The Luck of Olympus

by Manu

Summary

The world has been at peace for years since Gaea's defeat. The seven demigods of the Prophecy and their friends and allies have moved on with their lives. Relationships have ended, others have bloomed and new ones are just beginning. Both Greeks and Romans are still getting used to cooperate between them; some with more success than others. Amidst all this, Percy and Jason are suddenly called to aid Olympus again. Something has been stolen from the gods, something important. They reluctantly embark on a quest that will take them back to the Ancient Lands and beyond. A quest that threatens to push them to their limits; forcing them find solace, understanding and companionship on each other, and make them question everything they've known and thought. But even then, not everything is as it seems, and this might just change the world forever...

Notes

This was written for the Riptide PJO Big Bang on tumblr.

I really can't believe it's done. First of all, many, many thanks to Lupe (aka orchis) for beta-ing this mess, all of her input was really valuable to me, as well as her unending support, patience and encouragement through the most difficult and writer's-block-y parts. I wouldn't even have entered the Big Bang without her nagging, I mean, power of persuasion. Any atrocities and mistakes you might find in the story are most definitely my fault.
Thanks to my artist octopiinajar for providing the art for the fic. I'm so glad she chose my summary among the many submitted. I've loved her style and art since I started digging through the Jercy tag on tumblr.

Thanks to the mods for such a well-organized Big Bang!

So yeah, things learned: Never underestimate how long setting up a scene can be. If you start to hate your work, just keep going until Stockholm syndrome kicks in.
Percy was paying attention in class. He stared intently at the front of the room, his eyes fixed on his professor, Mr. Davenport.

“And what does that tell us, Mr. Jackson?” the professor asked.

Percy straightened himself on his chair, like just woken up of a trance, but did not answer.

Yes, he was paying attention in class, but not exactly to the class. Percy was trying to figure out for the who-knows-how-many-th time in his life if his teacher was a monster in disguise. Surely no normal human was that interested and enthusiastic about the mating habits of whales.

Mr. Davenport waited. Percy gaped at him, still startled. That was all he could manage as an answer. His professor sighed and murmured something about “these Greeks…” under his breath. The rest of the class snickered and looked smugly at Percy, whose face was the picture of embarrassment and misery.

He was trying, really trying. He had managed to finish high school as early as twenty-one years old, a true record (a record among Greek demigods, anyway) and got into college (well, a record if one doesn’t count Annabeth). Sure, it was New Rome University on Camp Jupiter, which accepted all demigods and legacies, but it still was quite an accomplishment for him. He thought he had his ADHD under control now after all those years. Clearly, he was wrong.

“I’m sorry, sir,” he let out in a quiet and sincere voice, but way too late for it to be acceptable, disrupting the class again.

More snickering. The professor merely sighed.

Percy ripped off the page of the notebook in front of him, full of squiggles and doodles, and started to take notes with a scary determination in his face.

By the fourth class that morning, Percy was exhausted of being responsible. He was also exhausted of running up and down the stairs of the building to go to his classes, and yeah, completely exhausted and sick of people staring at him and whispering among themselves.

It was bad enough being a Greek half-blood around New Rome, but he was Percy freakin’ Jackson and practically everyone there knew his face. He tried to conceal his identity by wearing a hoodie, and when that didn’t work, he tried to proudly display the SPQR tattoo on his forearm—his way of saying, “Hey! I’m one of you! You can stop being jerks!” That didn’t work either; even more so, they seemed to find it inflammatory.

He was all but losing his mind during his fifth class, with his professor droning on and on in a monotonous voice about pressure rates and oxygen percentages in the deep ocean. Percy was the son of Poseidon; he didn’t really need that. He was about to stick his pencil through his skull when he heard a voice calling his name over the dull noise of his surroundings.

“Wha…?” he said.

“Mr. Jackson” said his professor, Mr. Banks, louder this time.

“Yeah…”
Mr. Banks sighed and pointed at the door of the classroom. A small, redheaded kid stood there, shuffling on his feet and playing with his purple t-shirt with one hand and rubbing his newly done tattoo with the other. It was a camper... no, sorry, a legionnaire. One didn’t want to go around calling the Romans campers; they would impale you and feed you to the elephant. Even the small Romans, those could be especially vicious, like cats.

“Go on, then” said Mr. Banks to the kid, his patience wearing thin. “Speak up, boy.”

“Um… Fran—I mean, the praetor has er… summoned Percy Jackson. He says it’s urgent.”

Percy looked at his professor, who ignored him and resumed reading. Taking that as permission, Percy stood up, took his backpack and exited the classroom, following the small kid. Although the kid kept throwing somewhat wary glances at Percy, he looked relieved beyond measure. Percy struggled to follow the kid, between him being up and down all day and the legionnaire walking as fast as his short legs permitted him.

“Whoa, slow down,” said Percy once he caught up with him, already short of breath. “It can’t be that urgent. Frank would’ve come flying instead of sending you. Like, literally flying.”

The kid complied, and Percy thanked him with a nod.

“What’s your name, anyway?” he wanted to know. “Brand new camp— legionnaire, then?”

“Yeah…” the kid said with a slight blush on his face. “I’m Todd… And you’re Percy Jackson.”

“I sure am” said Percy not sure of what else to say or if he even needed to say anything at all. So, naturally, he kept talking: “So, Todd, how’s things in the good old Camp? Maimed many enemy teams? Broken some bones on the War Games?”

“Not really…” Todd said, frowning a little. “I was still a probatio yesterday. This is literally my first day so they have been giving me errands to run all day and I’m not sure they would let me participate on the games what with my godly parent and…” he stopped and stared at the floor.

“Who’s your godly parent?”

“Crepitus,” answered Todd in almost a whisper.

“And that would be the god of…?”

“I think we should hurry.”

They crossed the forum at top walking speed, maneuvering around the residents of New Rome— vendors trying to sell them color-changing togas, fauns asking for spare change, and distracted citizens reading the Acta Diurna. Percy could see the lake in the distance to the south, where a boating competition was apparently taking place. Man, he used to kick butt in those. Used to.

As soon as they crossed the Pomerian Line, Percy could feel the weight of his trusty pen-sword Riptide on his pocket again. It had always being a reassuring feeling, but nowadays he had a complicated relationship with it. One that ranged from bitter reminder to crushing burden to, yeah, fond memories. He looked back and saw Terminus, the god of boundaries and OCD extraordinaire, who nodded at him; both as a warning and a salute. He really seemed to be in a complicated relationship with everything and everyone these days. It had even made him end some of them...

Todd walked silently alongside him now. Percy caught him throwing quick glances at him from time
to time. Despite himself, Percy already liked the kid. He pretty much liked all new and young kids at both camps, unless they were children of Ares or Mars, really. It was kind of an “in principle” thing. The overall nervous energy of Todd only gave him extra points.

They reached the Praetorian Gate and, after Todd identified both of them and stated their business, walked into Camp Jupiter proper. The camp hadn’t changed much since the last time Percy had been there. The usual running up and down of legionnaires attending various duties, from polishing armor, carrying messages to going to practice. Even more people stared at him now, in comparison with the city. He wanted to assume that it was the contrast of his casual clothes, a flannel shirt and dark-blue jeans, with the sea of purple t-shirts around him that was attracting all that attention, but he knew better.

They were in front of the Principia. A girl was at a tiny desk in the entrance, writing with fury on a long parchment already falling on the floor.

“Um… hi, Angie” said Todd in a quiet voice.

She didn’t seem to have heard him; she continued to write with utmost concentration, her long blond hair falling on the parchment and getting ink all over it. None of the Romans got ADHD, did they? They were kind of the opposite, laser-focused or something.

“Angie?” tried Todd again, louder this time.

“Oh…” she said, and finally looked up at them.

“They told me to fetch Percy Jackson?” said Todd “Fra—the praetor is expecting him? I didn’t mess up, did I? Maybe they said Perry Johnson and I…”

How had this kid survived until now? Percy wondered.

“Oh, yeah, sure,” she said with her right thumb pointing at the big door. “Come right i—”

Angie was staring at him. A creepy, frozen mid-gesture, eyes wide-open stare—“Oh…”

Oh, no.

“My…”

Here it comes.

“Gods…”

Yep, there it is.

“Percy Jackson!?” Angie stood up knocking over her desk and all that was on it. Ink covered the floor. She continued to stare at him.

“Oh, yeah,” said Percy.

She was tall, maybe sixteen years old, and had light brown eyes. She reminded him of Annabeth, if Annabeth had that eye color, wore magnifying glasses and oversized sweaters. Percy looked at Todd, asking for help or an explanation, whichever came first. Todd merely shook his head, mumbling something under his breath.

“I’m Angie” she said and extended her hand. “Angie Hayes, daughter of Athena. Third cohort.”
Todd squirmed.

“Athena?” asked Percy.

“Yeah,” she nodded enthusiastically, “it must be weird seeing a child of Athena in Camp Jupiter, I guess. My cabin mates are not fond of this place for some reason. I sort of transferred here to basically being a cliché: to learn all about it. Boy, did they give me a hard time about it back at Camp Half-Blood. ‘Angie, what in Hades are you going to do there? There’s nothing to learn there, Rome just copied everything from the Greeks. Just learn the Roman names of the gods and you’re set.’ But you are Percy Jackson! I’ve heard all about you! See? Where else could I have ever met you? You were always on some quest and then you left Camp. You’re smaller in person, though. But it doesn’t matter; I still can’t quite believe it. The Percy Jackson! Living legend! Hey, do you think I could borrow some of your blood?” she said all of this in one breath.

“W-what…?” Percy said, not sure how to react to the whole thing. Finally, his mind settled on something: “M-my blood, what for?”

She adjusted her glasses. Todd sighed.

“Can you believe that, in millennia, absolutely no one has ever done a serious scientific study on demigods and the supernatural? One could think that some Athena kid had stepped up and done something but no. So yeah, my dad runs a lab where he and his colleagues study genes and DNA and all that fun stuff, right now I’m just focusing on demigods and legacies. Maybe later I could go to Olympus and ask the gods for some ichor…”

“Yeeeah, I don’t think they’d like that…” Percy tried.

“You think?” she looked pensive. She then produced a syringe from one of her pockets. Percy took a step back. “Oh, it won’t hurt most likely. I’ve been practicing,” she assured him, and lifted one of her sweater’s sleeves to show them her arm. It was filled with little scars from needle pricks.

“Angie, can we just come in?” Todd looked more anxious than ever. “Frank’s waiting for him.”

“Oh, don’t be such a spoilsport, Todd. You don’t have to go all bitter on me just because the others treat you like Augeus’ cattle’s dung,” she whined, waving around the syringe without a care in the world. “What you say, Percy? For science?”

“Yeah, sure, I’ll do it,” Percy said, with a forced smile, to Todd’s despair. It seemed to be the only way to get rid of her. Percy didn’t want her chasing him around Camp with a syringe.

“Brilliant!”

Todd looked miserable.

A few minutes later they were inside the Principia. Percy flexing the arm from where Angie had took some blood. It did hurt. They reached the praetor’s room.

“Finally,” said Todd with relief, ready to get out of there. “I’ll announce you.” And he entered the room. Seconds later, he came back.

“Ready, you can come in,” he said.

“OK,” said Percy. Todd was already walking away, “Hey, Todd!”

“Yeah?” the kid said with dread, not quite turning around.
“If anyone ever gives you a hard time you eh… call me, alright?”

“Sorry?” Todd said, approaching Percy.

“Yeah, here…” Percy looked for some paper in his backpack and used Riptide to write down his number. “It’s new and I’m not supposed to use it, but whatever. For a friend, right?”

Todd took the small piece of paper, bewildered.

“I…"

“So yeah, get a cell or use a payphone or whatever. See ya.”

“Oh… See ya…”

And Percy entered the room.

Frank Zhang, son of Mars, the living proof that Aphrodite wasn’t the only Olympian who was into extreme makeovers. Frank looked… well, frankly impressive sitting in his praetor chair. Percy was not scared of many fellow demigods, but having seen Frank in battle, seeing him transform himself into a giant dragon a couple of times? And now looking all buff warrior emperor of Rome? Percy did feel a little small and about to be crushed. He wondered if Reyna had given him “How to Look Like a Badass No-Nonsense Leader” lessons or if there was a manual every praetor got.

It all came down crashing down the very moment Frank jumped out of his chair, letting out an excited “Percy!” as a greeting and promptly tripping up on his toga.

Percy made the mistake of trying to catch him. Really, who in their right mind considers the action of getting in the way of a falling Frank Zhang?

“Ow…” said both demigods from the floor.

They disentangled themselves out of the mess of Frank’s big toga, and looked embarrassed but fine in general.

“So…” said Percy finally “you ‘summoned me’?”

“I did wh—? Oh, right, yeah.”

“What’s up, Frank?”

“You’re needed” said Frank. “Camp Half-Blood.”

“What for?”

“Dunno,” Frank shrugged, “Something kinda bad from their tone of voice, I think. Something to do with their oracle.”

“Rachel?” said Percy suddenly getting stiff and alert, cold sweating already starting to build up. “Is she alright? What happened?”

“I don’t know, I told you,” repeated Frank. “I think I have to be the one to approve you going out to Camp Half-Blood and all that. Elisa is the one who generally handles those things kind of automatically but since she’s out again...”
Percy made an impatient gesture, letting him know that he understood, even though he really didn’t. He never got the hang of the new labyrinthine bureaucracy of New Rome, and certainly now it was not the time to get into it.

“So? I’m… approved?” said Percy.

“Guess so” said Frank, scratching his neck and burrowing his forehead “Yeah, lemme go with you to The Bridge. I’m so bored here.”

They ran down the stairs of the Principia (Frank wisely left his massive toga behind, wearing simply jeans and a camp t-shirt), and walked on a brisk pace down Via Principalis to The Bridge, just past the Fields of Mars.

“So Elisa is out again, huh?” asked Percy halfway there. Elisa, daughter of Mercury, was Frank’s co-praetor, Percy hadn’t treated her much, but she always seemed to be in a rush to get out of the Camp the few times he had saw her.

“Yeah,” answered Frank. ”Praetor’s curse, says Reyna.”

Percy nodded. It did seem like a curse, being left alone with all the responsibility of praetorship for one reason or another. Godly inter-campus exchanges, urgent world-saving quests and Mercury’s random errands being the highlights so far.

“How’s Reyna?” asked Percy. They could see The Bridge looming in the distance already.

“She’s fine. She seems… happy, really.”

“Serious? I can’t imagine Reyna just… settling down and happy and with a son of Demeter no less,” said Percy, trying to picture Reyna attending a gigantic field of corn, with birds braiding her hair. That last part he could see quite clearly for some odd reason.

“Girl did need a rest, y’know?”

“Yeah…” conceded Percy. “Yeah, I guess. And uh… how’s Hazel?”

Frank’s immediate grin told Percy all he needed to know, but Frank elaborated.

“Seven months.”

“Oh, yeah? Wow…”

“Yeah… Wow.” Frank’s grin widened and looked completely mesmerized. It took the sight of The Bridge right in front of them to get him out of it.

“And um…” said Frank looking to continue the conversation while he signed the paper the legionnaire in duty held up to him. “How’s Ann—I mean… Sorry.”


“So haven’t talked since…?”

“Nope.”

“I see,” said Frank with a deep-in-thought frown. “And are you alright? We’ve barely talked…”

“I’m fine. Just… getting used to this whole settling down thing,” Percy shrugged, “it does suit me, I
“Huh,” was all of Frank’s reply.

After all the paperwork was ready, Percy advanced towards the actual Bridge. Frank was not next to him.

“Not coming?” asked Percy turning around.

Frank sighed and looked at the big cave entrance of the Bridge with a wistful air in his expression.

“Nah,” he said finally. “Gotta keep taking care of all my important praetor stuff. Y’know, all that sitting around is not gonna do itself.”

“Oh, okay” said Percy. “Good talking to you.”

“Yeah, same,” and Frank went back from where they had come from.

Percy turned around and kept walking towards the cave entrance. He could feel a cold breeze of old and sickly sweet air coming from it. His heart started to race.

One of the two roman guards besides the entrance stopped him and held up a marker.

“Camp Half-Blood, then?” he asked reading from a piece of paper. The other guard let out a small and mean giggle.

“Yeah,” Percy responded “What’s that for?”

“I’m gonna mark you so that you don’t get lost. We do control it but it can be… temperamental at times,” explained the guard who had laughed “Just follow your mark, it shows the right path.”

