. Then he saw what she saw. The scent of iron vanished like it had been a whiff from a distant breeze. That chunk had some kind of label covered in blood—not blood.

Pax sniffed.

The scent of barbeque sauce became overwhelming.

He rubbed his own chunk with his thumb. The sauce smeared to reveal a packaged sausage, like the kind you’d have on a cheese platter. There was even a bright label on the protective packaging.

Pax stared at his hand. The spell had been so convincing.

Lou Ellen made a low whistle. “You’re good,” she said, “Titans, can you teach me how to do that?”

“When you have enough discipline to pull off your nose instead of your chin,” Alabaster scolded.

Pax couldn’t think about the spell or the sausage.

He threw his arms around Alabaster.

Alabaster made a grunt of annoyance.

Slowly and firmly, as though not to draw attention to them, Alabaster removed Pax’s arms. There was an embarrassed hue to his pale cheeks as he scowled from Pax to Lou Ellen. “You didn’t come to me to devise this plan?” he demanded.

“We thought you’d be mad,” Lou Ellen meeped. She sheepishly poked at the fake dent in her head. By comparison to Alabaster’s effects, hers looked like something out of a D-rate horror movie.

“Oh, I am mad. When we get back, I’m killing you, and then you’ll have to march right back in there and explain to Charon how you’ve shown up twice, then you’ll have to see what he does with you,” Alabaster said.

Pax couldn’t help but grin. Threats aside, he couldn’t handle looking at this very-much-alive Alabaster. It was cute thinking about it: Alabaster finding their, “Went to Underworld. Will bring back souvenirs,” note and stuffing a bunch of sausage links into his shirt, cussing at the confused centaur that could swear he just took Alabaster and Lou Ellen off the ship. He really cared. At least about Lou Ellen.

“Are you making us go back?” she whispered, shuffling away from a wandering soul and closer to her brother. Pax understood. Everything here was cold. Touching another warm person was a nice reminder of the above world.
“How, pray tell, am I to make you go back in our current situation?” Alabaster closed his eyes and rubbed his eyelids. “Mercedes warned me you’d want to go after Axel. I didn’t think the two of you would be stupid enough to throw away your life chasing him or smart enough to get off the boat undetected.”

Lou Ellen and Pax exchanged a glance over Alabaster’s shoulders. Neither could decide if the comment was more compliment or insult.

“So, we’re going after Axel?” Pax clarified.

“We’re certainly not going back the way we came. I have no interest in angering Charon on his own boat,” Alabaster said.

That meant that Alabaster had come down here with his own plan. Even if he didn’t have one when he left, trying to catch them before they went into DOA Recording Studios, he would have come up with one by now. Before Pax could hear any awesome details, their ship pulled up along black sand.

Pax guessed that Hades hadn’t heard the memo—that pink was the new black. If Pax ever got scared while he was down here, he would have to remember to visualize the Underworld in various shades of Easter egg with magenta stalactites meeting a sparkling, rose floor. His stomach dropped about what shade of pink the river would be with its thick eddies. That went too Mayan in his head.

Alabaster tossed the plastic-wrapped suit backwards into the boat, quickly shuffling the younger two off. They didn’t wait to hear what Charon thought of the contents.

They walked towards the airport-like security with ghoulish attendants separating people into various lines. There were signs above the lines, ones that Pax couldn’t read since the letters jumbled into incomprehension.

A low whine, like that of an injured puppy, echoed around the chamber. Yea, there were wails too, but those were human wails. Pax was way less interested in those. He couldn’t find the source of the animal noises until Lou Ellen tugged furiously on his jacket.

Pax didn’t know how he missed the view before. Unlike Alabaster, Lou Ellen, and Axel, he struggled to see through the Mist. Even so, the Mist deserved a pay raise.

A few yards ahead of them was a massive Rottweiler with three heads. Maybe the truck-sized dog would have normally been intimidating; Pax had heard some intimidating stories about Cerberus. Instead, the dog just looked pathetic, curled up and nursing a paw. Pax could see why.

There was a sword imbedded between two toes.

“He’s hurt!” Pax cried.

“Ajax, no,” Alabaster growled.

Lou Ellen joined in the cry, “We have to help him.”

“What part of—”

“Please!” Pax and Lou Ellen said together.

“Grant me the patience of the Furies,” Alabaster said under his breath.
One of the heads must have caught their scent. It perked up and glanced in their direction, growling.

The other two were licking at the injured paw still. He looked cute, the way a monster truck might if painted with bambis and rabbits.

Alabaster stopped in his tracks. He fumbled with his intestines—sausages. Pax really needed to stop thinking of sausage as intestines. “Who do you think stabbed him?” he asked in his you’re stupid if you can’t answer this question and I know you too well to let you play dumb. “See many stray demigods wandering down here with blades?”

“It wasn’t Axel,” Pax said. Axel was obsessed with mythical creature rights and would have known Cerberus was just doing his job. One caged animal to another—Axel would have likely tried to play-wrestle with the beast. “I’ll bet it was Luke.”


The two of them vigorously nodded their heads towards Alabaster.

“Lou Ellen,” Alabaster chided, “I expect more creative insults than vulgarity. And you aren’t going to win me over by insulting Castellan.”

Despite him saying that, the corner of his lips twitched into a smile. Until then, Pax hadn’t realized how glad he was to have Alabaster along. The Witch Boy would know his way around the Underworld, or Pax guessed he would. Alabaster held that easy calm, even amongst the dead.

Pax and Lou Ellen would have feigned calm confidence. But, uh, that would have only lasted so long as they got closer to the line’s attendants.

Another of Cerberus’ heads noticed their movement. It raised and joined in the low growl.

The noise didn’t seem to bother Alabaster. “How were you planning on getting past?” he asked, gathering the rest of the sausages from his waist—he must have wrapped them under his shirt, and withdrawing them like a towel around a hand wound.

“We brought a chew toy,” Lou Ellen said. Pax could tell that she wanted to sound proud, but had realized a flaw in their plan. There were three heads and only one chew toy.

“Seriously?” Alabaster’s growl chimed in with Cerberus’.

“I heard it worked for Annabeth,” Pax said.

Although Pax couldn’t see it, he could feel Alabaster roll his eyes. “The amount of inconvenience that girl has caused,” he said under his breath.

Pax hesitated. Cerberus’ growls were making his body vibrate. This dog was massive, the size of a truck. Pax didn’t even come up to Cerberus’ chest and Cerberus was half-laying down. One of his heads still licked the sword hilt imbedded in his paw. Focus on that, Pax thought, and not on how his teeth are about as long as that sword.

“We have a treat for you!” Alabaster called. His voice was way too cold for dealing with a ball of cute fluffiness and death. Pax had a feeling that Alabaster had never been allowed pets as a child. Other than Axel and Pax. Pax was fairly certain that they were pets to Alabaster.