And, without warning, the guard with the marker drew something in Percy’s forehead.

“What in Hades….?! What mark?”

“You’ll see…” both guards said and they exploded in laughter.

Percy tried in vain to see what was on his forehead. The laughter only grew louder.

“Go on, then.”

Percy stopped his cross-eyed attempts to look at his forehead and sighed. He felt stupid and angry; better get out of there before he murdered those two with a geyser or something. Shaking a little, he stepped into the cave. Absolute darkness surrounded him immediately and all sound of laughter or anything else stopped, like he had been cut off of the world. His shaking had nothing to do with anger now.

So this was The Bridge, a modified version of The Labyrinth that connected faraway places. It had been Hazel’s idea. She and some talented members of the Hecate cabin had worked on it for months after The Giant War, a combination of old-fashioned magic and Hazel’s knack for tunnels had brought it back. Its purpose was clear: to magically connect useful places for demigods, like the two camps, without having to cross the United States from coast to coast or even the world, and without encountering monsters at every stop. A secret passage and shortcut. It was quick and efficient, and as scary as the old Labyrinth had been.

Percy saw a bright light ahead of him, illuminating a long stone corridor. He kind of wanted to turn
around and go back to Camp Jupiter, but Rachel was in some kind of trouble and needed him; besides that, the way back to Camp was now a wall of solid stone behind him. So he advanced.

He pulled out Riptide and uncapped it. He didn’t really need the reflection of its sword to illuminate his way, the bright light ahead was more than enough; but right now his relationship with Riptide was one of comfort and safety. The Bridge was controlled by demigods, but as one of the guards had said, it was temperamental. And it was, as they had learned the bad way in the past, not entirely monster-free. Monsters could re-spawn everywhere, and the Bridge was no exception, maybe its ancient magic attracted them. Now there was a delicious and smelly son of Poseidon wandering the maze so anything could happen, and when “anything” had something to do with Percy, it was often a pretty bad “anything.”

His steps echoed all through the corridor and in the darkness beyond. The air filled with ancient magic filled his lungs with dread. The light ahead cast menacing and moving shadows on the irregular walls. He picked up his pace until he was almost running. His heart pounding, he was now in front of the source of the light and could make out its shape.

It was a penis.

A crude cartoonish drawing of a penis blazed with fire-y and almost divine light in front of him. Now all the giggling made sense, Percy thought. His hand was already going to his forehead. Before he could rub off the marker, the shiny mark vanished and instantly reappeared to his right, at the end of another corridor that Percy was sure wasn’t there before. Quirks of the Bridge, old habits.

He sighed and continued his way, now more confident. The darkness still wanted to swallow him despite the light, the shadows were as menacing as ever, whispers could be heard here and there, and the air was nauseatingly ancient, but none of that bothered him that much now. In a way, the cock in front of him was comforting.

Five minutes of fast-paced walk and sudden turns every once in a while was all it took for him to reach its destination: a solid brick wall with some graffiti on it, like taken out of any street behind a school in a bad neighborhood.

The wall read:

CAMP HALF-BLOOD

ABANDON ALL SUCK, YE WHO ENTER HERE.

Percy touched the wall and was momentarily blinded by the sudden outburst of light. Fresh air filled his lungs and familiar sounds returned to him. When his vision came back, he saw the forest extended in front of him, surrounding Zeus’ Fist. He smiled.

It all lasted just a few moments, however, because as soon as he took a step of out of the Bridge, everything around him bursted into flames.
WHY DOES JASON KEEP PASSING OUT?

Jason’s day was going great, until he got impaled by a sword.

It all had started innocent enough. He had woken up at five o’clock in the morning, said hello to a couple of campers from Apollo’s cabin who seemed to be actually about to go to bed. They had to start doing something with those late parties thrown by Cabin Ten, he thought. He entered the arena, and readied himself for his usual activities as Not Quite Head Counselor.

A couple of hours later, he was in the middle of running his sword practice session at Camp Half-Blood, like every other morning. By then he should have seen it coming, really; seeing as that day’s group consisted mostly of kids from the Ares cabin. Most of the campers gravitated towards Jason during sword practice. He wasn’t as rough and unfriendly to them as Denisse from Demeter’s cabin or as intimidatingly beautiful as Alan from Aphrodite’s. But the Ares kids? They loved a challenge, and a son of Jupiter with a couple of successful world-saving quests under his belt fit the bill just right.

Jason was sweating like crazy. That day’s group was getting bigger than usual, it seemed like the entire Ares cabin had gathered there. It didn’t matter how light his sword Nimbus was, his arms were getting painfully sore. His energy was dwindling down, but his trainees were as enthusiastic as ever with no sign of slowing down. He long suspected that they had some sort of bet among them. “Who can bring down the son of Jupiter?! Winner gets a month free of cleaning duties and boasting rights!!”

In the middle of battling Dick, a short but well-built sixteen-year-old kid with a Roman-style haircut, an eerie scream echoed all through the camp. In an instant, Jason stopped and held up his hand, indicating his opponent to do the same, but it was too late. During that brief moment of distraction, Dick had managed to sneak behind Jason.

“Oh, Gods…” said Dick, backing away from him.

“What…? Oh… Oh, Gods…”

The blade of Dick’s sword protruded from Jason’s stomach.

Jason fell to his knees and dropped his sword.

“Man, I thought you were gonna… I… You should have…” Dick was shaking. The screaming continued, giving the scene an unnerving atmosphere. The rest of the Ares kids were frozen in a gesture of victory that didn’t reach their now horror-stricken faces. “Oh, Gods…”

Denisse was next to them immediately, shouting instructions and looking at the severity of Jason’s wound.

“Oh, Gods…”

“So we all keep saying…” said Jason, feeling dizzy.

He passed out.

Jason was flying. No, he was falling. It was hard to tell which one since he was surrounded by
darkness. But there was definitely a lack of any kind of support below him. In a panic, he tried to summon the winds but it only made the air thicker and harder to breathe. The temperature raised and the darkness became more solid, more vicious, like it was pressing him in every direction. He wanted to puke. He wanted to pass out and stop this.

Wait, wasn’t he already out of commission? His whole body shook and suddenly there was silence, he had been screaming all the way down. Now he knew that it had been definitely a fall. He stood up. The darkness was gone, but there was a thick and grey fog all around him. His whole body went through intermittent sensations of unbearable lightness and unbearable pain, like a pulse, like feeling his heartbeat all through his body.

Jason tried to clear his head and study his surroundings. The fog was less thick now, and there were voices in the distance. Muffled sounds came from everywhere around him. He could hear what sounded like a room full of people having a good time and laughing. In other direction he could distinguish dark shapes walking towards him, moaning and screaming. He tried to run but his legs were heavy and still in intermittent pain. He fell to the featureless floor. He thought he heard his own voice, angry and hurt, but it was gone once he tried to focus on the actual words. He was on his feet after a great deal of effort, with the echoing sound of female laughter mocking him. The sound of incessant whispering overpowered any other noise at times.

He took a careful step forwards and everything around him shifted. He was in the entrance of some sort of temple and then he was back to the fog. He took another step. The open sea at night, millions of stars above him. Fog again. Another step. The inside of a tent, warm and protected. Fog. One more step. Flying through clouds, terrified. Fog all round him. Step. Flames. Fog. Step. Flames…

The world stopped shifting and got stuck in flames. His skin burned and smoked, he couldn’t breathe at all. He fell again. His head was about to explode…

He woke up.

“I’m… hot…” he managed.

“Yes, you are.”

A hand was on his forehead.

Jason tried to focus his vision, but tears made it difficult. He waited for them to stop and get dry. Nico di Angelo was sitting next to his bed, looking worried. Jason could feel the aftertaste of pizza in his mouth.

“He woke up!” Nico said to the door.

A small group of kids entered and immediately started to check on Jason. An annoyingly bright light shone directly in front of his left eye while someone used a tongue depressor to take a look at the inside of his mouth. After a few more minutes of poking him and checking his pulse millions of times, they assured Nico that he would be okay and left the room in the same hurried fashion.

“What…?”

“Sword through the stomach,” said Nico. “Nasty stuff. We gave you enough ambrosia to burn up Hephaestus. You still look like a boiled lobster.”

Jason placed a hand over his stomach; he could feel the bandage through his t-shirt. It still hurt a bit.

“I’m gonna kill that Dick kid,” Nico said, clenching his fists and with a well-known murderous look
in his face.

Jason couldn’t suppress a small smile, so he turned his face away from Nico.

“I don’t think he meant to…” Jason started to say.

“Oh, don’t you start.”

“What?”

“You always… you… do that thing“

“What thing?”

“Always thinking the best of people. It adds a lot of pressure, you know? Maybe that’s why we…”

A few minutes of silence followed.

“It wasn’t like that.”

“I know.”

They stared at each other for what seemed hours, trying, as they had done many times before, to understand each other, to know what made the other man tick. A knock in the door interrupted them.

“Nico?” said Alan, poking his head into the room.

“Yeah?” said Nico, blushing.

“Bronte says Jason needs rest,” Alan answered. “She’s going to let some people who want to see him in but after that…”

“Yeah, okay, got it,” said Nico. “You were going to show me something anyway, right?”

Alan smiled and his head abandoned the room.

“I better go,” said Nico, rising to his feet and looking eagerly at the door. “Enjoy your fan club. They were here faster than me and they can’t shadow travel.”

“My what?”

“See you around, Grace.”

After Nico left, a group of maybe fifteen demigods crowded the room. Bronte, from Apollo’s cabin was there too, looking miffed and repeating how much Jason needed to rest. But the kids were too busy gushing about Jason to care.

“Man, they said you almost died!” said a sand-haired boy with the hugest grin.

“Dude, can I see the wound?” said another.

“Did your guts fell out?” asked a girl.

“Why are you all red?”

“You must be stronger than Hercules. This sword is heavy as hell!”
“Why is it made of glass?”

“Is that creepy Nico guy your boyfriend?”

“Don’t be stupid, he’s with Alan.”

“Jason’s with Alan?”

“No, dunderhead—”

“Enough!” said Bronte, finally snapping. “All of you out!”

“But…”

“Out!”

It was only under threat of extra cleaning duties at the infirmary that the group left the room. Bronte brushed some hair away from the front of her face, and looked sheepishly at Jason.

“Sorry about that. I told them to behave but…”

“It’s okay.”

“Anyway, you do need the rest and…”

There was a knock at the door. Bronte sighed.

“What now?” she looked just about to lose it, but opened the door anyway.

Dick was at the threshold.

“What do you want?” asked Bronte with her hands on her hips.

“Just… talk to him… for a bit… Won’t be long, I promise.” He craned his neck to see inside the room.

“He needs to—” she started to say.

“It’s fine,” Jason said.

“Fine, whatever, come in. I have to check on other patients, anyway,” and she stormed out.

Dick entered the room and stood there in silence for a few seconds, biting his lower lip.

“So?” Jason prompted him.

“So… um… Man, I didn’t mean to… I…” he brushed his palms against his jeans. “I’m sorry, okay?”

“It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not. I could’ve killed you.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No, I mean really. I should never have brought that sword to practice. I’m an idiot. I think you’re only alive because you’re like the super-powerful son of Jupiter or something like that. Diane told me not to trust Ares’ gifts under such circumstances but I was too thrilled by it that I didn’t listen and
“What are you talking about? What gifts?”


“Okay…”

“And, well, it just appeared with my name on it after a fiasco of a quest I went on for my fifteen birthday. All the Ares kids do it and…”

“Why would he give you that if you failed a mission? Doesn’t sound like him.”

“Yeah, well, didn’t make too much sense to me either until now,” said Dick gesturing towards Jason. “I guess I just brushed it off. I thought he was being kind and paternal for some unknown godly reason. Anyway, Diane did some research with the Athena kids just now and she says it’s a backstabber sword.”

“A what?”

“It sort of guides itself once it finds a chance to, well, backstab,” he explained, scratching his left arm. “It’s not a gift, it’s a curse. Dishonor for any child of Ares, being a backstabber… I don’t even want to go back to the cabin, they already think I’m a wimp so I’ve been lifting weights but they still—”

“So when I paused to listen to that freaky scream…” Jason tried to change the topic slightly.

“It took its chance and did its thing. I could felt it pulling me and I couldn’t even drop it.”

“See? It wasn’t your fault. Anyway, who curses their own kid like that?”

“I should never have brought that thing to practice,” repeated Dick. ”I thought it would help me win the bet and make Ares and the others see that I wasn’t a total failure and I deserved the gift and…”

“So there is a bet!” Jason jumped.

“Well, uh, yeah.”

“Look, man, don’t beat yourself up so much over this,” Jason instinctively tried to get up the bed to be next to Dick, but a sudden and sharp pain in his stomach made him fall against the bed again. He groaned. “It really wasn’t your fault. A lot of pressure from cabin mates? Trying to please dad after failing once? I get it. Just… be careful next time when it comes to gods, okay?”

Dick didn’t look convinced, but nodded anyway.

“Once I feel better I’ll personally train you so you can kick your cabin mates’ bullying posteriors, all right?” Jason suggested.

“You would do that?” asked Dick, perking up. Jason smiled. No child of Ares would refuse the chance to beat other people up, except for Frank Zhang, and these days Jason wasn’t too sure about that.

“Yeah, man.”

Jason’s smile widened.
“That’s… that’s pretty cool of you. You’re not that much of a pompous stickler-to-the-rules prick as everyone thinks.”

Yes, another Ares trait showing up.

“So, see you around?” said Jason.

“Sure. Alright,” Dick took the hint and they shook hands.

Jason fell asleep almost as soon as Dick left the room. He was way more tired and worn out that he had been letting on. Luckily, he had no dreams this time.

He woke hours later; the sun was at its peak. He finally had the strength to get up the bed and get dressed with some fresh camp clothes he found by its bedside. He still had the bandages covering his torso but it hurt way less than before. The room was oddly quiet for that time of the day. Looking through the window, he couldn’t see any sort of activity at camp. There were people here and there, yes, but they mostly seem to be keeping to themselves. No pranks by the Hermes cabin going down, no angry retaliation from the Ares kids to said pranks, no children of Apollo singing songs to their crushes from the Aphrodite cabin. Not even one of Leo’s newest crazy inventions running amok.

He could make out the Zeus cabin in the distance. Deciding that he had had enough of the Big House for the day, he made his way there. The Big House itself was just as quiet and solitary as the outside. Chiron must have been there, but Jason didn’t see him anywhere. He started to worry. His pace got faster and just when he was about to ask a distracted kid carrying a water bucket about what was going on, he spotted Nico.

He was with Alan at the entrance of the Hades cabin. Even before Jason got there, he could hear their talk, or more accurately, their argument.

“…I told you it’s fine,” he heard Nico say.

“Oh, you haven’t even… C’mon, just let me touch it up a bit…” Alan said.

“No.”

“Why? Are you afraid I’m going to fill it with pink laces and glitter and stereotypical Aphrodite crap?”

Nico remained quiet looking at the floor.

“Oh, come on. Really?” Alan crossed his arms in front of him. Jason was now next to them. Alan acknowledged him with a nod. “I’m sure you know me better than that.” He had his attention back to Nico.

“You do want to redecorate it, that’s pretty much some stereot—”

“I just want your cabin to feel more like a home than a tomb to you. Since you say you’re thinking of staying for good,” Alan said. “You are, right?” he didn’t look so indignant anymore, he looked insecure and took a step towards Nico.


“Good,” said Alan flashing one of his one-million-drachma smiles “Don’t worry. I will not disturb the ‘I’m the mysterious and broody son of Hades’ vibe that you got going on.”
Jason swore he could see a small smile on Nico’s face. The boy looked up, a resigned expression on his face that Jason was sure was totally fake.

“All right, then,” Nico said.

“Great!” said Alan, and hugged and kissed him. Nico made poorly acted faces of disgust but soon relented and kissed back.

Jason was happy for them, really. Nico and him had tried a thing some time ago—a few months after Piper had left to join the Hunters—that didn’t quite work out. A quick, unfortunate thing where Nico’s well-concealed need for human closeness and Jason’s sudden curiosity had clashed in a passionate yet unhealthy way. Jason just did not see Nico that way and started to feel awful about the whole thing. As a result, Jason started to unconsciously push Nico away and Nico started to get withdrawn and miserable again. It all ended with a sudden “just friends” that seemed to be holding up pretty well so far. All that mattered was that Nico was happier now than he had ever seen him.

Too happy.

Way too happy.

“Hey!” Jason said just as Nico started to slide a hand under Alan’s shirt.

They separated, a bit embarrassed but not quite enough. They seemed ready to go at it again at the most minor provocation. Jason had to be fast.

“Do you guys know what’s going on?” he asked. “Where’s everyone?”

“Oh, they’re at Rachel’s” said Alan. “You know that freaky scream we heard? When you got brochette’d?”

“It was her?” asked Jason. “Is she okay?”

“No,” said Nico. “Once they located the source of the scream they went to check on her, she was surrounded by, you know, that green smoke of hers. And then she seemed to be getting back to normal, but she passed out. Now they say she won’t wake up.”

“So everyone’s there? Chiron and the rest?”

“Yeah.”

“Right. Gotta go, then,” said Jason already walking away. “See you, guys! Keep it PG!”

“You’re not the boss of me, Grace!” Nico shouted back, and continued where he and Alan had left off.

Jason ran to the hills, and then hiked until he reached near the top of one of them. No wonder he was panting once he arrived at Rachel’s cave. Why did she choose such an inaccessible place? The Big House would have been Jason’s choice if he was the Oracle, but Rachel was weird like that.

There was a crowd gathered there. A couple of Hermes kids were playing with the skulls and bones littered on the floor, other campers chatting outside the cave or simply resting by a big rock nearby. Jason advanced, and after crossing the velvet curtains that covered the entrance, he found an even bigger crowd, the inside of the cave was packed.

Jason navigated through the crowd until he found Chiron. He was in his full centaur form, not
helping the matter of crowdedness at all, kneeling awkwardly next to a bed with a red-headed girl in it.

“What happened?” asked Jason with horror once he took a good look at the girl in the bed.

She was paler than a ghost (and Jason had seen his fair share of them, so it wasn’t just an expression), with her usually fiery hair now opaque, without life. Rachel looked beyond the brink of death, if it wasn’t for the noticeably breathing Jason would’ve sworn she was dead. And that wasn’t the worst part. Bright green smoke surrounded her, hissing and whispering menacingly at one moment, recoiling and suddenly snapping like a bunch of furious snakes the next.

“After the scream we came to see if anything was wrong. You know how the Oracle likes to be dramatic,” said David from Apollo’s cabin. “She seemed fine, but the next we know, she’s on the floor. It was like she was having a seizure or something.”

“Then she stopped,” a girl next to David continued the tale, “and we tried to wake her up but nothing worked. And then, well…” she just gestured towards the bed.

“Chiron, you know what’s happening?” asked Jason.

Chiron shook his head gravely.

“I had never seen anything like it. Not even when May…” he paused. “No, this is most definitely new and, I think it’s safe to say, really quite bad.”

Always comforting words, that Chiron, Jason thought.

“Has anyone tried to…?” Jason started to say while he outstretched his hand towards Rachel.

“Don’t even think about it,” warned him Marcus, the head counselor of Athena’s cabin, towering above everyone else and showing him his hand covered in blisters. “That freaky smoke attacked me when I tried to wake her up.”

Jason withdrew his hand and approached her cautiously instead. He kneeled next to the bed, imitating Chiron.

“Rachel?”

The smoke hissed at him with agitation, but did not attack him. Jason leaned closer.

“Rachel? It’s me, Jason,” he whispered.

More hissing. The smoke seemed to be retreating but did not look happy about it.

“It’s me, Jason,” he kept on trying. “Jason Grace.”

This time, the smoke retreated even more, some of it went right through Rachel’s skin, ears and nose, the greenish glow that had filled the cave until that moment dimmed.

“That seems to be working,” said David with an air of professional interest. “We tried that, of course, but the smoke grew in size instead.”

Encouraged, Jason went for it. He shook Rachel’s shoulder.

Searing pain went through his hand to his arm until it reached his head. He fell to the floor with a scream. Then he saw smoke once again pouring out of Rachel’s body; it hissed and screeched with
fury. It formed little hurricanes above her bed. The rest of the world seemed frozen in place. A voice coming from nowhere and everywhere boomed in the cave, echoing as if the place was completely empty. The voice, raspy and ancient was saying something but Jason could not understand it. It seemed to be the same lines over and over. The smoke formed shapeless figures in rapid succession. Jason concentrated and caught one word but this time it was Rachel’s voice saying it: his name. Now two voices were fighting for dominance, trying to out-yell each other. Thunder shook the cave and vibrated through Jason’s skull.

He caught another word in Rachel’s voice, another name.

And then everything was darkness.

“Percy!” Jason yelled once he woke up. He was still on the floor.

“Oh, thank the gods,” said a girl’s voice. A chorus of other voices joined her in her relief.

“What…” Jason tried to get up, but David stopped him.

“Take it easy, man.”

“How’s…”

“Rachel’s still the same, mostly,” answered David, guessing correctly Jason’s question. “I thought you were gonna end up like her.”

“What?” his head seemed ready to explode.

“You looked just like her when we found her. So…”

“Did any of you could make out any more words?” asked Jason with sudden urgency. He looked all around him only to find puzzled expressions in everyone’s faces.

“Words?” asked Marcus. “Were you trying to say someth—”

“No, no. The smoke, the… hurricanes, the figures. Then Rachel’s voice and my name and…”

“You probably just dreamed it, Jason” said Chiron “We did not see or hear any of that. Rachel and the spirit of the Oracle have been quite calm now, actually, since you touched her.”

Indeed, Jason got up with the help of Marcus and David and looked at the bed: Rachel still looked almost dead but no more green smoke surrounded her.

“No one has tried your thing again,” said David.

“You said she said your name?” asked Marcus “In your vision or dream or whatever?”

“Yeah, and… Percy’s” said Jason. “Chiron, I think we should bring him here.”

“It does seem our best option,” Chiron agreed. “Diane, send an Iris message to Frank Zhang and tell him we need Percy as soon as possible.”

“On it, Chiron,” Diane said and left immediately. Jason recognized her as the girl who had been next to David.
“Coming with you!” Dick’s voice called her from among the crowd, and Jason saw him leave the cave going right after her.

“I think it’s best if all of you leave Rachel alone for a while,” said Chiron to the crowd that had grown even larger. “Only head counselors can remain if they wish. Please return to your activities.”

Still sending worried and curious glances towards Rachel, most of the crowd left the cave, leaving it almost empty. Only Chiron, Marcus, Jason, David and Lauren from Hephaestus cabin remained in the cave.

“You okay?” Lauren asked Jason. “You’re still shaking.”

“I…” he looked at his trembling hands. “Yeah, I just… yeah.”

Unconvinced, she sent him to rest in one of the chairs in the cave.

They were all quiet for a good while. Marcus and David had been discussing ideas about Rachel’s condition and recent events in whispers on a corner, but they stopped after getting nowhere with them. Chiron continued to look after Rachel. Lauren sat next to Jason; she tinkered absently with a couple of metal pieces in her hands. Jason thought of Leo, missing out all this commotion being all the way back in Bunker Nine, working tirelessly. Leo had renounced the position of head counselor of Hephaestus cabin and retreated to work in more and more projects that no one at camp seemed to understand anymore. This had been met with loud protests from his cabin mates, but Leo had said he wasn’t much good as the head of his cabin now that they had no Big Project like the Argo II had been. But Jason knew better, Leo still hadn’t found a way to Calypso’s island. He had offered his help, only to be rejected.

Something shiny passed in front of Jason’s face. He heard a giggle next to him. He felt a sudden weight on his head.

“Sorry,” Lauren said and held up her hand to retrieve a little mechanical bronze bird from the top of Jason’s head. “I build things when I’m nervous. Never know what will come out,” she said while petting the bird. “They’re usually things that fly; I’m getting pretty good at those.”

Jason smiled; Leo had picked his successor right.

“Hey,” a voice from the darkness said, startling everyone. Jason and Lauren got up and drew their weapons instantly. In front of them, Marcus and David had done much the same.

“Whoa, calm down. It’s just me,” the voice said. Nico di Angelo stepped out of the shadows. “Percy just got the message, Chiron. He should be here any minute.”

“Thanks, Nico,” Chiron said, getting up.

“You could have asked me to bring him here,” Nico said to Jason in a low voice. “Much faster to shadow travel than to use that creepy maze...”

“Would you really want that? Being alone with him?” asked Jason in the same volume. Nico’s face went a bit red and he shook his head, uncomfortable. “Besides, it didn’t occur to me, and maybe you were gone already. We never know with you.”

“I’m staying. For good this time,” Nico said.

“Glad Alan convinced you. He seems to be good for you, unlike me.”
“Let’s not go down that path, all right?”

“All right,” Jason agreed. “And… did you just call the Labyrinth creepy? You?”

“Oh, shut up, Grace.”

Both of them laughed but stopped almost instantly, looking around them. But they were alone now; everyone else seemed to have gone to receive Percy.

“Come on,” Jason said.

“I’ll stay. To take care of Rachel,” Nico said straightaway, already walking up to sit next to her bed.

“OK,” Jason had really hit a nerve with the whole Percy thing; he cursed himself for it in his head.

The others were outside the cave, ready to hike down. Jason joined them. They were midway down when a roar from above made them stop. Looking up, they saw a bright, orange light descending towards the camp. David yelled something but the sound of his words was overpowered by the roar of the giant ball of fire falling from the sky. It felt like an earthquake once it hit, and they looked in horror as the woods caught on fire.
Percy was on fire. It was depressing and worrying how many times the phrase had taken its most literal meaning, he lamented as flames were all over him. One more to the tally, he thought as he rolled on the floor with desperation. Now he could share Frank’s constant worry about fire, he mused as he screamed for his life.

“Whoa, stop freaking out, kid,” a voice said next to him with a laugh. Percy knew that voice.

“I’ll…stop… freaking out… once I’m…” Percy said while taking off his burning shirt and now going after his pants, “not on fire anymore,” he finished, realizing that he was indeed no longer on fire. And neither was the forest.

“There,” the voice said. “Better?”

“Much.”

Percy looked up and saw a familiar face: same blond hair, same sunglasses and same athletic build, although a bit older and taller than he remembered.

“Apollo,” Percy said.

The god flashed a smile. Percy heard some excited giggling nearby and turned around. A group of wood nymphs and a couple of satyrs were gathered around them, admiring the god. They were in poor condition; their dresses charred in lots of places and their hair a complete mess. In their hands they were carrying branches and stones, apparently ready to attack whoever had set fire to their beloved forest, but right now they were not very interested in that anymore.

Apollo walked towards them, still smiling. Unfortunately, he tried to do so while fixing his already perfect hair and doing two things at once seemed beyond his abilities at the moment, so he tripped and his face met the forest floor. Percy laughed, and the nymphs and satyrs shoot him nasty looks.

“Ugh,” the god said from the floor. Percy sighed and helped him to get up. He regretted it almost immediately.

“Dude…” Percy said, covering his nose, his eyes already tearing up. “Drink much? Your breath stinks.”

Apollo giggled, dismissing him. He separated from Percy and tried to regain his balance, failing spectacularly. Percy shook his head in disapproval and went to help him once more.

“I can do it! I can do it!” Apollo said, shooing him away. Slowly, he crawled and sat next to a poor burned tree and then used it as support to stand up. He did not let go of it.

“There. Told you I got it,” he hiccupped. “I’m perfectly fine and capable of…” He stopped for a second, and proceeded to barf all over the floor. Their audience looked worried.

“Damn Hermes’ mead,” Apollo said on a hoarse voice. “Dionysus’ never made me do that… most of the time. I think.” He pressed his forehead on the tree.

“You all right there, now?” Percy asked, careful to keep his distance. He did not need godly vomiting all over him.
“No, but I’ll be,” Apollo assured him “Give it a couple of decades, six or seven years of hangover and I’ll be golden.”

Percy was thinking that he would not wish an Olympian-sized hangover to anyone, when another noise came through the woods towards them. Their audience had disappeared. Perhaps it was just another drunk god stumbling through the forest; nonetheless, he held up his sword. One could never be certain of what would show up around there.

What showed up, struggling to pass between two trees, was Jason Grace. Percy lowered his sword. Jason looked exhausted, like he had been running at top speed for miles and miles, which as demigods was entirely possible. He also kept clutching his stomach, as if he was in pain.

“Jason?” Percy said. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, yeah. Just… give me a minute,” Jason answered without looking at him, he was pressing his eyes shut and taking slow and deep breaths. After a while, he opened them and looked at Percy, he blinked rapidly. “Why are you shirtless? And your forehead… is that a…?”

“Damn it,” said Percy, rubbing the markings off. “No word of this, okay?”

“No promises,” Jason replied, and he grinned. “Good to see you, dude. It’s been ages.”

They fist-bumped and half-hugged.

They heard more noises. Chiron and a couple of kids that Percy didn’t recognize joined them next to Zeus’ Fist. They looked tired but not as bad as Jason. Percy greeted Chiron with enthusiasm. A quick exchange of names between all demigods took place, and then they all turned their attention to the almighty god of the sun, music and prophecy, who was now in all-fours puking.

“Lord Apollo?” said Jason “Are you okay?”

“He will be,” Percy said, taking his now almost disintegrated shirt from the floor and putting it on. Homeless demigod, his usual look on every quest he had ever been on, seemed to be back in style. “Couple of drinks. Such a lightweight,” he teased.

They were at the Big House, Percy with a new t-shirt and Apollo merely dizzy after a couple of liters of nectar. The god still did not trust his balance, so he was sitting on the stairs leading to the porch. Chiron, Jason, Percy and the rest surrounded him.

“So what was the big occasion?” asked Percy, crossing his arms in front of his chest. “And does this visit have anything to do with what’s happening to Rachel?” Jason had briefed him on the situation on the way to the Big House. “Did someone curse the Oracle again?” he finished, dreading the worst.

“Are you going to fix her?” asked Jason. “Why did she say Percy’s name and mine?”

“Agh, questions, questions…” Apollo complained, rubbing his temples. “All right, if you must know, I was at the Pythian celebration. The gods decided to throw me a party, since you lot seemed to have forgotten the games. You know? The Pythian Games? In honor of the great god Apollo? Two years before the Olympics?” He looked irritated at them.

The demigods looked at each other in confusion. Only Chiron and the tall guy, Marcus was his name, nodded in understanding. Athena’s cabin, most likely, thought Percy.
“Our deepest apologies, lord Apollo,” said Chiron “I think it’s a little too late now to organize a whole event, but we shall have a feast on your honor and a game of Capture the Flag later, perhaps?”

“Yeah, all right, sure” Apollo said, with a dismissive gesture. He sat up a bit straighter. “As for Rachel Elizabeth Dare, yes, that’s the reason I’m here. And well, him.” He pointed at the blond kid, David, who until that moment had remained quiet and, Percy thought, sort of in hiding.

“Me?” David said. He looked a bit intimidated by the god. “What did I—?”

“You prayed to me, did you not?” Apollo seemed to be regaining his composure. “Well, here I am. Prayer answered.”

“Now we’re in trouble” commented Percy to Jason in a low voice. Jason chuckled and immediately put on his as serious business face as soon as Apollo turned to look at him.

“So, uh, lord Apollo… you were saying about Rachel?” Jason asked.

“Right, yes” Apollo said “She was supposed to deliver a prophecy but it er… went wrong.” And with a snap of his fingers, Rachel’s body appeared laying on the grass. She was unconscious and surrounded by green ominous smoke. Percy had never seen her so pale and sick, if this was somehow Apollo’s fault he was going to...

“I told Mercury that I only wanted the new Angry Stymphalian Birds for free,” Apollo rummaged through the pockets of his shorts, and produced a phone. “But no, he had to upgrade and add all this fancy stuff to the damn thing. I don’t care if it has Siri or not…”

Chiron cleared his throat.

“Yeah, right,” the god said. “So yeah, malfunction. Sorry, I’ll fix it in a second.”

He stood up and started tapping on the screen of the phone. After a minute, Rachel’s body stood up as well, but it was as if it was being pulled by invisible strings. She opened her eyes, and the eerie yet familiar voice of the Oracle filled the air. Percy felt a chill going down his spine, he was never going to get used to that snake-like voice; it was made even worse by seeing Rachel in such state.

“Sons of sea and sky, get our amphibian duck ba—”

The voice stopped and Rachel went limp again. Jason caught her just in time, to Percy’s admiration. Those half-blood reflexes seemed intact, unlike his.

“Damn it. Sorry.” Apollo said. He was tapping on his phone again. “Stupid autocorrect. How do I…? Oh, give me a break.”