Cerberus stood up. When he applied pressure to his front paw, all three heads whimpered.
They pulled the paw up slightly, to alleviate the pressure.

“Go fix his paw if you wish. I can only hold him for a few moments with this,” Alabaster said. “If you take too long or are sloppy, you’ll get yourself killed.”

For an instant, Pax wondered if Alabaster was nervous. The Witch Boy unwrapped a link of sausage and tossed it into the air towards Cerberus.

The two heads less affected by the wound snapped at it, nipping at each other to bite it to pieces, probably the same way they would do with Pax’s limbs if he was caught.

Its breath flooded over them, almost as bad as Pax’s little brother’s, Hiro’s breath.

“You suck at this,” Lou Ellen said, pulling a link from Alabaster. “You heard him, Pax. Have fun getting that sword out. Hey puppers! Look what I got for you puppers!”

Her voice raised in pitch and excitement. The sentiment worked. Cerberus sat upright, letting his butt drop back onto the ground. From what Pax had heard of Annabeth’s interactions with this dog, he thought their red ball plan might have worked with Lou Ellen’s charm. Uh—natural charm. No witchy charm required.

Pax puffed up his cheeks and popped them, realizing Lou Ellen had volunteered him for the harder job. His heartbeat pounded in his head.

“It’s just a cute, injured puppy,” he told himself, “It just so happens that it wouldn’t need to chew to swallow you.”

Alabaster gave Lou Ellen a look that might have been reproachful or approving. He handed her the rest of the sausage as Cerberus’ short tail thumped against the black sand, echoing around the chamber. Pax thought it was weird that interacting with this dog wasn’t a red flag for the Underworld Security. What dead person wanted to poke at the landowner’s attack dog?

Alabaster made a few signs in the air around Pax’s head, muttering in Latin. Was he making him invisible? Or at least making him blend in with the stone? Or smell less like a delicious treat?

Pax hoped all of the above. When Pax glanced down at his hands, they still looked visible and potentially delicious to a monster.

“We don’t have enough sausages for you to hesitate;” Lou Ellen said.

Pax swallowed. He thought about Juana, Axel’s jaguar. Their father bought it for him a few months after they were forced back “home.” Axel warned his siblings not to go near Juana without him, since she could tear them to shreds. Juana was a tenth the size of Cerberus.

From what he knew of Juana, there was no point in trying to sneak up. He approached Cerberus’ injured paw, hands outstretched in attempt to look non-threatening. Not that a 4’ 7 rail of cuteness could look threatening.

The other two heads were locked on Lou Ellen, or fighting over bits of sausage she threw.

The last head faced him. The eyes didn’t quite focus on Pax, showing Alabaster’s spell must have done something. Pax heartbeat thudded in his head as he took the last few steps to Cerberus’ foot. The dog hadn’t batted him out of existence yet.

The head whimpered and pulled its paw closer to its body.

“It’s okay,” Pax said, the way he did when his littlest brother had a nightmare. “I just want to help. It’ll be quick, like ripping off a Band Aid.”
That felt like a threat to Pax. *Just gonna take that sharp, pointy thing in your paw and move it around a bit.*

“Pax,” Alabaster said in warning.

Pax didn’t look over to see why. He figured it had to do with how the middle head had turned to sniff furiously in his direction.

*Now or to Xibalba,* Pax thought. He wrapped his fingers around the cold metal of the hilt and pulled up, trying not to twist the blade or yank at an angle.

It slid out easily.

Pax wanted to gloat about the *Sword in the Paw* and how he’d be king of the Cerberi.

His mouth went dry instead.

When he wretched the blade out, dark liquid splattered up from the paw. Something clear and goopy dropped on his head from above—saliva.

Pax puffed up his cheeks and popped them, looking up. The other two heads glowered down at him. Their teeth were barred within inches of his face. Their low growl rattled his skull.

He trembled, thinking at least one good thing would come out of this: if he died in the Underworld, he didn’t need to worry about going through Charon’s Waiting Room again.

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed! And I hope you and your loved ones are staying healthy and safe!

Stay tuned next week for part X!
The farthest Cerberus mouth lunged towards Pax. Probably because Pax was now armed with the very item that had caused this puppers so much pain.

Pax assumed he was going to die. He said a quick prayer to his Mayan gods and Catholic overlord and cowarded away as best he could.

Instead of having three heads calls dibs on his own, the one that had hovered over the paw snapped at the others. It made a whining noise, disrupting the attack.

Then, it leaned down and licked Pax from foot to hair.

In the best of cartoon fashions, his hair stood up from the line of drool. If he hadn’t smelled like a corpse before, he did now. Normally, it took a lot for Pax to be grossed out. All he wanted to do was wipe off his face. Considering the rest of him was covered in the same gooey substance, that would do little good.

“Good boy? Boys?” Pax said uncertainly. He slowly set the sword onto the ground, calming the growls of the other two heads.

“Ajax..?” Alabaster’s voice hovered behind him. The relief in Alabaster’s tone made Pax want to hug the Witch Boy. It showed potential for Alabaster to look at him as more than a meat shield. Then again, this relief could come from Pax being a highly successful meat shield—a reusable one.

When the friendly head lowered back towards Pax, Pax hesitantly reached a hand behind the dog’s ear. The dog made a face like it needed to sneeze. But, in good news, it didn’t rip his arm off. He reached up both hands two hands to rub behind the ears, realizing one might feel more like a flea.

“Lou Ellen, stop!” Alabaster scolded.

Lou Ellen giggled, rushing over to Pax’s side. She joined in the petting.

Cerberus’s tail thudded the ground again, sending up little clouds of black dust.

The middle head looked like it wanted to investigate Lou Ellen for more sausages. The furthest glared jealously at the pets.

“Such a good boy!” Lou Ellen cooed.

Alabaster made a sound of annoyance.

Lou Ellen waved him off. “Could you take us to our friends?” she asked, “Would you be a good boy and do that?”

Pax perked up at the idea. He put himself right under the friendly head’s snout. “One smells kind of like me,” he said.
“If Axel was the one that stabbed him, is that such a good idea?” Alabaster asked. Pax suspected Alabaster was preparing a spell to make dogs vomit demigods. He had so little faith in them.

“Axel did not stab him,” Pax said to Alabaster. He turned his attention back to Cerberus. There was a mini-dust storm from all the tail thumping. “How ‘bout it? Take me to my brother?”

“Ajax, what makes you think it can understand you?”

Pax could tell Alabaster had folded his arms by the skepticism in his voice.

As though enjoying the challenge, Cerberus answered on his own. The friendly head leaned down to lift Pax up by his belt. The middle head got Lou Ellen. The angry one snapped up Alabaster by the nap of his shirt.