“Maybe I could…” David started to say.

“Ugh, that’s it.” Apollo said with finality.

There was a flash of light coming from where Apollo was standing and everyone covered their eyes.

“What was that?” asked Lauren, once they all regained their vision.

“Just changed to my Roman aspect,” Apollo said, he kept on tapping on the phone as if nothing had happened.

“But you look… exactly the same,” observed Marcus.
“I do not,” Apollo said, indignant, and he showed them his phone. It was a different one, Percy noticed.

“That’s it? That’s all the difference?” asked David, he seemed to be getting more and more unimpressed by the god.

“What do you mean that’s it?” said Apollo. “It’s a whole different hardware and OS, and frankly a better one; for example, the interf——”

“Can we focus?” Lauren said. “Prophecy? Rachel?”

“I am on it,” and with a final tap from Apollo, Rachel rose from Jason’s arms.

“Sons of sea and sky,
get our Olympian luck back
or watch the world fall.”

Rachel fell into Jason’s arms again, who carefully rested her body on the grass once more. A few seconds of silence followed and she started to stir. The color started returning to her skin and the green smoke was gone. Everyone looked relieved. Chiron went to Rachel and started checking her vital signs.

“David, could you help Rachel to get inside the Big House and then call Bronte and your siblings to take care of her?” asked Chiron.

But David was not listening; his eyes were fixed on Apollo with an expression of incredulity on his face.

“Was that a… haiku?” he finally said, furrowing his brow.

“Yep, composed it myself” the god grinned. “You liked it, er… son?”

“I…”

Now Percy got it. Not the best first impression, Apollo, he thought.

“David!” Chiron called again.

David got out of his trance and went to help.

“So what does that mean?” asked Percy once David and Rachel were gone.

“‘Sons of sea and sky,’” Jason said. “That’s Percy and me, isn’t it? That’s why Rachel said our names.”

“Yes, that’s why,” Apollo confirmed. “And well, in short, our Palladium has been stolen,” he added with gravity, “and you two gotta get it back or, you know, end of the world.”

“The usual,” Percy said absently.

“What’s a Palladium?” asked Lauren, a mechanical spider scurrying around her feet with great joy.

“The prophecy said it: Olympian luck,” Marcus answered. “The Luck of Olympus. I didn’t know they had one on Olympus. I mean, we all know about the Luck of Troy, but…”

“We do have one, indeed,” Apollo said. “And it’s due to it that we had had such good fortune during
all these centuries. We could say that we owe all our victories to the Palladium.”

“All?” demanded both Jason and Percy in unison.

“Sure, a little help from a demigod or two, but mostly it’s all due to the Palladium. As I said, it has been stolen. At first we thought Vulcan had melted it or something to make those weird pipes for the party but… anyway, yeah, it’s missing and it’s disastrous. If any of our enemies hears about this…”

“They would attack Olympus in an instant,” Chiron supplied. “Disastrous indeed.”

“See? So yeah, get it back, you two,” Apollo said, pointing lazily at Jason and Percy. He started to shimmer.

“Wait!” Jason shouted. Apollo did so, impatience creeping into his expression. “But, lord Apollo, we have nothing to go on. What does it look like? Don’t you guys have any suspicion of who could have done it? Where could it be? Where can we start looking? Why Percy and me if we don’t really do that anymore? That was an impressively direct yet vague prophecy.”

“How does an all-powerful good luck charm get stolen anyway?” asked Lauren. “That’s pretty unlucky if you ask me.”

Apollo sighed.

“The Palladium does not luck itself, girl,” he said. “It can perfectly get lost. A rabbit’s foot is good luck and still the rabbit was killed, no? So…”

“But it getting lost means disaster for Olympus,” Marcus argued. “That would be against its very purpose. It’s kind of a paradox, really…”

“Do you really want me to stay here all day explaining in detail the mystical intricacies of it?”

“Yes, please,” Marcus said in an instant with a dreamy look.

“Athena’s kids…” Apollo scoffed. “We have no idea who could have done it or where it could be, Jason Grace. As for why the two of you? I wouldn’t know; I don’t write fate or know much about it.”

“You kind of do; you’re the god of prophecy.” Percy said.

“But I don’t exactly write them…” Apollo was getting more and more upset, Percy observed.

“You just said you composed that haiku!” Percy said with bite. He was getting as exasperated as Apollo. That’s what you get when you treat with Olympians.

“Prophetic inspiration!” Apollo bit back. “I do not control the muses, the creativity…”

“Yes, you do!” Percy shouted.

“Percy, calm down,” advised Chiron, putting a hand on Percy’s shoulder. “It’s not something worth getting upset about.”

Or blown to pieces about, Percy added mentally. Apollo was looking more pissed than he had ever seen him. Somehow, the threat of getting obliterated calmed Percy down. If that wasn’t maturity then what was? Percy thought.

“I mean… it’s just that… we’re retired and… I wasn’t really planning on…” Percy tried to explain
himself to Chiron. He felt back at Yancy Academy, trying to explain to Chiron why he hadn’t memorized all that Greek stuff and feeling horribly guilty about it.

“Quests rarely arise in a planned fashion, as you might remember, Percy,” Chiron said.

“Well, I was not expecting this,” Percy gestured wildly. His mood swings were getting out of hand. “You guys said we were done!” He pointed at Apollo, but the god was gone. “Oh, great.” He turned around, looking for someone who supported him. “Jason, don’t you think this is totally unfair?” he said, picking his target.

Jason looked caught off guard.

“Yeah,” he blurted out. “I mean, yes, it would seem so. But, it’s kind of the fate of the world at stake, no? And the quest’s been issued directly by a god and…”

“He just said he doesn’t write fate or whatever!” Percy shouted. Had everyone gone mad?

“You know what I mean!” Jason shouted back; his was a more controlled and authoritative one, though. “Calm down, all right? It’s not like it’s my fault, man.”

Percy could not believe this. His day was just getting worse and worse, he thought while looking down at the lawn trying to contain his anger. Maybe Hera or Ares would pop up any minute now being their annoying selves; that would really be the cherry on top of everything. His blood had started to boil inside him.

He let out a grunt and kicked one of the steps leading up to the Big House’s porch in frustration, and looked up, only to find himself being stared at by everyone. Somehow, the stares of the campers he just met, Lauren and Marcus, were the ones that got to him. Was he really this jaded, selfish and fit-throwing guy now? Percy sighed.

“I’m sorry, again,” he said. “It’s just…”

“I get it, dude,” Jason said, placing his arm over Percy’s shoulders. This calmed him down. Of all the people on the planet, Jason Grace was one of the few who Percy believed when they said they got him. They all had gone through so much, both together and by themselves. Jason continued: “I do think it’s totally unfair. They did promise no more quests for all seven. I remember them swearing by it on the River Styx… So I guess this is actually really important, no? To make them change such a thing?”

Percy nodded.

“I guess.”

“And we’re their big guns, huh?” Jason said, tightening his grip on Percy’s body. “The heavy hitters, the big shots, the–”

“I get it, Grace,” Percy said with a weak laugh. Jason knew better than to appeal to his ego, but the thought was what counted.

“That’s my boy,” Jason grinned. Percy rolled his eyes. “So, Chiron, time for a senior counsel then?”

“That does seem like the next logical step,” Chiron nodded.
Head counselors meetings hadn’t changed much since Percy’s days. They were still these informal affairs around Mr. D’s ping pong table in the Rec Room: with demigods pulling pranks on each other, playing with the ping pong balls, laughing at anything or merely talking among themselves about the most recent hot topic. The noise of teenage chat did seem much louder, chaotic and annoying than Percy remembered. He didn’t know if it was because he was getting old, a terrifying thought, or was merely the presence of the biggest amount of people he had ever seen in that room. The second one was the most appealing option, but didn’t help to change his increasingly foul mood.

Chiron and Jason took upon themselves to inform everyone about the events of the day and the quest that Apollo had given them. Rachel arrived in the middle of their explanation and sit quietly at the back of the room next to Percy.

“Hey,” he said. “How are you?”

“Much better now,” she said. “And you? I heard about the prophecy.”

“I could use some better,” Percy replied. He looked at her still lifeless hair. “Gods, I wanted to punch Apollo for what he did to you.”

“Occupational hazards,” she said with a shrug.

Rachel’s presence did not help Percy’s mood. On the contrary, it made him feel even worse; in his indignation and anger he had completely forgotten about her. Gods, he was a jerk.

“It did suck, but it’s good to see you,” she said. “You’ve hardly shown up around here. I haven’t even had the chance to tell you I got accepted into that art program I told you about the last time we talked.”

“That’s… that’s fantastic!” he said, and he meant it. He meant it with his whole guilt-ridden heart. Rachel deserved it, she truly did. She deserved happiness and a normal freaking life. She wasn’t a demigod; she didn’t have any business getting mixed up with prophecies, gods and monsters. He had dragged her into this whole thing.

“Stop that,” she said. “I know that look. It’s your ‘I blame myself for everything’ look.”

“I was only thinking about how much you deserved it after all the trouble you’ve been through getting mixed with us… With… me.”

“I’ve always had a feeling that this always going to happen, Percy. If it wouldn’t have been you, then I would have encountered any other demigod or something else that would put me on this path. Demigods aren’t the only ones whose fates and destinies are tied up to the gods.”

Percy wasn’t convinced but let it go; he didn’t want to start a fight with Rachel.

“So I’m leaving in six months. To Paris,” she whispered as Chiron was talking about possible places to look for the Palladium.

He nodded, but he did not want her to leave. It seemed like all of his friends were scattering away. All of them following their own path, they all had figured out their lives and had made plans that already were unfolding. And it seemed like none of them included Percy. He was torn between wanting to keep all his friends together with him, and his genuine desire for them to be happy. Couldn’t they be happy near him? With him? Couldn’t he stop being so selfish about the whole thing? This was the exact kind of thing he had tried to avoid by distancing himself from them. He couldn’t bear hearing any more news like that. So he made plans of his own and had started to follow them. But then, as usual, a god had to came in and screw everything up.
Percy sighed and paid attention to the counsel to distract himself from his own thoughts. He wasn’t thrilled by the quest, but it was better than wallowing in his own growing misery. Chiron and Marcus talked about how they didn’t really have a deadline so Jason and Percy would have time to get ready for it, but how still it was an urgent matter. They talked about how the Hecate and Athena kids had been working non-stop with the Athena Parthenos so it could help them locate the Palladium; something about two strong magical objects being able to sense each other in a way. Percy didn’t understand everything that Marcus was saying but that was the gist of it.

“We haven’t been able to narrow it down more than that radius,” Marcus was saying, while looking at a recently unwrinkled paper in his hand, without looking up. “It’s too great a distance from here and we know how much Mist covers everything up over there so it’s messing with…”

“Over where?” Percy asked.

“Oh, sorry…” Marcus said, a bit startled. “The… Ancient Lands. The radius of convergence covers most of Europe but seems to be focused around the Mediterranean.”

Oh great, just great.

“You gotta be kidding me,” Jason voiced Percy’s thoughts.

“We have to go back there? No way,” Percy joined. “With only two of us? We will be dead in less than a day.”

“Being only two of you might actually be helpful,” Chiron declared. “You wouldn’t attract as much attention from monsters and the like as you did during the quest for the Doors of Death.”

“Chiron’s right,” Jason said, looking pensive. “Besides, we’re older and more experienced about what that place entails now.”

All right, Percy liked the guy, but he did not appreciate that constant changing of sides once an authority figure was in the picture.

“Look, Jason…” Percy started to say, but it was interrupted by the door of the Rec Room being flown out of his hinges, with a ball of fire following it. Everyone ran for cover. The fire ceased almost immediately, with the only casualties being Mr. D’s pool table and a couple of chairs.

“See what you made me do, man?” a familiar voice complained from outside. “I just want to see how he is.”

“And I told you that you could do that once they were finished, Valdez,” a girl’s voice said between coughs. “Hardly something worth getting upset enough to get The Big House burned down! And I’m not a man!”

“Whatsoever, and it’s just an expression,” Leo said, and entered the room. “Is everyone all right? Where’s Jason?”

“Over here,” Jason answered, struggling to pull himself up from below the ping pong table. Leo went immediately next to him.

“Are you okay?” Percy heard Leo ask Jason.

“Yeah, just a bit dizzy…” he heard Jason mutter in response.

“I think we are finished here,” Chiron said, coming out of the shadows. “Everyone agreed on the
terms of the quest?”

Percy’s response was the only “No” that was heard. The group left the Rec Room. Once outside, Rachel told Percy she was really tired and had only got up to be present at the senior counsel. She went back to her cave, instead of the room they had set up for her at The Big House. Alone, Percy started to walk towards his old cabin; bitter thoughts consuming him.

The day of their departure came later than expected, but much sooner than Percy would have wanted. Campers had been hard at work trying to pin-point the exact location of the Palladium but it was no use. “Sometimes it even seems like it’s moving around at great speed,” said one of the Hecate kids in frustration. Percy didn’t do much before the day they would leave for the quest; he mostly kept to himself in his cabin, not wanting to see anybody. Rachel would come by and visit him from time to time, and that had been most of Percy’s interaction with the world outside. Jason and Leo appeared a couple of times to say hi, with Jason offering some practice before the quest but Percy had refused. They didn’t come back after that.

Percy, Jason, Chiron and the head counselors were at the beach, with Long Island Sound extending before them.

“How are we going to get to the Mediterranean?” Percy asked to no one in particular.

“Hephaestus cabin has had that covered for days now, man” Leo said. “Seriously, if you stepped outside once in a whi-ow!” Lauren had hit him on the ribs.

“Why are you even here?” she asked somewhat irritated. “I’m the head counselor; it’s my responsibility to give them the gift.”

“Well, I built it,” Leo said. “…mostly… okay, fine I just planned it…” he amended after a glare from Lauren. “And they’re my friends, all right? My chums! My compadres! My…”

“Shut up, Valdez,” Lauren said, but she couldn’t hide a smile. Leo complied.

“Wait, what gift?” asked Percy.

“Since it’s just the two of us instead of the usual three, each of the major cabins agreed to give us something useful,” Jason explained. “You know, to kind of compensate.”

“And it’s Hephaestus cabin’s honor to present to you with your method of transportation,” she said with an air of solemnity; Leo was sniggering behind her. Lauren had obviously heard him and Percy felt sorry for what will surely happen to Leo once they were gone. “The ship of Theseus.” She finalized with grandiosity, gesturing dramatically at a covered mass floating on the water, which Percy was pretty sure wasn’t there before.

They uncovered it, revealing a small trireme. It was a much smaller version of the Argo II, sans the bronze dragon as figurehead. It did seem perfect for two people traveling in it comfortably for a long stretch of time. The sight of the ship cheered Percy up a bit. He was already feeling the pull of the sea on him, and the ship just increased its intensity. He wondered if Jason would mind if they made a small stop before the quest proper; he had been meaning to visit his mom for ages.

“It’s not actually a ship that Theseus used,” Leo said, answering a question that Percy hadn’t heard. “It’s just the name. We didn’t come up with it.”

“My idea,” Marcus jumped in. “You see, what’s special about it is that it repairs itself…”
“Since your awesome technical expert isn’t coming with you,” Leo interrupted. “So I… well, we thought it would be a good idea if you didn’t have to worry about it during the quest, or Iris message me every time something breaks, interrupting my beauty sleep.”

“So it fixes itself,” Lauren said. “Like, if it misses its mast; it repairs it with wreckage from other ships. Sunken ships.”

“Which of course brings up one question: given enough reparations, that make all its components different from the original, is it actually the same ship? So yeah, ship of Theseus,” Marcus finished the explanation, obviously really pleased with himself. His smile deflated once it was obvious that no one understood what he was talking about. “Well, I think it’s interesting… and worth pondering about! What if after a certain point it’s not, like, metaphysically the same ship anymore so it stops doing its magic thing?”

Leo and Lauren rolled their eyes.

“Athena kids,” they said in unison.

“Talking of Athena,” Marcus said once he finished glaring at his fellow campers, “here’s our gift for your quest. Knowledge!” he said while giving them a small rectangular object. Jason took it and it turned on immediately.

“A tablet with all you need to know about Greek mythology,” Marcus explained in a salesman tone. “Hyperlinked, illustrated, and with photos and video when possible. With quotes from the original epic poems, general overviews of all the monsters, gods and other beings we know of and their place in the Olympian genealogic tree so you can navigate those tricky familial situations more easily. I call it Greekepedia.”

“Wow, uh, thanks,” Jason said, putting the tablet inside his bag-pack. “That’s actually really useful, Marcus. You guys outdid yourselves.”

Marcus smiled. Percy didn’t think that Marcus could be taller but right now he sure did seem so.

The rest of the gifts were as useful as the ones from Athena and Hephaestus cabins, or at least they tried to be. It seemed like a competition of who would bring the best one. There was a pair of winged sneakers from Hermes cabin, which Percy took with some hesitancy. From Demeter, a small pot with a white flower called moly. Some Sprayable Mist in a bottle, from Hecate’s cabin in lieu of not being able of giving them the exact location of the Palladium.

“If you try hard enough you can even create mistforms! You don’t need to be a Hecate kid!” said the small really-long-haired girl who Percy had a hard time believing her to be head counselor. She seemed really excitable.

The Ares kids gave them a weapon, of course, an ancient sword which its mere sight, they said, would frighten unworthy opponents. Aphrodite’s cabin, led by a tall black kid named Alan, gave them a belt.

“It will enhance your attractiveness enormously,” he had said “Not that you need it, of course, but it could be useful,” he added scanning Percy up and down. Someone elbowed Alan on the ribs.

Nico di Angelo was standing next to Alan. Percy hadn’t seen him in a long time, and his jaw almost hit the floor. Nico looked healthier, no longer as skinny as a skeleton, and much taller and happier than Percy had ever seen him. Sure, he still had a scowl on his face and a serious look on his eyes, but it was a somewhat happy scowl and a cheerful sort of serious. Percy got dizzy trying to find the
“Hi, Nico,” Percy said, awkwardly. He never knew where he was with Nico di Angelo; they had a rocky history.

“Hello,” Nico said. A long silence followed between them.

“Ehm…” Alan looked at both of them dubiously; he looked as if he was trying to figure out something. Finally, he perked up and said, “Hey, Nico, didn’t you want to talk to Jason?”


Followed by Percy’s gaze, Nico went to talk to Jason. They were both whispering, as if trading state secrets. He didn’t pay much attention when the Apollo cabin bestowed upon him an old magical lyre that did something or other. Now they were laughing, and then Nico was nodding and smiling. Percy felt a sudden and weird pang on his chest. He almost tripped while standing when they hugged. Percy saw Jason ruffle Nico’s hair with affection, and then the younger boy went away, followed by Alan. He tried to make sense of it all, but to no avail.

“So, what’s up with that?” Percy asked Jason in a low voice, once Nico was gone, nodding towards the direction the boy had went.

“Tell you later,” was all Jason said, while pocketing something small. He didn’t mention what it was. Percy felt left out, and there was something bothering him still. He put his arm over Jason’s shoulders and forced himself to grin.

“So, right, so are we all set, then?” he asked with the enthusiasm he didn’t feel. Jason smiled at him, and Percy smiled back, genuinely this time.

“I think so,” Jason said. “No one else is going to give us a gift?” he asked jokingly to the crowd gathered.

“I think we’re ready,” Percy said, and hopped up with ease in the trireme. He helped Jason up.

They were saying good bye to the campers gathered at the beach. The ship had already started to move by Percy’s command. Percy saw Marcus running through the crowd, waving something in the air.

“Wait! Wait up!” he was yelling. Percy stopped the ship.

“What’s wrong?” asked Jason, concerned.

Percy climbed down the boat, landing next to Marcus, who was panting.

“I uh… forgot to give you this,” he said, offering him what he had in his hand. “It’s uhm… Annabeth’s address. You know, in the UK.”

“Uh,” was all Percy said, taking the small piece of paper.

“She said that it’s okay,” Marcus assured him. “She left it in case anyone from Athena’s cabin needed her or something, but I guess you guys might want to ask her about the quest. I already IM’d her and she says that she might have something useful.”

“Um… yeah, thanks,” Percy said lamely, staring at what was written on the paper as if it was the most complicated math problem he had ever seen.
Finally, he looked up. Everyone was staring at him with curiosity, even Chiron. He cleared his throat.

“Thanks, Marcus,” he repeated, louder and clearer this time, and smiled at him. “So if that’s all for real… um… We should be going.”

He boarded the ship again. Jason was next to him immediately.

“What was that? What did he want? Couldn’t hear anything from up here,” he said.

“Nothing just… wanted to give us something that he thought would be useful,” Percy said, still not knowing how to react to the whole thing.

“What is it? An address?” Jason asked once he read the little paper that Percy handed to him.

“Yeah. Annabeth’s,” Percy replied. Jason said nothing; he paused for a second and finally just nodded.

Percy made the ship start to move again. He saw Jason waving at the crowd, saying goodbye. Percy didn’t even look back; he went straight below deck, to find a place to rest and think. He had been doing a lot of thinking since he arrived at Camp Half-Blood; and it seemed like it wasn’t going to stop anytime soon. That couldn’t be good for his seaweed brain… He felt a pang of pain in his chest.
Jason didn’t want to go on the quest. He felt the same way about it than Percy did. It was just that he didn’t voice any of his complaints and frustration out loud. He felt like crap by not supporting Percy, but it did seem like the quest was something important. He sighed and his head went dizzy.

His whole body ached with built-up tension; he had been posturing, being polite and all Jason-y since they heard the prophecy. He had wanted to punch Apollo on the face for what he had made Rachel go through, he had wanted to tell Percy that he agreed with him and he had wanted to run like hell on the opposite direction once the Ancient Lands were mentioned, but none of that was Jason Grace. None of that was actually of any use either. Eventually, they were going to convince him. There were going to be talks of destiny and duty, empty motivational speeches and badly-concealed disapproving looks from Chiron. He wanted to save himself all of that and just decided to suck it up and do what was expected of him. His eyes glazed over and he sat on a chair on the ship’s deck, hearing the sounds of the sea.

Percy came out of his hiding place a few minutes later, looking serious and serene. He sat next to Jason.

“Crap deal, huh?” Jason said.

“Yeah,” Percy replied. They weren’t looking at each other.

“I’m sorry I went all Duty and Responsibility on you back at camp,” Jason said. “I wanted to tell you earlier but…”

“I wouldn’t come out of my cabin, yeah,” Percy supplied. “And I’m sorry about that. It was just… this whole thing dug up some stuff.”

“Yeah,” Jason said.

They sat in silence next to each other for a minute. Jason glanced over Percy from time to time. He seemed to be struggling with something. Percy opened his mouth a couple of times to say something, but shut it immediately.

“Spit it out, man,” Jason said finally.

“This sounds lame but… I want to see my mom.”

“I see…”

“Can we uh… would it bother you if we…”

“Made a quick stop?”

“Yeah.”

“Not at all,” Jason said. “I’m not that eager to actually start this quest, you know. Besides, I’ve only met your mom once. Great cookies.”

Percy smiled, and closed his eyes in concentration, making the ship turn.

They were in Manhattan in no time. The ship was fast, and having a son of Poseidon on board only seemed to make it faster and more efficient. They docked at the most discreet location they could
find, and Percy led the way towards his mother’s house.

Jason had only met Sally Jackson once before: right after their quest to stop Gaea and the giants had ended. She was waiting for Percy by the magical border of Camp Half-Blood, next to a man whose name Jason couldn’t remember: Paul Blowfish or something, Percy’s stepfather. Sally had looked angry, worried and then relieved once Percy showed up, and their hug was the longest and most tight hug Jason had ever seen. It made him jealous. Sure, they hadn’t seen or talked to each other in months, a big part of that time with Sally having no clue about Percy’s whereabouts; but the image had stayed with Jason for a long time. The image of a family that was whole and happy. And he could tell that it had had a similar impact on their other friends. Demigods’ family lives were messy at best and downright tragic at worst. Jason classified himself on the latter category, even though he didn’t think much about it. He didn’t want to; it was too painful and confusing to dwell on.

He was pulled out of his darkening thoughts by the sound of a doorbell. They were in front of a nice two-story house in the middle of a row of similar-looking ones. Jason knew Percy lived on an apartment, he had been there shortly after the scene by Camp Half-Blood; the family must have moved for some reason.

The door opened and Percy’s stepfather was in front of them, his salt and pepper hair a wild mess. He was wearing light-blue pajamas, holding a cup of coffee on one hand and a newspaper in his armpit, and he had a pleasant look on his face. He was the perfect image of Hollywoodian suburban normalcy that one didn’t see anymore nowadays, Jason thought. The pleasantness on the man’s face turned into surprise and then into delight as soon as he saw Percy on the threshold.

“Hi, Paul,” Percy said.

“Hello!” Paul said, already motioning them to enter. “What a wonderful surprise, Percy. Your mother’s going to be so happy to see you, and so will—oh, hello there,” he said once he spotted Jason.

“Hi,” Jason said, extending his hand.

“Jason, is it?” Paul said with a grin while they shook hands. Jason was surprised he remembered his name.

“Yes, sir,” Jason replied, not sure of the level of formality expected of him.

“Just call me Paul,” he said, still grinning.

Paul let go of Jason’s hand and looked at them for a couple of seconds, beaming.

“I’m going to go get your mom, Percy,” he said to his stepson. “It’s great to see you. Please, sit on the living room while she comes down,” he said to both of them, gesturing vaguely to his left.

He disappeared upstairs. Percy led Jason deeper into the house. They reached the living room, where Percy sat comfortably in one of the sofas, his feet on the coffee table. As if he was never gone from home. Percy sighed and tilted his head back, allowing himself to relax. A small smile crept upon his lips. This was the Percy that Jason remembered, or liked to remember, easygoing and carefree; not the moody guy locked in Poseidon’s cabin for days. He stared at him, smiling when Percy let out a big, lazy yawn. It made Jason feel sleepy instantaneously.

“What are you doing there standing up?” Percy said, finally looking at him. “Sit.”

“Right, yeah,” Jason said, feeling awkward.
A whole minute had passed when they heard footsteps approaching the room.

“Percy, feet,” a female voice said from the entrance to the living room.

Percy obeyed immediately; he got up and almost ran to hug his mom. She hugged him back, both all smiles and love. That bittersweet feeling from years ago filled Jason again. He also stood up, feeling dizzier by the second.

Sally opened her eyes and saw Jason. She let go gently of his son and walked towards their guest.

“Hello, Jason,” she said with a warm smile. “It’s lovely to see you.”

Jason limited himself to wave and to keep standing there, motionless. He suddenly felt exhausted. It was since his little incident with Dick’s backstabbing sword that he kept getting, there was no other word, sleepiness attacks at random. The Apollo kids had told him it was nothing to worry about, most likely. He opened his eyes wide, trying to fight it.

“Are you all right?” Sally asked, approaching him, with worry creeping into her eyes.

“What’s wrong, man?” Percy joined her, also worried. “Gods, you’re as pale as a marble statue’s butt.”

Jason opened his mouth to say “it’s nothing,” but all that came out of it was a big yawn. Small yellow and pink spots appeared on his field of vision, and he felt lightheaded and disoriented. His hands and face were going numb and a shivering cold was taking hold of his body.

He felt himself falling and then he vaguely registered being caught by a pair of firm, strong arms. Darkness enveloped him.

He woke up in a couch. Sally and Paul were next to him, drinking coffee and talking in hushed and worried tones. He sat up quickly, and regretted it almost straightaway.

“Ow…” he complained, closing his eyes firmly. The world was spinning around him.

“Jason,” Sally said. “Lay down, love. Slowly.”

He did so.

“How are you feeling?” Paul asked.

“Stupendous,” Jason said, squinting due to the light of the room hurting his eyes. “What happened?”

“You passed out,” Sally answered.

“Again,” Jason’s mind provided with a jaded tone.

“How long was I out?” he asked, sitting up, this time more carefully.

“Almost six hours,” Sally said. “You gave us quite a fright. If Percy hadn’t caught you, you might have hit your head on the table.”

Feeling guilty about worrying them, Jason tried to change the subject. “Where’s Percy?”

“I last saw him on the garden. He was doing something with the sprinklers…” Sally began.
“Well, whatever he was doing frustrated him because I saw him stomping his way upstairs. He hasn’t come back down, I think” Paul supplied.

Jason was feeling much better now. He tried standing up. Nothing catastrophic happened, as if his latest episode hadn’t happened at all. The Jacksons (or was it the Blowfishes?) looked at him worried.

Jason stretched his body. His neck hurt.

“I think we should be going,” he said.

“Going?” Sally said, frowning. “Where? To that quest Percy told us about?” she sounded upset. “Back to that awful place? I thought all of you had stopped that; didn’t they promise that? I’m going to—”

“Sally...” Paul said in a calming tone.

“I know. Believe me,” Jason said. “I feel the same, and so does Percy. But we have no choice.”

“Now, there’s always a choice,” Paul said.

“Well, yes,” Jason said. “We chose to go, then. It has to be important. Like, end-of-the-world kind of important.”

“Surely,” Sally said, bitterness tinging every syllable. “He had nightmares for months, you know,” she added, this time more quietly.

“Who? Percy?” Jason asked, but she didn’t respond. Paul put one arm around her.

“I think,” Paul said, taking his time to say the next part, as if he was thinking of the best way to say it, “I think they’re old enough to decide by themselves, Sally. You have trusted him and his friends for a long time before now. And if Percy feels up to it…”

“He’s not a kid anymore, is he?” she asked, apparently to herself. “He has been coming home less and less frequently over the years…”

“The lives of half-bloods are... busy,” Jason tried. He didn’t really know how to talk to parents. Trash-talking monsters? Sure. Commanding masses of legionnaires? Piece of cake. Lifting his teammates’ spirits up? He could do that with sign language. But parents worried sick for their son’s safety were an entirely different matter. One he didn’t have any experience on. Paul seemed to understand what was going through Jason’s mind, or at least part of it, because he smiled at Jason encouragingly. Jason continued: “And well, the mortal world is a de facto dangerous place for us, even more so for demigods like Percy, Nico or me. Camps are our safe havens, and quests almost our only chance to see the world. So it makes sense that he’s been coming home less and less. He also does it to protect you both, I’ll bet.”

“I know. I know how it is,” Sally said, her voice gaining resolve. “I’m just... We hadn’t seen him in months and now he shows up for a second, only to leave to another of those quests.”

Paul sighed next to her.

“Can you at least wait until you’re fully recovered, Jason?” he asked. He was also worried about Percy, Jason could tell, but he also asked for the benefit of his wife.

“We don’t have a deadline,” Jason declared. “But every minute that passes counts and the risk only
gets higher. I’m sure Percy told you all about it.”

They both nodded.

“So, upstairs?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Sally said, standing up and getting into a more businesslike mode. “I’ll give you guys some food and clothes. I’m sure you could use some of Percy’s. They might be a little tight on you but…”

“Thanks,” Jason said.

Sally disappeared into another room, presumably the kitchen or wherever they had clothes, and Paul followed to help her. Jason climbed the stairs. He had no problem locating Percy. It was dark on the second floor and only one room was lit. Laughter reached Jason’s ears; it was Percy’s, joined by a much more childlike one.

Once at the door of a well-lit room, Jason was momentarily confused by the scene before him. It was a blue room, the walls decorated with cartoonish scenes depicting the sea and its depths. Colorful mobiles with fishes, octopuses and other sea creatures hang from the ceiling. Toys were scattered all over the carpeted floor. In that very floor, Jason saw Percy sitting next to a little kid. He couldn’t be more than two years old. Percy was making floating figures out of water. A small pegasus flew around the kid’s head, reflecting the room in its uneven watery surface. The kid followed it with his eyes, hypnotized and delighted.

“Percy?” Jason said at last.

Percy looked up with a startled look that soon gave way to a broad smile. He got up from the floor, waving his hand towards the flying horse made of water, making it dissolve into individual droplets that fell straight into a bucket next to the little kid. The kid’s face went from joy to a pout of disappointment.

“How you feelin’?” Percy asked, eyeing Jason with slight concern.

“Much better,” Jason replied; his eyes still locked on the little kid, who was now peering into the bucket and waving his small hand over the surface of the water. “Who…?”

“Oh, uh…” Percy blinked rapidly seemingly at a loss of words. “That’s Ezra,” he said at last, simply. He went next to the little kid and got him up the floor, huffing to carrying him in his arms.

“Mom’s been feeding you way too many pancakes, little bud,” Percy said to Ezra.


“Ezra,” Percy said to call the kid’s attention. “This is Jason, he’s my friend.”