Cerberus, tail wagging cheerfully behind him, began to trot down along the River Styx.

So close to Cerberus’ mouth, all three of them gagged.

“How ‘bout it? Take me to my brother?” Alabaster shrieked.

They didn’t need to ride for long, which was fortunate: Alabaster sounded ready to behead at least one of Cerberus’ heads when the dog stopped.

In retrospect, they didn’t need Cerberus to sniff out Axel. All they needed to do was follow the riverbank. Regardless, Pax was pleased they would arrive in style. And that Cerberus had a scent to follow. Part of Pax was terrified of what Alabaster would do to him and Lou Ellen if they got into the Underworld and found out that Luke, Axel, and Jack were already topside, celebrating a successful quest. Pax suspected that Alabaster wouldn’t pick weasel transformation as the punishment for having them unnecessarily picnic to Hades.

He heard their friends before they saw them. The frantic trill of Jack’s angelic song was eerie in the black cavern, bouncing haphazardly off the stalactites and stalagmites, making it sound like a choir of dead church children.

That type of singing was a bad sign. While Jack loved to hum aimlessly, that type of panicked song meant someone was hurt.

When Pax saw the three figures—definitely too lively to be undead unless the Z or T virus was about to break out in the Underworld (something Pax would both pay to see and not to be part of)—Pax’s hopes sank.

Jack’s red hair spiked like a flare in the gloominess. Axel’s height was the next obvious silhouette. Once they got close enough to see that Axel had withdrawn a sword at their approach, Pax noticed there weren’t three people here, but four. Luke was a crumpled heap in one of Axel’s arms.

Standing alongside their friends was an Ancient Greek dude that Pax had never seen before. This fourth guy was, in fact, a ghost, making Pax reconsider the stereotypes against ghosts.

Axel’s muscles relaxed when Pax yipped, “Axel!”
Pax meant to wait and let Alabaster lessen the blow for them. Until he saw Axel here, Pax hadn’t considered the asswhipping he was going to get once they got topside.

Cerberus stopped three yards away, growling deeply.

That’s when Pax remembered that, presumably, one of their friends had stabbed Cerberus’ paw. Pax crawled further up Cerberus’ neck to pet behind his ear and keep him calm. “It’s okay! Good boy! Nice boy! Thank-you-for-not-eating-us boy! You can let us down now, boy.”

Lou Ellen must have been doing some similar cooing. Either Cerberus respected that Pax had helped him and really liked their pets, or he didn’t want to risk another stabbing. The Rottweiler let Alabaster, Lou Ellen, and Pax jump off, gave one last snarl towards their friends—which sent Jack squealing—and dashed back upriver.

Worry and anger flashed over Axel’s face upon recognizing Pax. Despite the chill of the Underworld, sweat soaked his shirt. His sword arm shook. The skin there was pink like he’d just withdrawn it from a vat of acid. Whatever scolding Axel might be preparing shattered when he saw Alabaster. Axel’s golden eyes softened with relief.

“You brought Alabaster,” he said, shoving the sword back into its sheath.

“I assure you, Pax and Lou Ellen had no intentions of being helpful,” Alabaster said. “What happened here?” His emerald gaze flicked suspiciously to the ghost.

“Luke is hurt!” Jack cried. Without the echo of Jack’s eerie singing or the low thrum of Cerberus, the Underworld felt quiet, their sentences uncomfortable punctures in a natural silence.

Axel must have felt this too. His muscles tensed. He lifted Luke’s limp body for Alabaster to examine.

Pax swallowed. Luke looked like a newborn baby or a cartoon piglet. His skin was pink, similar to Axel’s, except it looked way worse, because—you know—pasty white people. Jack would have slapped Pax upside the head for that one. Flynn would have agreed.

“He lost sight of what kept him mortal, so the River Styx started to burn him to ashes,” said the helpful, mysterious ghost, “I told him not to bear my curse.”

“Achilles,” Alabaster said, nodding his head absently towards the spirit. He withdrew some latex gloves from a pouch along his waist and reached to lift Luke’s arm. “He looks pretty good for the River Styx trying to burn him.”

Pax thought it was both terrifying and cute that Alabaster’s cold, scientific curiosity was triggered by their wrinkly friend. Pax and Lou Ellen fell silent on either side of him, staring in confusion at Luke’s marred skin. Mercedes would have scolded Pax for the awful job he’d done gathering information to hunt Axel down. All he knew was that Luke wanted to bath in the River Styx to become shiny or something. He didn’t understand the ghost’s presence or how skinnydipping could hurt someone.

“He didn’t look like this a minute ago,” Axel said, clenching his jaw.

Jack tugged at his hair. “I had to sing him back together! Alabaster, what went wrong!? And why isn’t he getting better?! I healed him—I—I made all the blisters go away—and his skin regrow—”

Achilles shook his head. “I told you. His anchor wasn’t strong enough. I warned him—”
“What does that mean?!” Axel demanded of the ghost. “And how do we fix him?”

Luke’s breath came in shallow, sharp gasps. Shivers wracked his limbs. His eyes would open partially to reveal lazily listing whites. Similar to Axel, his body was soaked in sweat or—or likely River Styx water. Pax saw how polluted that thing was. Axel and Luke were likely to sprout even more super-human powers. Either that or become villains. It’s what happened when you swam with three-eyed fish.

A pang of terror ran through Pax when he realized Axel must have reached into this acid-water to drag Luke out.

“He’s in shock,” Alabaster said. He frowned, turning Luke’s hand over. The witch boy fished along his belt. Pax expected him to withdraw some ambrosia or some other healing substance.

Instead, Alabaster withdrew a scalpel and stabbed Luke’s palm. That, Pax had to admit, was not in his *Traditional Methods on How to Heal*.


“What the Hades?!” Axel snapped.

“Torrington!” Jack cried, sounding near actual tears. Probably because Jack knew he couldn’t beat someone as terrifying as Alabaster. Pax loved his surrogate father, but, uh, Alabaster could kick his ass.

“The curse took successfully,” Alabaster said calmly.

He rubbed the scalpel onto his sleeve before putting it away.

When Pax squinted at Luke’s limp hand, he saw what Alabaster meant. There was no blood. There wasn’t a mark at all, even though Alabaster had put enough force to cut open a hell hound.

The River Styx didn’t just make people shiny, Pax realized in awe. It made them invulnerable. Or maybe invulnerability was the original myth…. Pax was bad with myths.

“You had to fish him out,” Lou Ellen said, pointing at Axel’s arm. “Like Achilles’ mom did for him.”