Ezra turned around and eyed Jason with all the thoughtfulness a toddler is capable of. Jason smiled shyly at him, feeling awkward. He suddenly felt the need of being liked by the kid; he felt like he was being appraised by the harshest of judges. He shook his head, dispelling those thoughts away.

“Hi, Jay-so,” the kid said finally, his eyes still locked on him.

“Jason,” Percy said. “This is Ezra, he’s my little brother.”

“Your…?” Jason blinked three times in quick succession before the information truly sank in.

“Oh,” Jason said, finally understanding.

Ezra’s attention was back to the bucket, but he asked: “Jay-so do horsie?”

“I’m sorry?” asked Jason.

Percy let out a small, almost imperceptible, laugh.

“He wants you to do that whole water thing I was doing when you came in,” Percy explained, and put Ezra back on the floor. The kid looked up at both of them, a questioning look on his face.

“Oh,” Jason said to Percy, and then he addressed Ezra: “Sorry, I can’t do that.”

Ezra half-crawled half-walked towards his big brother, and pulled at his pants with insistence.

“Ummm, I can do this, though,” Jason said, and held up his right hand, showing Ezra his palm and separating his fingers. A second later, bright blue sparkles went from one finger to the other, making crackling sounds. Both things increased in intensity, as the electricity formed arcs between the tips of his fingers. Jason held up his left hand and the arc jumped to join both hands.

Ezra’s face was lit up by the light of Jason’s electricity and his own excitement and wonderment. He laughed and clapped.

Jason made the arc vanish. A metallic sensation permeated the room’s atmosphere.

“How’s that, then?” Jason asked to his audience. Ezra kept clapping and Jason made an exaggerated bow before him. He didn’t let them see how much that small performance had drained him, he steeled himself and straightened.

“Pessy do that?” Ezra demanded, looking expectant at Percy.

Percy went a bit red, and looked down at him.

“Not… really,” he replied, with a slight frown, more to himself than to his brother. He lifted his head and regarded Jason: “Gods, Jason, upstaging me much? I’m supposed to be the coolest person he knows.”

Jason laughed.

Percy and Jason were both sitting on the floor now, next to each other, his backs pressed against a wall. Ezra was in the other side of the room, playing with his toys and making undistinguishable sound effects.

“Who else knows?” Jason asked. “Annabeth, I guess?”

“Yeah,” Percy said, still looking fondly at his brother.

“Why haven’t you told the others?”

“It just never came up,” Percy replied, his right-hand’s fingers scratching the carpet in random patterns.

“Yeah, I guess it’s hard for it to come up in a conversation if there are no conversations at all,” Jason commented, regretting almost immediately the harshness and hurt on his tone.

Percy sighed.
“I guess you’re right,” Percy said, a little morose. “That, and the fact that I don’t really want him knowing about that part of my life just yet.”

“Come again?”

“For now, I’m just his older brother who stops by once in a while to do cool water tricks,” Percy continued, seemingly ignoring Jason’s question. “I mean, he’s my actual brother,” he said this as if not believing it, as if just realizing it was so. “I know I have lots of brothers and sisters from Poseidon’s side, and I love Tyson, but this is my mother’s son. He’s not a pirate with a dolphin crew, or a huge mouth in the sea that devours whoever crosses her path. He is completely human, completely mortal. It all feels… more real.”

Jason suddenly understood.

“You’re protecting him. You’re protecting them all,” Jason stated, repeating what he had said to Sally. “That’s why you hardly come home even though we haven’t had a quest in years.”

Percy just nodded.

“He’s defenseless, unlike Tyson,” Percy said after a while. “And I want him to have the nice and normal life he deserves. Far from monsters and quests and magic… Far from me.”

Jason remained silent next to Percy, watching Ezra play with a couple of dinosaurs making them fight. He could feel the conflict brewing inside Percy as if it was his own, because he understood. He didn’t have an actual, human family but he could imagine how hard it must be to try and separate both sides of one’s life. Wanting to spend time with them, like Percy was doing just a few minutes ago, and feeling like life was devoid of monstrous nightmares and menaces from the depths of hell. But also being painfully aware that such things were real, that normal people needed protection and that they would never be safe if he stayed with them for too long. Which one would Jason renounce? The chance to finally have a normal life? Or the chance to make the whole world better?

Jason had no mortal attachments, not really. He had an immortal ever-young sister hunting by a goddess’ side for eternity, a dad who was the king of the heavens and whom Jason had never actually seen or spoken to, and—just like Percy—a lot of freaky creatures result from said dad’s random hook-ups as half-siblings. All he really had were his friends, and they were all more or less in the same myth-full boat as him. He couldn’t imagine being like Percy and having an actual family who was in actual danger merely by being in his presence. If such a choice, between normalcy and destiny was hard for Jason to even contemplate, then for Percy it must be tearing him apart.

He looked at him, all love and protectiveness for his family and all fierceness and determination for saving the world. Jason remembered how Annabeth once told them about Percy’s fatal flaw: personal loyalty. Percy would risk the whole world for the sake of his friends and family. But the person he had before him now did not quite match up with that description. Yeah, Percy had refused to go on the quest, but Jason could tell that once it finally started he would give it his all. For the first time, Jason saw Percy as something much more than a goofy kid, much more than a natural leader or a formidable fighter and ally; he saw someone who had grown, and whose growth was still going on, painfully but surely. He could only imagine how far Percy would go. Percy Jackson was an actual hero, Jason thought, beyond quests and legendary mythological feats.

“I’m kind of your biggest fan right now,” Jason said after what had felt like ages.


Jason shrugged. Percy stared at him, completely puzzled, and then frowning.
“Seriously, what in Hades are you…?”

“Don’t get a big head about it, though,” Jason said, dodging the question. “We still got one more quest to complete so don’t blow it, Jackson,” he said, standing up with some difficulty.

“Jason, wait.”

“What’s up?” Jason said from the door, planning to leave Percy with his little brother for a while before mentioning that they still had to go on a quest. A look at Percy was enough to make Jason come back to his side. He sat down again; there was something in Percy’s tone. Something that told him this had nothing to do with the previous baffling, at least for Percy, exchange.

“Are you sure you feel all right?” Percy asked. He closed his hands into anxious fists.

“Yeah, bit tired,” Jason shrugged. “I mean, it is a little weird and kinda worrying th—”

“You’re poisoned,” Percy let out in one breath.

“I’m what? Poisoned? What do you mean?”

“I got an Iris message from camp like an hour ago. It was this kid from the Ares cabin… Dick?”

“Yeah?” Jason’s body tensed up. “What’d he say?”

“He was freaking out,” Percy said, “and he explained to me the whole business with you getting impaled by some sword Ares gave him.”

“A backstabbing sword, yeah.”

“Apparently, he did some more research and turns out that, well, it’s poisoned.”

“What?”

“Jason, I think you’re dying,” Percy said, his eyes fixed on Jason’s face.

“But… that was days ago,” Jason protested. “And, yeah, I passed out and I’ve felt dizzy at times since then, but I feel all right now. Surely I should be getting worse and worse? Not, like, intermittent fits of worseness?”

“You haven’t seen yourself on a mirror recently, then?” Percy said, deadly serious.

“N-No…”

Jason got up and out of the room. In the corridor, right outside Ezra’s bedroom he found a mirror on the wall. Percy turned on the lights and stood next to him.

“Oh, Gods…” Jason said staring in horror at his reflection.

“Yeah.”

On the mirror Jason could see his face, almost as pale as Rachel’s had been days ago. His skin looked dry. There were black bags under his sunken blood-shot eyes. All of that making him look like an extremely malnourished panda. Jason realized he was shaking. He didn’t know if he had been doing it all along or the shock of seeing himself like that had provoked it. Percy’s reaction told him it was the second option.
“Hey, hey,” he heard him say next to him. “Calm down, dude,” Percy approached him putting a hand on his back.

“Why didn’t you tell me before?”

“I mean, that kid wasn’t absolutely certain…” Percy said, turning off the lights and guiding Jason back to the room. Ezra watched them attentively from his corner. “And you actually looked fine when you entered the room, so I just assumed… I hoped for the best, but then…”

“It was that electricity thing I did, wasn’t it?” Jason said, looking at his trembling hands.

“Yeah,” Percy nodded. “I guess it drained a bit of what was keeping you together or something. Dick said that Chiron told him that you probably hadn’t succumbed to the poison so far because, well, super-powerful son of Jupiter and all that.”

“So I might be ok, then?”

“For a while,” Percy said. “They weren’t sure.”

“So, do we come back?” Jason asked. “They must have something to fix me up at camp…”

Percy shook his head.

“Dick says that they tried everything already,” he said, still eyeing him up and down, his face full of concern. “Since you weren’t waking up, they went beyond the extra mile, before risking it by filling you up with tons of ambrosia and nearly burning you up.”

“What do I do, then?” Jason asked, imagining poison going through his veins and killing him slowly but surely: he pictured acid eating its organs away; his blood getting black as ink, spreading death all inside him.

“What we are gonna do is to keep on with the quest,” Percy said, determined. Jason caught a glance of Ezra, who had approached them and stared at both of them, and then looked confused at Percy.

“Dick said something about Annabeth probably knowing what to do and that it was uh… likely that you could survive all the way there. But we have to hurry.”

“Annabeth? What can she do?” His legs were wobbling, so he supported his weight on Ezra’s bedpost and leaned against a wall.

Percy shrugged.

“It’s Annabeth. I mean, Dick was going to tell me more, but the Iris message sort of ended. It just vanished. I tried to contact him again but it was no use. Then I tried to reach Annabeth to see if they had told her anything, but the same thing happened.”

“I don’t think I can make it to the Ancient freaking Lands like this,” Jason protested.

“Sure you can,” Percy said with confidence. “Just don’t do any son of Jupiter tricks; none of that electricity stuff, or the flying thing,” he amended.

Jason was about to say something, but he paused and took deep breaths.

“You’re looking better,” Percy tried after a while.

And Jason did feel better, not exactly in perfect condition but undoubtedly better. His legs weren’t shaking anymore for one thing. This whole dying stuff was going to show up at the most
inconvenient of times, wasn’t it? Jason was more annoyed by it now than scared or anything else.

“We’re gonna be fine,” Percy assured him. “You’re gonna be fine, I promise. I can take care of you, for a while. I’m not completely useless at it, you know…” his eyes glanced down to Ezra and back to Jason almost imperceptibly. Jason nodded, confidence building up inside him.

They wasted no time; they picked up the stuff that Sally and Paul had prepared for their quest and said goodbye to the couple and Ezra. Sally didn’t look apprehensive anymore; if she still had any concerns or protests, she didn’t mention them to Percy. She gave a look to Jason over Percy’s shoulder though; a look that said, “You take care of him or else.” Ezra clung to Percy for a whole minute, with the latter reassuring him that he would return soon.

“I’ll make Jay-so teach me his sparky trick,” he said to the kid. “You take care of mom.”

Ezra smiled only slightly.

In a flash, they were at the spot where they had docked the ship. The sun was going down. Percy prepared everything on the vessel for their departure with an almost literal snap of his fingers, while Jason limited himself to gather strength for the journey. He closed his eyes and saw Percy’s mom worried sick for his son, and then Percy’s words from earlier ringed in his ears: “I can take care of you.” They were going to have to look after each other more than ever, to rely on one another like never before. He looked at Percy, now at the helm of the boat, completely in his element. If Jason had been given the choice of who to take with him on this mission, under these circumstances, he wouldn’t have chosen differently. He smiled; they were ready for this.

The ship of Theseus, that hasn’t actually been owned by the man, advanced to the west. They gained speed and soon Jason couldn’t distinguish any sign of land around them. The water was still, and all around them peacefulness reigned. All around them the sound of the sea and the smell of it invaded their senses. All around them there was the light of the setting sun, and a cool and relaxing breeze.

And all around them darkness began to form.

It was as if midnight had fallen instantly, or as if they had entered a cave and the entrance had been sealed immediately. But it wasn’t night yet, and they were not in a cave: dark storm clouds dominated the sky that had been absolutely clear a few moments ago. And then they heard them, the rushing of wind, the sound of thunder and the crackling sparks of electricity were approaching at demented speed.

From the sky, dozens and dozens of columns of black clouds had begun to descend like the tentacles of a giant monster ready to snatch its prey. Soon, their boat was surrounded by venti. The storm spirits didn’t waste any time, and attacked them with swiftness and wild fury.

The quest was on.
Percy hated storm spirits. For one, Riptide seemed to them more of a slight hindrance than an actual threat. The venti unsolidify themselves as soon as his sword was about to make a direct hit. And then there was the fact that they were noisier and louder than a son of Hypnos snoring, and more chaotic than a Hermes kid high on sugar. He could hardly concentrate on actually defending himself with all those blasts of wind, thunder and mocking laughter going on around him. He dodged most of their zaps of electricity and intercepted some with his sword, making his arm numb and useless for a while. He got hit in the chest by a winged-horse-shaped ventus, sending him almost flying and then tumbling to the edge of the deck.

He was panting, wheezing, trying to recover fast. It was then that a couple of humanoid ones lifted him twenty-five feet up in the air, and then dropped him hard, mocking him all the way. The wooden floor of the deck cracked as soon as he hit it. Splinters made cuts all over his arms and legs. And when he got up, some of them were still attached to him like acupuncture needles. Blocking out the sting of a multitude of cuts and a sharp pain in his chest, he charged at the nearest storm spirit like a pissed off hedgehog. The ventus was busy wreaking senseless havoc on the ship, and didn’t see Percy running towards him; it was having way too much fun tearing to shreds a sail. Percy swung his sword, slicing the spirit clean in half, making it explode into bright monster dust. One down, two hundred and ninety nine to go.

Percy could hear the taunting screams of Jason above him. The other demigod was hanging on the mast of the ship, attracting to him as many venti as he could. Great job, keeping your moribund friend safe, Percy chided himself. It was like Jason wanted to one-up Percy on the recklessness department. Percy ran towards the mast, swinging Riptide left and right without really expecting to hit anything. That strategy seemed to be the one working out the best so far; the randomness of Percy’s attacks seemed to be catching by surprise some of his enemies. He was now struggling to see anything through the golden, monster-sandy mist. He reached the bottom of the mast, and that’s when he saw it.

He was aware now of the actual situation that Jason was in. Percy had been merely fighting off schoolyard bullies; Jason was waging an all-out war by himself. Fighting the biggest, most chaotic and nastiest storm spirits Percy had ever seen. The thing was, despite being basically a guy at the verge of death, Jason was a venti-killing machine. He saw Jason using the ropes as rappel lines like a pirate from a movie. Percy watched in awe as Jason then twirled around the mast, sometimes only his legs around the pole giving him any support, slicing and stabbing as many foes as he could. He hit them faster than they could make themselves vapor. Percy saw Jason going higher and higher up the mast with ease, all the while keeping the spirits in line.

A swarm of other, smaller, spirits rushed towards Percy, but did not attack him. Some reached the bottom of the mast and flew up, hoping to knock Jason down from below. Others attacked the mast itself, sending lightning bolts to it and scratching furiously with dark, cloudy claws.

“Oh no, you won’t,” Percy grunted, and proceeded to annihilate them all as fast as he could. Seeing Jason fighting like that had reinvigorated him; he wasn’t going to get one-upped like that.

He had stabbed the last one that had remained on deck level, when he felt it: goosebumps all over his skin, a shiver going up his spine, every last one of the hairs on his head standing up. He looked up and saw, horrified, how the majority of the venti had gathered around Jason. Not only that, they
seemed to be fusing with one another, forming an enormous black cloud in the shape of a ring surrounding his friend at the top of the ship’s mast. A couple of the smallest and fastest venti were keeping Jason distracted. He didn’t see the danger he was in. The cloud started to spin menacingly, electricity building up inside it producing a loud, ominous hum.

“Jason!”

He didn’t hear him. Percy started to climb at maximum speed, while calling Jason’s name. The ring cloud gained speed. Percy yelled at the top of his lungs. This time, Jason did hear him. The demigod saw Percy below him, a confused look on his face, and then around him, realization dawning on him. He jumped.

It was a second too late, Percy’s eyes went wide open when he saw at least five gigantic lightning bolts from the enormous cloud rushing towards Jason and hitting him square on the chest and stomach. The sound of thunder was deafening. The smell of charred flesh reached Percy almost instantaneously. Jason’s body hit the mast behind him with his back and then fell like a rag doll to the deck, impacting it with mortal force. Percy’s screams were drown by the sound of the storm spirits all rejoicing at once.