Alabaster brushed off Jack’s whines and panic. “It was more time efficient to stab him than explain I was going to stab him and have you protest.” Alabaster shifted his gaze to his half-sister. “Now, Lou Ellen, astute observation. Axel had to pull him out and Jack had to sing Luke back together, which means the River Styx *should* have killed him and it means he was in immense, horrific pain when you pulled him out. Jack healed him physically, but…”

“He’s still in shock,” Lou Ellen cheered like she’d gotten the right answer on a test. When Axel and Jack gave her bewildered glances, she dropped her eyes to the black sand. “Sorry, got excited,” she said.

Pax reached around Alabaster to pat Lou Ellen’s shoulder. He understood how exciting it was to meet Alabaster’s impossible expectations. “Can shock kill someone?” Pax asked, unsure why everyone was freaking out. Luke was out of the water, right?

Jack paled. His fingers clutched at Luke’s soaked shirt. He squeaked when his fingers came
“Circulatory shock—he’s not getting enough blood—oxygen! That explains the weak pulse, the cold hands and feet, the—”

The stutter broke into a song. Jack hovered his hands on either side of Luke’s sweaty, pale face. Luke’s shallow, rapid breath mixed with the fluttery, echoing words. “This is where the healing begins, oh, this is where the healing starts. When you come to where you’re broken within. The light meets the dark—”

His frantic, bright eyes flicked desperately to Axel and Alabaster, as though to communicate a message.

“But he’s supposed to be invulnerable,” Pax said, feeling small. At the sight of Jack’s renewed panic, he felt some of his own, contagious like a yawn.

“My curse makes one’s battle prowess beyond that of any mortal and will make one physically strong,” the ghost in ancient armor said, “However, it heightens all of one’s weaknesses. I know not of this circulatory shock, but—”

Alabaster snorted, looking both scornful and bitter. “He was too weak-willed to handle this and the curse only intensified his weakness. We need to get him to the River Lethe.”

Axel looked as confused as Pax felt. It took Pax a moment to realize Axel’s skin must be burning everywhere he touched Luke. Axel’s jaw clenched against it. “But—he’s not in the river anymore—”

Alabaster motioned them away from the River Styx. “You’re talking about someone prone to vicious nightmares. Either his nerves are fried and he’s still in all of that pain, or he passed out and is stuck reliving the nightmare of it. Either way, his body is trying to give up and all that’s kept him alive is Jack’s singing. Unless any of you have morphine...?”

Alabaster held the word in the air, like he genuinely expected someone to lift the drug.

Axel scowled at him. He hated it when people insulated that he or Pax might have access to illegal drugs. Alabaster didn’t know why and likely meant nothing by it, but Pax could feel Axel tense in offense despite the circumstances. Pax could see the resemblance between Axel and their real father in the way Axel went still with rage.

“No?” Alabaster surmised. “Very well. Then let’s get to the River Lethe. If we do a quick splash, it’ll hopefully erase just enough to make him forget the pain without forgetting who he is—”

“His healing pow’r this very hour—Hopefully?!” Jack said between verses, “Shall give new life to thee!”

“Unless you have a better idea?” Alabaster said. His emerald gaze flicked to the ghost.

Achilles shook his head. “This lack of mental fortitude is beyond my knowledge.”

Pax was pretty sure this famous hero just called Luke a bitch.

“There’s no other option then. Let’s go,” Axel said. He grunted and lifted Luke over his shoulders in a fireman carry.

Pax wanted Axel to put a fire blanket between his body and Luke’s, or like, turn Luke into a bubble boy with a full hamster ball that they could push to the River Lethe, but Pax figured they
didn’t have time for that.

When he heard someone shout behind them, he realized they had no time at all.

“There they are!”

The shout belonged to a demented grandmother with wings and a fiery whip. She looked like something out of the **weirdest** porn links that Matthias had dared he open, thinking Pax wouldn’t take the challenge. He wished he hadn’t. It haunted his nightmares for weeks.

Their pursuers were a soccer field away. Two more of those winged, leathery grandmothers flanked the first. Behind these scouts, a chariot rolled across the black sand.

Pax felt his skin go cold. There was a small army of ghouls behind that chariot.

Alabaster released a string of curses. Lou Ellen paled. Jack’s voice cracked in panic. Axel went to withdraw his sword again.

“No, you idiot,” Alabaster growled. “The pit to Tartarus isn’t that far. We’ll be safer with my siblings down there.”

Axel shoved Luke’s limp body into Alabaster’s arms. Fortunately, with the latex gloves, long sleeves, and whatever barrier Alabaster had put between himself and the earlier sausages, the residual Styx water didn’t seem to bother Alabaster.

“They’ll overtake us,” Axel said. Once Luke was with Alabaster, he gave the Witch Boy a harsh shove down shore.

Alabaster’s jaw dropped, in offense or disbelief, Pax wasn’t sure.

Jack’s lips quivered. He stopped singing for a moment. “Axel..?”

“Even with Lou Ellen here, you can’t create a Mist shield that could hide all of us without them seeing someone was here,” Axel said. “If they’re looking for someone, they’ll see through your Mist shield. Mist cracks under scrutiny. If they’re distracted because there is someone in front of them, you can sneak off. You’ll need you and Lou Ellen to keep the Mist shield up and Jack to keep Luke alive. Keep Ajax safe.”

Pax shook violently. What was Axel saying?

“You stubborn, stupid, arrogant—” Alabaster seethed.

“Each insult is costing you a second that could be taking your to Tartarus,” Axel said. That voice was too calm, too accepting, too final. “Go.”

Axel ruffled Pax’s hair with a forced, calming smile.

When Pax glanced back up the shore, he saw why.

That chariot radiated power. It wasn’t just a platoon of level-one fodder. That was a boss fight. An Underworld boss fight. One Pax was sure Axel wasn’t a high enough level to win.

Not that anything could beat up Axel, Pax assured himself. It just didn’t follow a proper storyline. They hadn’t been at this war long enough. Not enough people knew how awesome Axel and his clever shirts were. He hadn’t even had a proper girlfriend yet, and Pax would be damned if he let anything happen to Axel before he got a proper girlfriend. Would he already be damned if
they were in the Under—

*Focus*, he told himself as Axel shoved Pax to Lou Ellen. “Don’t let him out of your sight,” Axel said.

Pax’s heart choked in his throat when Lou Ellen’s hands caught him. This wasn’t happening. He wasn’t about to let this happen.

“Fine!” Alabaster spit. “Get yourself killed.”

The Witch Boy chanted in Latin, either casting a massive invisibility spell, or something to crack Axel’s will. Lou Ellen jumped into the chant, making Pax think it was an invisibility spell, since he doubted the children of Hecate had been practicing to subdue Pax boys in rhythmic harmony.

Like earlier that day, sparks sputtered near Lou Ellen. She must have been nervous or at least upset at the concept of leaving Axel. Her voice broke once. At least the Mist shield wasn’t blinking like it had been.

Now, at least, Pax knew one of Alabaster’s secrets for sure: he actually liked the Pax brothers. Either that, or they were too good a lab specimen to waste.

“Oh God,” Jack whispered in horror. “We’re really doing this. B—”

“Go!” Axel growled, his voice getting impatient. He took several steps away from the invisibility shield.

Pax wanted to think everyone was weeping at the sight of this beautiful hero, but he couldn’t tell. Everyone had vanished. The only part that looked odd was the occasional spark drifting down from above his head.

Vaguely, Pax wondered how Jack was going to keep singing to heal Luke. Maybe Alabaster could maintain silence and invisibility at the same time?

“Come on, Ajax,” Lou Ellen said. Her voice cracked again.

Pax wasn’t going to wait to see how they planned to save Luke without Jack’s singing. He felt her hand and jammed his thumb into the pressure point in Lou Ellen’s forearm. He figured, if he couldn’t see any of them, they couldn’t see him. That meant, if he ran far enough from their group—

“Ajax!” Alabaster’s voice hissed.

Okay, so maybe they could guess that he had run from Lou Ellen’s squeak of pain.

By then, Axel was a few yards away and the furies were fast approaching, the chariot and army not far behind.

Axel’s tufted ears twitched at Pax’s approach. Maybe it was the fact that the sand still shifted under Pax’s invisible feet. Maybe it was the fact that Pax smelled amazing or that Axel could usually see through the Mist. Whatever it was, Pax could see the instant Axel realized Pax had broken away from Alabaster, Lou Ellen, Jack, and Luke. It almost looked like Axel’s courage faltered.

But neither of them could turn back now. Hades, Lord of the Underworld, was already
descending upon them with his army.

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed :D You’re about to hit the reason why this short story exists, and it is for a very stupid reason. Stay tuned next week to see Hades’ hospitality with our Pax boys!

I hope you guys are staying safe and healthy!

[1] I yawned every fucking time I edited this paragraph, which, unfortunately, had a lot of mistakes.
The Lord of the Underworld was almost exactly what Pax expected he would be: moody, dark, and evil-looking with a strong affinity for the color black. Or maybe it was the color “trapped soul.” Whatever it was, Hades liked it outlined in gold, probably to look more intimidating. He wore black robes and had a helm under one arm.

There was one major problem. He didn’t have blue fire for hair. Disney taught Pax that Hades was supposed to have blue fire hair and a great sense of humor. Disney had lied to him. This just looked like a rich, pasty white guy.

His black and gold chariot was spooky, but Pax had seen cooler ones. The one they were designing for Kronos was way better.

Axel was crazy enough to have his sword still drawn. In the presence of the Lord of the Underworld, with Hades’ squadron of geriatric dominatrixes, and some Halloween standees behind them, Pax’s brother set his jaw and kept his lips in a firm line. When asked later, Pax would say Axel didn’t shake once (and they would get a chance to be asked later; they were both surviving this, damn it.) Truth was, Pax’s presence seemed to weaken Axel’s resolve. Pax guessed it was real easy to get yourself killed when it was just you that would be doing the dying part.

Pax’s mind raced. One thing was certain: they weren’t fighting their way out of this.

Axel grunted when Pax pushed his sword hand down.

“Get out of here,” Axel hissed in Mayan.

Pax didn’t know how to explain to Axel that the invisibility spell over Pax was sparking and would attract a lot of attention if he tried to pick up Axel and flee. Pax didn’t get a chance.

Hades’ voice boomed and reverberated around the cavern more than Jack’s had. “You will not escape me this time, Perc—”

As his chariot ground to a halt, his dark eyes narrowed at Axel’s tiny form, then flicked back up to the furies. “This isn’t Percy Jackson.”

The furies had been fluttering in an intimidating circle above, like the most obnoxious of gnats. One landed beside Hades’ chariot, looking nervous. “We thought it was Luke Castellan, My Lord. Your rage and obsession over Jackson must have—”

Hades roared. He lashed out towards the Fury.

She took to the sky again, shrieking.

“Does this look like the host of Kronos?!” Hades bellowed, Pax thought, rather offensively. Axel could totally host Kronos if he wanted. “I’m not sure if I would rather strike Jackson or Castellan dead first.” His dark gaze returned back to Axel. “You’ll have to suffice.”

Pax wished the invisibility spell came with a sink-into-the-ground function. He trembled at
the power radiating off this god, and knew, in that horrifying moment, that Axel was about to challenge Hades to a duel.

Pax’s mouth opened. He wasn’t sure what words would come out, but they would definitely be better than Axel’s, You wanna throw down?

“We’re lost,” Pax said.

Hades looked confused, clearly noting that Axel hadn’t opened his mouth.

Axel tensed.

No option for running now. Pax continued, feeling a few sparks above his head flutter down to singe his shoulder. He hoped that wasn’t burning holes in the invisibility spell. He might need it in a moment. “Yes, we’re lost,” Pax repeated. “We’re looking…” He grasped for anything that might baffle the Lord of the Dead. At those words, it popped into his head. “We’re looking… for Xibalba?” The comment came out a question.

Axel cleared his throat. “Yes,” he confirmed, glancing in Pax’s general direction without landing exactly on Pax. “We’re looking for Xibalba.” Robotically, Axel sheathed his sword.

Hades looked incredibly annoyed. “You are Mayan,” he said, examining Axel’s tufted ears with begrudging realization. “You’re not Greek at all.”

“Nope,” Axel confirmed. “My faith is in the Mayan gods and the Catholic Trinity.”

None of that was false. They had always practiced within the Mayan and Catholic faith. They knew Greek and Roman gods and hung out with them. Pax hardly called that faith or worship, no matter how often Morpheus liked to tease them as his little devotees when they slept-in with a rare, sweet dream. Axel scorned when anyone suggested he refer to the Titans as all powerful.

Hades pinched the ridge of his nose. “Who let you down here?”

“Um…” Axel said. He, Luke, and Jack must have slipped into the Underworld through a back entrance and didn’t know who to pin the blame on.

Pax had an immediate answer. “Charon,” he said.

“CHARON!” Hades bellowed.

Even Axel flinched as the cavern trembled with a minor earthquake. A stalactite fell and crashed into lines of the dead in the distance. They passed through, unharmed.

“First he has the audacity to ask for a pay raise, and now he’s letting heathens into my domain!” Hades yelled, “His impertinence knows no end! First his suits! And now his life coach that’s telling him how hard it is to find someone with his skill set!”

Although Axel probably couldn’t see Pax, the brothers knew to look towards each other as though to exchange a glance.

“Is his skill set hard to find?” Axel asked.

“Yes!” Hades bellowed, “It’s nearly impossible to find a well-suited grim reaper.” Pax wanted to raise a hand to ask if Hades’ “well-suited” meant Charon’s outfit or skill set, but Hades cut him off. “But, you can’t let him know that. It goes straight to his head and now he thinks he’s
irreplaceable. He forgets that one-in-a-billion is different than irreplaceable. How many people do you think die in a day?"