Percy let go of the mast, jumping and landing on his feet. He ran until he reached Jason, crouching next to him. He looked for a pulse desperately; he didn’t find any. There was blood all over Jason’s shirt and a pool of it was beginning to form around him, the smell of burning flesh intensifying and joining with another smell that Percy couldn’t quite identify, something rotten and evil. Percy’s heart was pounding with fury, his ears still hurting from all the chaos. He started to shake with violence.

Something small and tense inside him broke, like a string on a violin, making him stand up. He turned around and looked up to face the now disintegrated cloud floating above the ship. Dozens and dozens of shapes, much darker than the young night sky, were scattered all across his field of vision. Hot and acidic bile went almost to his throat. His heart kept on pounding, wanting to get out of the cage that his aching ribs formed.

“Come on, then!” he shouted, his voice wild and raspy. “What are you waiting for!?”

The sight of vicious monsters all charging at him at once should have frightened him to death, but not this time. All of them attacking at once? Good, just perfect. His lips twisted into an insane smile. He felt a familiar tugging sensation on his stomach, stronger than he had ever experienced.

The furious roar of the sea increased until it matched the chaos of the storm spirits diving down on him. He lifted his arms and a gigantic wave exploded behind him, its rage only parallel to Percy’s. The venti on the front line of the attack stopped dead on their tracks, screeching. The tsunami went above Percy and the boat, and hit the mass of approaching venti with the force of a thousand high-speed trains.

With that swift hit, he destroyed hundreds of venti at once. But he wasn’t done. Four of the biggest and meanest storm spirits were untouched, floating beyond the reach of Percy’s previous attack. It was now they the ones who should have been scared, seeing him like that, but they didn’t seem to know better. They continued with the attack, sending lightning bolts all around Percy, taunting him.

Percy stood in the midst of the now burning ship, an eerie calm on his face. He concentrated all of his strength and might with scary ease on the venti. Their attack stopped. They seemed frozen in time. Percy’s whole body was now in sharp and relentless pain but he didn’t show any sign of discomfort, a vein on his neck seemed to be about to pop. He could feel every single molecule of water floating above him, frozen. Now he got it: storm spirits, in a way, were just that. Water.
Something inside his mind told him that, this time, his attackers were beyond terrified. They would be shaking if not for being on Percy’s grip. He almost could hear them begging him to stop. What he was doing was causing them tremendous pain. Monsters weren’t used to long lasting pain; quick deaths were their usual fate. A small cry seemed to resonate clearly on his mind: “End this, please. Please!”

He complied.

He ripped them apart. Their dark cloud forms were now bigger but much clearer, then they were just thick mist floating against the sky and, finally, they fell as rain into the ocean.

Percy fell to his knees, exhausted. Exhausted and satisfied. Blood was coming out of one of his nostrils and the previous pain settled into a dull ache all over his body.

“What in Hades…?” he heard a weak, almost inaudible voice near him say.

It was Jason.

“Jason…” Percy said, and crawled next to him. “Hey.”

Jason seemed to be having a hard time focusing on Percy.

“Hey, stay with me. It’s gonna be ok, all right?” Percy said, all traces of rage or anger gone, replaced by pure worry and fear. “Jason…”

Percy didn’t know what to do. Part of him wanted to go back; but in the distance he could already hear, almost feel, the venti reforming again. He had drained most of his strength just then, and was in no shape to fight even a single one. On the other hand, Jason was freaking dying in front of him. Jason seemed to be unconscious again.

“Hey!” Percy said. Thankfully, Jason awoke. “Stay with me.”

“Okay…” Jason said; he didn’t seem to have the strength for much else.

Percy’s mind was blank when trying to recall even the most basic lessons in first aid that he had had at Camp Half-Blood. Should he keep him awake? Let him rest? Cover his injuries with something? Move him into a certain position? He felt completely useless.

“Perce…” Jason said, and his eyes closed.

“Hey…” Percy said. “Hey! Jason!”

Jason didn’t wake up this time. Percy was afraid of moving him at all. Finally, he did the only thing he felt safe doing: he held one of his hands and squeezed it softly. Jason stirred and groaned, and then went back to peaceful unconsciousness. His breathing was getting weaker, Percy noticed.

“Jason… I… I don’t know what to do. Tell me what to do. Wake up.”

Would an Iris message work this time? He could reach that kid David from Apollo’s cabin, or Marcus from Athena’s, or…

He let go of Jason’s hand with some apprehension. It wasn’t as if his life-force somehow went through their contact, keeping Jason afloat in the living world, Percy thought. Or as if death was a river and Percy was on the riverbank, preventing Jason from being dragged downstream by it. Percy stood up with difficulty, his eyes fixed on Jason; the man’s condition didn’t change. He ran towards
their supplies, thankfully protected from the venti and the now diminishing fire, below deck. He
rummaged through Jason’s stuff, until he found what he was looking for.

He held up the tablet that Marcus had given them. Its screen lit up once Percy was touching it.

“Right…” Percy said, his throat sore, while looking at the screen and the small cursor that was
waiting for him to type. “What do we have... what do we have…”

He typed “moly,” the name of the plant from Demeter’s cabin. He skimmed the small article, trying
to discern if it was useful now: The Odyssey… grown from a giant’s blood… dangerous for a mortal
man to pluck from the soil… used as protection against Circe’s magic…

Percy sighed. It was useless. He got up and supported himself on the edge of the ship, his body
facing the open sea and his arms resting on the rim of the boat, while holding the device. He made a
search for anything concerning electricity, burns and all kinds of wounds. They didn’t have any of
the stuff that could help them, except for ambrosia. He was getting frustrated, anxious and angry. His
head hurt, and he could hear the sea getting restless. It was then that a small rectangular icon
appeared on the bottom of the screen, accompanied by a chime sound. Frowning, Percy tapped on it.

Hydrokinesis
The ability to manipulate and control water. Ability shared by water nymphs, aquatic deities and
some of their offspring…

He examined the back of the device; there was a camera on it. A small red light was next to the lens.
The tablet chimed again. He turned it around again, and tapped on the same icon that had appeared
before.

Percy Jackson
Son of Poseidon. Half-Blood…

He went back to the entry about hydrokinesis; he had seen something. There, in the bottom
paragraph, a couple of his search terms were highlighted.

... only the most skilled of individuals evolve their ability into its most advanced (and dangerous)
forms, such as the healing of all kinds of wounds and maladies…

He stared at the screen a few seconds, frowning. Realization dawned upon him. He read further
down, trying to find some form of instructions, with no success. He put the tablet back in the bag-
pack and ran towards Jason. He lifted him up with some effort and carried him below deck as fast as
he could go.

Could he do this? He could accelerate his own healing process without even really thinking about it;
he just needed to be in the water. Percy had never tried it on another person; he had never even
thought about it. Sure, he had used his powers before to save Jason—he remembered that now—but
expelling water from Jason’s lungs was quite different from what he was going to try.

Percy reached the bathroom next to what he had claimed as his sleeping quarters earlier that day, and
put Jason inside the big bathtub. The half-burnt remnants of Jason’s t-shirt were on the floor soon
after, his pants and underwear followed. There was no time to be coy.

Percy opened a window and concentrated. A snake made of water entered the room and went inside
the bathtub, covering Jason’s body. Unfiltered ocean water felt like the right choice for this. The
bathtub was almost full in seconds, only Jason’s face was above water level. The drops of blood still
pouring from the man’s wounds reached the surface. They formed circular, floating patterns. That
was not good at all, Percy thought. Wasn’t blood supposed to be thicker than water?

Jason woke up, to Percy’s relief, and looked at him. The life on Jason’s eyes was waning, but Percy could see that he was still battling against it, trying to stay afloat.

“What... What are you doing...?” Jason asked, his voice a rough whisper.

“Don’t worry. I think I saw this on a cartoon once,” Percy said, flashing a weak smile. It didn’t matter, Jason was unconscious again.

Percy stood up, trying to think what to do next. How had he done it for himself in the past? Did it really just happen? At a loss, he uncapped Riptide and used its tip to make a small cut on his left index finger. He touched the water and it healed almost instantly. Percy didn’t even have time to actually register that it had happened. He scratched the back of his neck, pensive. He put Riptide away.

Finally, a ghost of an idea came to him: if it did just happen whenever his body suffered an injury, then maybe he only had to trick this healing thing somehow, so it “just happened” to Jason’s body too. Somehow...

He submerged one arm in the bathtub and reached for Jason’s hand. He closed his eyes. He was trying to think of both of them as one. Jason’s body was merely an extension of his, their minds were one too. He thought of this as if it was a fact, as if it had always been true. Or at least he tried to.

A rush of thoughts hit him. They had always had similarities. Both leaders at their camps, both sons of the Big Three, both chosen by the queen of the gods as the forefront of her strategy, and both were chosen again now. Their fighting styles had been in increasing synchronization during the various battles in the war against the Giants, whether by necessity or true compatibility, it didn’t matter. It had just happened. Even their senses of humor had started to rub off on one another, to the amused annoyance of everyone around them. In a way, they had always been one; or rather both had been part of the same thing, the same destiny. Two sides of the same coin.

Percy felt a curious sensation in his stomach. Not the vicious and violent one from earlier before he went berserk against the venti, this was something much gentler. It was now extending through all his body. It reached the hand he had under the water and stopped for a millisecond, which felt like ages, before it continued through Jason’s body. Because Percy could now feel it: he could feel himself kneeling next to the bathtub, and he could feel himself being in the bathtub. He felt dry and wet. There was both pain and comfort, both health and sickness. Foreign thoughts were now his own. Jason’s fear and resignation battled now in Percy’s mind too. Percy’s joy and sense of accomplishment were now in Jason’s mind as well.

He tried to calm himself, calm both of them. The other didn’t fight him, because there was no other. They were the very same thing. Sickness and pain receded fast. Relief washed over him, over the being that was both of them. They realized that they wouldn’t mind to stay like this forever; it was relaxing, it felt right. They felt stronger than ever, healthier than ever, like they could take on anything. Not even the curse of Achilles had felt this good, because this was no curse at all.

Percy and Jason opened their eyes at the same time. Their hands separated, and the feeling of oneness started to vanish. Percy felt a yearning, like something vital had been tore apart from him. Something he didn’t know he had needed all this time. He looked at Jason, who mirrored his expression.

“That was…” they both started to say, equally stunned.
“I know,” they both replied to one another.

They frowned. They laughed.

Jason’s face contorted in pain, and the spell was broken.

“Are you all right?” Percy asked, worried it hadn’t worked at all.

“Yeah, well… no. I feel much better, I mean,” Jason said. “I…”

Percy stood up and looked at him. The water was clear again, no signs of blood or anything else floating in its surface. There was also no sign of any wounds on Jason’s body at all.

“Ok, wow…” Percy said, blinking rapidly.

“Admiring the view?” Jason asked in a teasing tone. “I know it’s impressive but…”

“What?” Percy asked, confused. Then he saw Jason’s hands underwater rushing to cover his more er… sensible parts. “Oh, no. No, no, no… I meant… I didn’t… No, no…” he kept shaking his head.

“I know,” Jason said, smiling. “Would you mind to ‘No, no, no…’ outside while I make myself decent?”

“Sure,” Percy said at once. “No problem.”

Percy sat on the edge of the bed and waited. A couple of minutes later, Jason got out of the bathroom wearing a bathrobe and drying his blond hair with a towel.

“All good, then?” Percy wanted to know.

“All good, I think. I feel really tired, though; like I could sleep for weeks,” Jason replied, and yawned. “And this dull, numbing sensation is all over me and… well, I guess that’s not the definition of good but I’ll take it over agonizing pain any day.”

Silence followed while Jason finished drying his hair. Percy’s eyes were fixed on the guy in front of him.

“You should get to bed,” Percy suggested from the darkness. They hadn’t turned on the lights in the room. Jason’s hair glowed with the pale rays from the moon, once he walked to be in front of a small, circular window.

“Is that wise?” Jason leaned on the wall behind him, crossing his arms. “What if more venti…?

“I think I gave them a good scare,” Percy said.

“Not only to them. You’re a beast, dude.”

Jason smiled. Percy winced.

“Something wrong?”

“No… I just… I felt like I was sort of back in Tartarus back then…” Percy frowned.

“Back at…?”
“Like, it also happened a couple of times after we got out. You know, me going a bit scary over-the-top. Annabeth said she was worried, but…” he left the rest unsaid.

“Yeah, I remember that. I ehm… overheard a few arguments without meaning to,” Jason said. “Was it that reason why you two…”

“No, no. I don’t think so” Percy said, his hands now fists over the bed sheets. After a brief pause, he continued. “It’s just that I thought it was over, but with what happened today I guess not. It’s like something breaks inside me and I lose control. The worst of it is that I kind of enjoy it…”

It was Jason’s turn to frown. The guy shifted, visibly uncomfortable. Percy also had the feeling that Jason wanted to approach him and comfort him; he wondered if he would let him.

“Now I think we both need some sleep,” Jason tried for levity. “We’re getting way too dark here.”

“You sleep.” Percy said, partly in a caring tone and partly in a commanding one. “I’ll watch over things tonight,” he amended, without saying that he meant watch over Jason, since venti were the least of his worries. Jason still looked a bit pale and sickly for Percy’s liking. He wanted to think that maybe it was just the moon, but he trashed that idea at once, Jason looked perfectly handsome under any kind of light in normal circumstances. There was still something wrong.

Jason meant to say something but a yawn came to him in the middle of the first word. He then sighed and nodded, and walked towards the door.

“Thank you,” he said from the threshold, turning towards Percy in the bed. “You know, for saving my life and all.”

“Anytime,” Percy said.

They both gave each other weak, friendly smiles. Jason disappeared into the passage way, looking for a place to sleep. Percy lied on his bed, his arms and legs spread out. He exhaled with relief and exhaustion. Quest: Day one.

Percy stayed up for a good part of the night, at first not knowing what to do with himself. It was clear that, as he had said, no venti would dare to bother them for a long time. So initially he had decided to keep watch right outside of Jason’s room. But he felt overly creepy, so he resorted to take a walk and explore the ship. Jason was fast asleep anyway. The night sky was clear. The stars and moon were bright, illuminating his path. He sighed, looking at the sky and racking his brain to remember the names of the constellations that Annabeth had told him about, but it was no use. It was as if she had taken with her most of the things she had taught him, or maybe he chose to forget them. He started to pace around the deck with no clear destination.

He had gotten bored of exploring pretty quickly; he knew almost everything about the ship once he set foot on it the first time. That was one of the perks of being a son of Poseidon. He also knew exactly how far away they were from their destination or, more precisely, from Annabeth. He stopped pacing abruptly, frowning and then shaking his head.

Why did every train of thought in his head ended up on Annabeth station? That hadn’t happened in a long time. Percy needed something to distract himself. He briefly considered waking up Jason, but that thought was in the trash once he was outside the other demigod’s room again, staring at the door. “Jason needs all the rest he can get,” his brain reminded him.

An idea struck him, it was better than nothing. His hand was already at the doorknob, so he opened it slowly, trying to not make much noise. Jason was snoring pretty loud, and Percy suppressed a laugh.
If only the other campers could see their esteemed leader like that. Because there was no doubt about it in Percy’s mind, Jason was the leader now. If they had to choose, the kids at Camp Half-Blood would follow Jason over Percy any day. So would those at Camp Jupiter. Percy felt weirdly jealous of the guy. He tried to grimace at him but it was impossible once he saw his stupid sleeping face, with his mouth half-open, and his body completely spread out over the bed. With the help of the moonlight entering through the circular window, he could clearly see Jason’s muscles tensing and then relaxing, following the rhythm of his breathing. Jason had always been more athletic than him, hadn’t he? And a bit taller, and more handsome, and… Percy closed his eyes and reprimanded himself, he was being creepy again, staring at him like that.

He hurried up on the task at hand—retrieving the tablet. Once he had it, he got out of the room as fast and silent as he could. He went up to the deck of the ship and sat on the captain’s chair, his feet on the helm. He still had to keep watch, after all.

He spent most of the night doing one of the most un-Percy-like things possible. It turned out that Greekepedia, as Marcus had called it, was the perfect reading experience for him. His hyperactive brain could jump from reading one interesting article to the next with one single tap once it got bored. He could look up a definition in that same instant. Besides, it had pictures. It was like a bottomless pit of information. He, Percy Jackson, fell asleep reading.