Pax coughed into the back of his hand to keep himself from laughing. Was this guy for real? Most of his prior fear was evaporating. "Us heathens?" he reminded Hades.

“Yes, it has been an awfully long time since Charon flubbed and let savage barbarians into my domain—"

“Let’s stick with heathens,” Axel growled.

Pax had to agree. He remembered Alabaster once telling him something about how barbarian meant someone who wasn’t Hellenistic to the Greeks, but avoiding the adjective “savage,” was that too much to ask for?

“And now we have a leak in our ICEE unit. They should have caught you at the entrance,” Hades continued like Axel hadn’t spoken.

Had Pax heard that right? “ICEE? For real? As in—"

“Inhumation Correction to Exact Exequies,” Hades growled. “This is what you get when you let liberal arts majors name things. Regardless, they’re for the dead who were improperly processed after death. They’ll be able to sort a ghost and a…. are you some kind of spirit guide?”

The question didn’t sound sarcastic, just irritated. Pax’s mind raced, trying to think—

Pax decided to go with lying, a rarity with his normal half-truths. He forgot no one could see him while he shrugged. “He’s the weird one. All Mayan dead look like me.”

“Uh-hu…” a Fury somewhere above said doubtfully.

Pax stuck a tongue out at her and had the delightful realization that he could moon the Lord of the Dead right here, right now, in his own domain, and no one would know to stop him and there would assuredly be no repercussions.

That would also mean mooning the creepy dominatrixes in the sky. He decided he would pass up the opportunity to avoid that.

“We’re sorry to cause you such strife, Lord Death,” Axel said, holding up his hands in a mock-honoring gesture. “We can show ourselves out, really.”

“Likely,” Hades said. “Last time we had an ICEE mix up, there was SUCH ruckus and chaos. That einherji was terrible for our image!”

Axel frowned, his hands clenching into fists. “You know, not all misplaced souls are like that.”

“Yes, you try telling that to Elysian Field occupants that had their houses torched and raided. All it takes is one and it devalues all the properties for miles!” Hades said.

Pax got the bad feeling that Axel was about to attack Hades regardless of their ruse. While warranted, Axel might really be a misplaced Mayan soul stuck in the Underworld’s immigration unit if he did.

Before Pax could say something to ease the mood, Hades leaned forward in his chariot. His
hand curled around his black helm. His dark eyes bore down onto Axel.

Had Axel been a lesser man, he’d have probably crumbled to his knees with all that godliness trying to make him feel mortal. Pax definitely felt himself trembling. Instead, Axel stared back.

Hades pointed to Axel’s arm. “You tried to swim in the River Styx.” This time, when the Lord of the Underworld spoke, his oily voice was also filled with ice.

Axel lowered his arms completely. His burn marks had been on full display from where he’d withdrawn Luke from the dark waters and held his acidic friend.

Considering that probably wasn’t a popular tourist destination for a leisure dip, Pax could see where marks from it would be suspicious.

“Is that what your river is called?” Pax asked, trying to edge his voice with some mockery. “Our black river is the scorpion river. Dipping in it is part of our death ritual. You should check the pH balance of your scorpions. I think they’re off.” That most certainly was not part of their death ritual. Pax planned to stay as far away from the Black River as he could when we went to….

An existential panic threatened to break Pax’s concentration on the present. Would he end up in the Mayan afterlife or the Greek one? Or even the Catholic one? Others in Camp Othrys said it was based off belief, but what if you believed in all three? And what if Axel didn’t end up in the same one? Would paradise even be worth it if you couldn’t hang out with your bro?

The expression on Hades’ face brought Pax’s attention back. Those harsh lines hadn’t softened at Pax’s flubbed explanation. Hades was in the process of deciding he didn’t believe them and, probably, wondering which part of his robes he’d put the Pax brother’s souls into. Guy had some weird fetishes if he kept people’s souls in his robes and ladies with whips as his escorts. No wonder Persephone only stayed down here a few months out of the year.

They needed a distraction and they need one fast, something that would shock or offend Hades so much that he’d forget to toss them into his evil sock drawer and something that would startle Axel away from where his hand was creeping towards his sword hilt.

“Your helmet looks stupid,” Pax blurted.

That… that was not what they needed. But, Pax would make it work.

Before Hades eyes could bulge out of his head, his “WHAT” could shake apart the Underworld, or Axel could choke on his laughter, Pax continued, “I’m looking out for your best interests. It looks like your helm would look stupid on, and I wouldn’t want you looking stupid to other invisible spirits like myself. You see, us invisibles look visible to other invisibles. Haven’t you noticed that when you have your helm on?”

It was a huge gamble. Alabaster would have been able to tell Pax if that was stupid or not, according to mythology. At the moment, all Pax could remember was that it was a helm of invisibility. He couldn’t remember what other figures possessed this power.

Hades’ brow had furrowed in rage, his mouth agape like a rabid animal. In the briefest moment, Pax saw a glimmer of insecurity in those pits of eternal pain that Hades had for eyes.

Either Pax had already sentenced him and his brother to death or Hades needed the tiniest bit more coaxing before he cracked.

“I mean, I’m a Mayan. I’ll talk to you straight. How many Greeks would dare give you an
honest opinion on this?” Pax said, so fast that he hoped others could keep the syllables separated. “Try asking one of your humble servants.”

The ghoul army behind him shuffled in nervous motion. The Furies seemed to fly higher.

“I trust my servants to be honest with me,” Hades snarled. He scowled up towards the Fury that had spotted their party; she hadn’t flown up fast enough. “Alekto.”

She seemed alarmed. “Yes, Master?” she said uncertainly.

“How my helm look stupid when I’m wearing it?” Hades asked.

Her wing flapping grew so tentative, Pax thought that she might lose altitude. “Um…. Master, I cannot see it on you when you wear it. You’re invisible.”

Hades nostrils flared. “Of course you can’t,” he said, his voice bitter with suspicion.

Pax shrugged in a, what are you going to do?, gesture. Remembering that Hades couldn’t see him, he shoved Axel and hoped his older brother got the message.

“Underlings, am I right?” Axel asked. The words sounded unnatural from him. On the laundry list of things that made Axel passionately angry, the misuse of underpaid workers was one of them.

That didn’t matter to Hades. He examined his helmet so thoroughly, he probably hadn’t even heard Axel. Pax had cracked Hades’ confident demeanor with the tiniest hint of insecurity. Alekto’s hesitation was all Pax needed to convince the Lord of the Dead that there was a problem.

“Charon did give the design to the Elder Cyclopes during the First Titan War. It has always been a little too tight.” Hades lifted his helm and stared into the dark eye sockets. Pax was a little disappointed that the helmet didn’t turn Hades’ arm invisible when he stuck his hand inside to lift it up. Hades snorted. “Of course I would be the only god that needed measurements for my great weapon. Zeus and Poseidon get a bolt and a trident. Doesn’t matter if their henchmen are unreliable. You’d think with all those tailored suits, that Charon could take a proper measurement —”

Pax wanted to point out that Hades should be able to just change the size of his head. He was a GOD. That was the opposite of what Pax wanted Hades to think. Pax feigned a gasp, kicking his brother’s boot.

Instead of sharing Pax’s gasp, as he had hoped, Axel glared at him. His message was clear: get on with what you’re doing before you get us killed.

“Oh, you’ve never SEEN your helmet on yourself?” Pax said, sounding as aghast and offended as he could manage. “I mean, if you’re comfortable with not knowing whether or not you look like an idiot—”

Hades made a threatening growl.

Pax knew he couldn’t back down. “—and maybe telling Persephone that her husband lost his fashion sense after the SS uniform went out of style—”

“Those uniforms influenced dark fashion for years,” Hades said with pride.

“All villains admire that look. Clearly you know what you’re doing,” Pax agreed. “Maybe
we just need someone to model your helmet for you, that way you can make adjustments to fit what you think is best, not Charon’s sloppy notes.”

“It would be nice to fix the sizing. And I could add some more skulls to it, if I were to have it fixed,” Hades mumbled, tilting the helm on its side.

“You’ll need someone who—I mean, no one could do your grand, imperial stance justice, but someone who would come close. You need a chiseled, manly-jawed model. Someone with an authoritarian stance...” Pax hummed like he was thinking. “Oh, the Furies won’t do. They’re ladies. And you don’t want someone who’s decomposed. They won’t be able to tell you if it would be comfortable with adjustments. What’s your head circumference?”

“37 in this form; 25 when I look more like the lesser race,” Hades said absently. He gestured towards Axel and Pax, clearly meaning, when I look mortal.

“Twenty-five!” Pax cried. He shoved Axel’s shoulder, so Axel stumbled a step forward. “A chiseled-jaw, authoritarian stance and a 25 inch head circumference—”

“No—” Axel hissed at Pax, but Pax knew it was already too late for him to properly protest.

— that just so happens to fit my brother! What luck!” Pax had no idea if that would fit his brother’s head. He didn’t know many people who knew their own head circumference, let alone the head circumference of a relative. After they lived through this, he’d have to ask it of Axel. Then he could make him a, I Went to Hades and Only Got This Defective Helm of Darkness cap.

Hades’ eyes narrowed. They slid past the helm to the two of them. Pax had managed to usher them closer to Hades’ chariot. “Are you suggesting I put my most prized weapon atop your brother’s head?”

“I mean, if you have someone else to model it for you quickly, we don’t need to bother you.” Axel shot Pax a look.

Pax nodded sagely. “I’m sure you have lots of dashing heroes that aren’t decomposed and gross or incorporeal to help. I mean. We’re just right here. Passing through. And I happen to be someone who can see invisible things. I guess we could call up Hecate— augh. I forgot she betrayed you for the Titans.” Pax snapped his fingers like he was disappointed. “And Queen Persephone might not mind too much if you get some zombie brain junk on those beautiful, raven locks.”

Hades eyes widened enough that Pax thought the King of the Underworld might shoot lasers at him. Maybe Pax was pushing the line a bit too much.

“How would a Mayan know about Hecate and her betrayal?” Hades demanded.

“The Lords of the Dead gossip a lot,” Axel blurted. “You know how Lord Hun-Came gets when he’s been drinking and playing ball with Lord Vucub-Came.”

“This is why you only have one Lord of the Dead. Bureaucracy just means red tape and more time for courtly banter. You can run a government so much easier when you’re a tyrant,” Hades said and sighed, like he’d been petitioned many times for a democratic underworld.

Axel rolled his eyes and muttered under his breath, “Apparently, only when you have competent henchmen.”

Pax pinched his brother’s arm. They were close; he could feel it, especially since he almost
felt bad for Hades. If Hades really thought it was easier to rule down here by himself, Pax wondered how lonely this guy got.

Pax wasn’t here to check on the underworld’s mental health though. “Why not surround us with a circle of guards. It’s not like we’re trained acrobats that can jump over people’s heads.” Axel snorted. Pax pinched his shoulder again. “And, we might as well help you. It’s the least we can do before you escort us to your ICEE unit.”

Hades considered this for a moment. His entourage shuffled in discomfort. The Furies might hit a stalactite if they flew any higher to avoid his wraith.

“Very well,” he said. “Guards!”

The shuffling grew louder as the warriors made a loose circle around him and his brother. Some of the spear tips got a little too close for comfort. They’d have to be careful avoiding those while escaping.

Hades motioned Axel forward.

The taller boy clenched his jaw. Pax was pretty sure the tension therein could shatter an entire frozen lake. While this was the perfect opportunity for Axel to get the sword equivalent of a sucker punch on Hades, Pax wanted to remind Axel that they probably couldn’t stab the Lord of the Dead, bid a “good day” to his army, and skip out of here down a black brick road. Pax swallowed, reminding himself that sucker punches were things that he did. His brother had some weird concept about something called honor? Pax normally ignored Axel when he talked about it.

Here came the hard part: getting Axel to kneel to accept the helm.

Axel leveled with Hades’ black chariot. Pax could feel the overwhelming power radiating off it and its master. Authority bled off this guy like creepiness from a spider, and Hades wanted Axel to bend to his will without having to be asked.

Axel, an idiot who bowed to no man nor god, cleared his throat. “Lord Hades, I believe you won’t be able to reach me from your chariot if I kneel.”

The comment was presumptuous and Pax thought Axel had blown all their improvisation quicker than a Star Trek Vulcan would ruin the atmosphere of the Renaissance festival. He waited for Hades’ fist to turn into a cartoon hammer and smash Axel into the black sand.

Instead, Hades growled, “Mayans are the first people to even think about that. Would my soldiers have said anything? No. They would have forced me to reach further down to get them.” Especially with how tall the god was, an extra four feet would be a lot to stoop.

The Lord of the Underworld lifted his hideous black helm above Axel’s tufted ears.

As the helm came down, it compressed Axel’s long, twisted hair. Or, Pax thought it did. When it made contact, the helm melted Axel.

Within a microsecond, the essence that was Axel had liquefied into shadow and flooded into the sands. There wasn’t even an indent where he’d been standing.

There was one major flaw in Pax’s plan. He actually couldn’t see his brother. And, in that moment, with Axel-fertilizer in the underworld’s black sand, Pax realized Axel and Pax might have been the ones who were just tricked.
Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed! :D Stay tuned next week to see—well, you can’t really see Pax or Axel right now…. Anyway, stay safe and indoors when you can!

Footnote:

“Well,” Hades demanded, “How does it look?”

Pax was stunned into silence—an unusual thing for him. Normally, when he got nervous, he blathered. The helm hadn’t turned his brother invisible. It liquefied him. Was that a side effect of being Mayan? Instant liquefaction upon contact with Greek artifact? Hades didn’t seem alarmed, just eagerly awaiting a response. Did he turn into putty every time he put on his helm? If so, gross. More props to Persephone for kissing this ooze master.

“Um,” Pax said in a voice that he hoped conveyed thoughtfulness instead of panic.

Hades crossed his arms and tapped his fingers against his massive biceps.

Pax’s brain scrambled. If he were a Lord of the Dead, what lie would he want to hear about his helm? And how would he want it explained that “Sorry, we can’t give you your helm back. It ate my brother and is now lost in the ether.”

Then, someone grabbed his arm.

Pax almost screamed, thinking the guards knew something was wrong and were about to drag him back to the River Styx and drown him in the boiling water. When he glanced, there was no one there, not even footprints in the sand. The hand was definitely there though. It experimentally patted down his side.

By the time Pax realized what was happening, it was almost too late. His brother had grasped Pax’s foot. Pax only had a split second to balance himself. Then the invisible Axel (or, assumedly the invisible Axel; this could have been an acrobatic Casper for all Pax knew) boosted Pax up for an assisted front-flip.

Their audience didn’t applaud. All they saw was a spark floating over the guards’ heads. One said, “pretty,” but clearly didn’t appreciate the technical skill it took Pax to twist away from a spear tip before being gutted.

He landed on the sand on the other side of the guard circle. Unlike Axel, his feet did make a dent, even if the landing was nearly soundless.

Hades stood to full height in his chariot. Malice emitted in dark waves, making Pax feel sicker than the worst dead guy’s BO could make him feel. While guards were awed by the dancing spark display, Hades was not amused. “GET THEM!”

His roar made the cavern shudder.

Axel was probably still in the center of the circle. Pax needed to make a distraction.

“No—my Lord—the helm! It is so stupid looking!” Pax said apologetically. “I—I can’t bear it. The shame you’ll bring upon your household—”

“KILL HIM!”

“He’s already dea—”

“I DON’T CARE!”
“This is why your henchmen lie to you!” Pax shrieked.

All the guards turned towards Pax’s voice and the sparking of his invisibility spell. Meanwhile, Pax fumbled in his belt. He really hoped things turned un-invisible when he dropped them.

Five of the guards were already stumbling blindly in his direction, but a rank of them was closing circle where Axel probably stood. There was no way to tell where Axel really was, but Pax had to assume the worst.

He dropped two things. One was a smoke bomb. Upon contacting the ground, it exploded green mist everywhere.

The other took Pax a moment to light. Once he struck it hard enough against his flint bracelet, one of Matthias’s left over sparklers spat to life. Benefits to having an explosion-and-firework-crazed friend that helped with your utility belt: always some fun goodies at hand.

Pax tossed the decoy sparkler into the center of the green smoke.

The guards fell for it.

The next few seconds blurred. Half the guards had raced into the smoke bomb, getting lost in the swirls. A quarter managed their way towards the sparkler he’d dropped. A few fired shots.

Pax dropped to the sand. His heartbeat pounded in his head. Yea, tricking idiots with swords at a distance was one thing. He didn’t realize any of these ancient looking guards had upgraded with futuristic equipment.

“Follow his footprints!” a Fury hissed.

Pax swallowed. He had left footprints. They weren’t obvious in the dark sand, but he could see a rotting foot soldier bend down to examine the ground he’d stumbled from.

They’d be on him in no time.

That’s why he couldn’t decide if he wanted to scream in horror or in relief when invisible hands grabbed him again. It took Pax every ounce of self-restraint to refrain from shrieking, “Ah! A ghost!”

He didn’t know how Axel had crept from the circle of guards—ones that were currently tightening their ranks so much so that Pax hoped they’d stab each other if they got any closer. Talk about a friendly fire nightmare if any of them had guns.

Axel threw Pax over one shoulder and took off sprinting. Instead of going upriver, towards the exit, the sensible direction, they raced away from the river, further into the underworld. Pax only caught ever few of Axel’s words between his breaths, “Going—kick—your—ass—”

Pax was about to point out that they’d both be dead if it wasn’t for him, unless Axel had some other brilliant plan that didn’t involve playing chicken with the God of the Dead’s unkillable army.

Most of the air was exiting Pax’s lungs in painful gasps. Axel could use his shoulder blades to work as a butcher if their impact on Pax’ diaphragm was anything to go off of. Pax had managed a full breath right as Axel swooped low beside a stalagmite.
A familiar giggle rang in Pax’s ears. “Axel!” came a cheery voice, “How did you know I was there?!”

“Lou Ellen?” Pax asked with his limited breath.

Axel must have scooped her up. That didn’t answer why she’d been crouched there, but Pax wasn’t going to argue.

“See—through—Mist—” Axel gasped. “See—Ajax—whole—time—” His pace had slowed with the weight of a demigod per shoulder, even two tiny ones. The fact that Axel could carry them like that at all was impressive, except it wouldn’t be enough.

Behind them, someone must have noticed the spark from Pax’s invisibility shield. That, and the soldiers had stabbed his sparkler out. Hades screamed so loudly, Pax had to wonder if it was really Poseidon or Hades that caused earthquakes.

A squadron of soldiers were chasing after them. In the air, the Furies were gaining. One of them was enough ahead that she could sweep in wide circles like a vulture. Pax didn’t want to think of what she would do with that whip if she caught three handsome adventurers. Talk about eternity of punishment.

Pax wasn’t the type of person to point out that they needed a plan, but he also didn’t like the idea of being a free-range target for Hades. The god was sure to start tossing soldiers at them like skeet shooting—Underworld style.

“We need a plan!” Lou Ellen said, saving Pax from staining his chaos-loving reputation.

“We—running—it—”

That was all Pax could understand from Axel’s pants. Although it was impossible to fully turn with his position over Axel’s shoulder, he caught sight of something large, ominous and empty ahead of them.

Then, Pax understood what Axel had been trying to say. We’re running towards it.

Pax figured this out as his brother’s feet leapt off the edge of the Underworld and the three of them freefell into a pit of blackness, towards a nest of potentially unfriendly monsters, and the equivalent of Greek Hell. Pax wanted to remind Axel that demigods (or Mayan warriors for that matter) should not be willing to go to Tartarus, but he figured that would be a mute point with all their screaming.

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed! Stay tuned next week to see these three take a fluff bath. Because what else are you going to do in Tartarus?

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