The morning woke him up with the sound of birds flying next to the ship and fresh ocean breeze on his face. He stood up, his whole body sore and his mouth dry and disgusting. His right shoulder felt wet with saliva. He stretched, and a small object fell to his feet: the tablet.

“Careful there,” he heard a male voice say behind him.

“Morning,” said Percy while picking up the tablet.

“Morning,” said Jason, now next to him. “Did you sleep out here?”

“Yeah,” he said finally looking at his shipmate. Jason wore a clean Camp Jupiter t-shirt, a blatant contrast to Percy’s ratty clothes. “Well, I spent the night mostly reading,” he added, pointing at the tablet on his hand.

“Reading?” Jason said, mild surprise on his face. “You can read?” he asked.

“Hey!” Percy said, punching him lightly on the shoulder.

“Sorry. It’s just… it’s weird. You. Reading.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Did you learn anything useful then?”

“I’m not sure,” Percy said, pensive. “Did you know that there was also a Luck of Rome? It was called the Ancile.”

Jason was smiling at him.

“What?”

“Nothing. You… you sounded pretty Athena-kid-like just now,” Jason explained, still smiling. “Is this going to be your new thing? Being the source of information? Being the brains?”

“Probably…” Percy said, somewhat defensively. What had gotten into Jason? He put the tablet on
“I mean it kind of makes sense,” Jason continued, his tone pensive and with something else in it, something devious. “We can’t both be the muscle. In that department I think I’m more than enough, don’t you think? You can go below deck to do your nerdy research if you want…”

Percy frowned, a bit hurt, and then smiled, finally understanding.

“Really?” he replied, using the same tone as Jason. “You? The one who got owned by the venti? and needed MY help to fight them off AND heal him?”

“Only because they ganged up on me. They recognized who was the actual threat,” Jason said, leaning his back against the railing, with his hands behind his head. He was showing off his arms, Percy was sure of it.

“Yeah, and weren’t you struggling to keep them in line? I was the one who got rid of all of them in like ten seconds,” Percy crossed his arms over his now inflated chest.

They stared at each other. Their faces were serious for a moment, both sporting their respective well-practiced wolf stare. Both of them broke into a smile at the same time. A rush of excitement went through Percy’s body, waking him up completely. He could tell something similar had happened to Jason.

Percy eyed the collection of metal shields besides him; he took one and then tossed another to Jason. He then took Riptide out of his pocket and uncapped it. The Celestial bronze sword was now in Percy’s right hand, glinting with the morning sun as if it was new, as lethal as ever. Jason looked unimpressed while adjusting his shield.

“Check this out, Jackson,” he said, and he extended his right arm to one side.

For a second, nothing happened. Percy was already preparing his next biting comment when a rush of wind hit him on the face.

“What the…?”

A small tornado had formed next to Jason; it seemed to be growing out of his hand. Then, the wind and small clouds solidified like a storm spirit, and a sword was now in Jason’s hand. A crystal sword.

“Neat trick, Grace.”

“Say hi to Nimbus,” Jason said.

“Seems valuable,” Percy commented, appreciative. “I wouldn’t want to break such delicate instrument.”

“Don’t worry. You won’t,” Jason said raising his sword and adopting a battle stance. Percy followed suit.

They circled each other, without taking their eyes off their opponent.

“You sure you can handle this? Weren’t you, like, dying just last night?” Percy said.

“Oh, I can handle it,” Jason assured him. “It’s you I’m worried about. Fighting a guy on the verge of death doesn’t seem like a low enough challenge.”
And with that, they charged at each other.

Bronze and crystal clashed. Percy’s wild and unpredictable fighting style, even for a Greek demigod, gave him the edge at first. He smirked. He looked directly at Jason’s face, which was all concentration and gravity. Percy kept advancing and Jason kept retreating, dodging, blocking and intercepting with his shield every swing of Percy’s sword. That didn’t last long.

Jason was corralled against the edge of the ship, with Percy ready to mark a final, winning blow. It was then that he rolled to the side with such agility and speed that left Percy dumbfounded for a second.

“Pst,” he heard next to him.

Percy looked to the side. He raised his shield just in time to intercept Jason’s swing. Percy staggered backwards, partially blinded by the sparks flying in front of him.

Advancing. Swinging. Advancing. Another swing. Jason charged at him with renewed energy and speed. He was mimicking Percy’s style perfectly, with a healthy dose of Roman in it to keep things entertaining for his opponent. He had been holding back, measuring, observing.

Now it was Percy’s turn to retreat, dodge and block as fast as he could. Despite that, he was happy. He had forgotten how good the rush of a good sword fight felt. He managed to send Jason stumbling backwards with a hit of his shield on Jason’s chest. The blonde recovered quickly and sent a wide swing towards Percy, who had to bend backwards as if doing the limbo lest he lost his head. Jason laughed like everything was going according to plan; he was playing him, testing him. Percy felt a small surge of irritation going through his body and charged.

Their swords met again, with Percy’s managing to send back Jason’s, but not quite enough to disarm him. Jason retaliated with a backswing that somehow sent Percy’s shield flying out of his arm. He laughed again. Percy swung wildly at him, with no clear purpose or strategy, and managed to slice Jason’s shirt in the midsection. He was counting on Jason being fast enough. His sword met Jason’s shield, that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, and a large part of Riptide went through. His opponent realized Percy’s plan right before sword had met shield and his eyes went wide open. Too late. With force, Percy moved his sword upwards; this time it was Jason’s shield the one sent flying away.

They stared at each other for a brief moment. They threw their weapons aside, and charged at each other. One trying to push the other, to throw him off balance, but both of them were on the ground almost immediately, wrestling and groaning. A mess of limbs rolled all over the ship’s deck. None of them was actually trying to connect a hit. They were laughing between grunts.

Percy managed to get on top of Jason. He secured both of Jason’s hands over his head, pinning them against the floor. Triumph washed over him. Their faces were inches away. He could feel Jason’s shaky, hot and tired respiration on the face. He felt Jason’s whole body relax; he had stopped struggling to get off Percy’s grip. Blue electric eyes stared at Percy intensely, a calculating and then curious air in them. Percy lowered his eyes to escape Jason’s, only to take his line of sight to Jason’s mouth. He caught his lip scar twitching. It would’ve been an almost imperceptible gesture to a casual observer, but it was hard to miss being that close.

A drop of sweat ran from Jason’s upper lip area to his jaw and then his neck. Percy’s eyes followed it all the way down, until it was absorbed by the fabric of Jason’s shirt. Percy blinked rapidly and his heartbeat went crazy. The strength on his arms seemed to have gone away and they wobbled, his whole body went even lower and closer to Jason’s. Their chests were barely touching, almost caressing, their faces millimeters apart now.
“Your eyes are really green,” Jason commented in almost a whisper.

“Wh… wha?” he asked in a loud, stupid voice. He looked up to Jason’s face again, who looked to the side, like he had just been caught red-handed.

“That you need to get off me,” Jason said, louder this time.

“Wh… Right, right. Sorry,” Percy said and he stood up as quickly as he could, setting Jason free.

He didn’t help Jason up; he was too busy keeping his heartbeat and breathing under control. Once Jason was back on his feet next to him, Percy felt Jason’s gaze on him. But Percy was staring at the floor, almost afraid to look directly into Jason’s eyes. They were so blue, weren’t they?

“Aren’t you okay?” Jason asked. His tone was undecipherable, or maybe Percy’s mind wasn’t up to the task right in that moment.

“Yeah,” Percy managed.

He finally looked up at Jason. He looked sweaty and a bit tired, but otherwise completely unfazed. Percy knew he didn’t look quite as cool; a small tremor had started on his left hand, which he hid behind his back.

“Good practice,” Jason said, nodding as if assessing it in a professional manner. “Breakfast?”

“Yeah, sure!” Percy replied, his voice a bit too high. He felt his cheeks going hot.

Jason nodded again, and Percy watched him walk away. Had Jason’s hair always being that blonde? Had his back always been that wide? And his arms always that… muscular? And hi—

“Hey, are those my old jeans?” Percy asked before he could stop himself.

“Oh, yeah, bit too tight but they’ll do,” Jason replied without looking back. He disappeared below deck.

Percy gulped.

Chapter End Notes

Art for this chapter.
Nico was going to kill him. That was Jason’s first thought once he reached the kitchen, making him stumble against the clean and polished central island of the room. He was going to die murdered by skeletons coming through the ground and dragging him into the Underworld or something worse. After all that drama about how Jason had just been curious and how it wasn’t fair to Nico and blah, blah, blah… And now Jason was having, he swallowed hard, pretty inappropriate thoughts about a guy: Percy freaking Jackson, of all people. He closed his eyes.

Jason had woken up that morning still thinking about what had happened last night. About the way Percy had healed his wounds. About how he had never felt so close to another person before, about how much he missed that sensation now. It was as if there were no secrets or any barriers between them, as if it wasn’t necessary to actually say anything to be completely understood by the other. It was an amazing feeling; it was liberating. He had never felt so free. And then it had been gone and all he could think about was Percy and how much he missed him. The first thing he had done once he woke up that morning was look for Percy.

He opened his eyes slowly. Maybe that was it. Maybe that was just a temporary aftereffect of whatever Percy had done to save his life. But what had just happened didn’t have much to do with that, another part of his brain supplied. It had been a purely physical thing. It had evoked memories of him and Nico together, fooling around, exploring each other’s bodies. It was that very same sensation, that very same arousal. No, it had been stronger, or at least the beginning of something stronger.

He had realized almost immediately how different Percy’s body was from Nico’s; how Percy was definitely taller and his complexion more athletic. And at the same time those memories still lingered, the feeling of familiarity persisted. That balance between comforting familiarity and exciting novelty had done something to him. It had sparked something, and then those sea green eyes had set it ablaze. He had wanted to lean up and kiss that stupid face.

A knock on the door behind him interrupted his thoughts. A little startled, he turned around.

“You mind if I go take a shower first?” Percy asked, pointing casually behind him. “After last night and this morning, I’m disgusting.”

“No, go ahead. No problem,” Jason said.

The sudden mental picture of Percy taking a shower invaded his mind. And then, it was unmistakable, his penis twitched. Oh, he was doomed.

He had classified himself as mostly straight, with a healthy dose of Nico-sexuality thrown in to add some flavor. But this was putting everything into a new perspective. Maybe he wasn’t done experimenting, or maybe he was simply bisexual and now he had to simply deal with it. Maybe this was just a fluke; he hadn’t had sex or anything of the sort in ages and now anything could… set him off. It didn’t have anything to do with Percy. He just liked guys and Percy was the closest one his age, he reassured himself. Percy didn’t even like guys, did he? Jason was pretty sure he didn’t, then again, Jason had always been pretty sure of his own straightness.

Maybe it would go away. No, it had to go away. Maybe he just needed to relieve himself. Nico didn’t have to find out. Nico didn’t have to know anything about this. Because there wasn’t going to be anything to be known, he hastily added. He was going to be fine, as long as nothing actually happened between Percy and him.
He heard the noise of the shower in the distance. He sighed. He could ignore this; he could survive this.

The rest of their journey was worryingly free of nasty surprises, barring a couple of minor sea monsters. Nothing that Percy couldn’t handle. Jason never could have guessed how much a trouble-free crossing of the Atlantic could have put him on such a state of anxiousness and restlessness. Between the odd sensation that clearly something was going on, and the fact that he had had almost nothing to do so far but steal glances at Percy and sometimes plain staring at him in what could only be qualified as “awe,” during a particularly skilled slayage of a monster, Jason spent the last part of the trip below deck locked in his room. “I’m tired,” was all the excuse he could manage, with Percy accepting it without questioning him further. Sure, he had basically been at the verge of death twice in less than a week, but for a demigod, that was frankly below average…

A knock at the door on the third day put him out of his rambling thoughts.

“Yeah?” he said.

“We’re almost there, dude,” Percy called from the other side of the door.

“Alright,” Jason responded.

“You feeling okay?” Even through the door, Jason could hear the mild concern on Percy’s voice. He fought down a smile.

“Jason?” Percy called after a little while, his concern evidently growing.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Jason said, startled.

“Right, see you on deck then.”

“Aye, aye, captain,” he managed to say, as naturally as he could.

They docked on the harbor an hour later, with Percy putting everything in order, making Jason feel increasingly useless. They hadn’t talked much since the sword practice incident, so maybe it was all that quiet poisoning Jason’s mind.

“Where are we, anyway?” Jason asked, finally, shielding his eyes against the morning sun.

“Fifty Twenty-two North, Four Eight West,” Percy answered automatically.

“I’m sorry?”

“Sorry, coordinates,” Percy said, shaking his head. “Hmmm, some port in Plymouth. Annabeth’s shouldn’t be too far, I hope.”

They started to climb out of the boat. No one seemed to be paying much attention to their Greek trireme, thanks to the good old Mist.

“You feeling okay?” Percy asked, once they were in land.

“For the millionth time, yes,” Jason snapped.

“Gee, sorry for caring. What’s up with you? Are you mad at me? Did I pass on my sulking to you?”
“What?” Jason asked; it came out meaner than he intended.

“You know, locking yourself up in your room, ignoring the rest of the world, brooding. That’s my thing, apparently.”

Jason smiled a little at that. They had started to walk on the pier.

“No, no, it’s fine…” Jason lied. “It’s just… it sort of started to dawn on me too that we’re actually on a quest and, well, I didn’t expect to be on one again.”

“Gotcha,” Percy said with a nod. He seemed distracted, looking at all directions, but Jason could tell he hadn’t bought it, how it was all an act.

Percy produced a small piece of paper from his pocket.

“So, where’s Oxford from here?” he asked.

“Um… Don’t you know? Perfect bearings and all?”

“At sea,” Percy said, still considering the paper.

“Oh, well… I have no idea,” Jason looked around. “There’s a Ferris wheel,” he said, pointing east. “Maybe it’s a tourist-y thing? They could have maps, or give us information or something. We could ask people on the way, too.”

“That’s better than nothing,” Percy said. “I think the ship has maps, but I don’t know how to handle anything on it apart from, you know, the sea stuff.”

“Good old Leo,” Jason said.

They walked for a few minutes until they entered a park. At that hour, they only spotted a few runners in the distance, but no one around to ask for directions. They passed a statue of a warrior woman and a lion. How long have they been walking? Fifteen, twenty minutes? Jason didn’t see people around the park anymore. They should’ve encountered some of those runners by then.

“Wait, did you hear that?” Percy asked, stopping and looking around him. “That noise.”

Jason perked up, listening intently for a couple of seconds.

“What noi-Agh!”

He was on the floor, his back pressed hard against the grass and something excruciatingly heavy on top of him, something that growled. He struggled to breathe. Once he stopped seeing stars, he could distinguish what was pinning him against the floor. A lion with metal skin—and metal innards, judging by its weight—was growling at his face, baring his teeth at him, ready to bite his head off. He tried to summon Nimbus, but his arm was useless due to the lack of blood going through it. It seemed mere intention was not enough for it to work.

He then heard the clash of metal against metal. Percy had attacked the lion with Riptide—and continued doing so—making sparks fly with every hit. The lion didn’t look any bothered by it. The beast was still totally focused on Jason.

“Don’t waste your energy, Greek,” Jason heard someone saying to his left. Percy stopped his attack. Jason risked looking at his side. The lion growled at him but did not attack. “The Roman is doomed.”
“Who are you? What do you want?” Percy asked to the figure pointing at it with his sword. “Let Jason go.”

“A Greek defending a Roman?” Jason heard the figure say, it was a female voice. “Now I’ve seen it all.”

Jason couldn’t breathe. A sudden movement from the metal lion and Jason was pretty sure his poor ribs would give in. The figure was close enough now for Jason to see her properly. Jason recognized her as the warrior woman from the statue. She was pointing her trident at Percy, but her angry eyes did not leave Jason’s form on the ground.

“Oh, and those accents… American,” she said. “That makes it all worse.”

“You haven’t answered,” Percy insisted. Jason did not think it wise to do so, but then again Percy wasn’t pinned to the floor by a metal lion so maybe he didn’t get the whole gravity of the situation quite as Jason did. “Who are you and what do you want?”

“I’m Britannia,” she proclaimed. “And I want him dead.”


“I am Great Britain itself. I am its history and culture. I am the embodiment of its desires and, right now, it desires all Romans to be gone,” she declared. “Step aside, Greek, and I’ll let you leave my land unscathed.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” Percy said. “Look, I don’t know what grudge you have against Romans or whatever, but—“

“His empire slaughtered my people! They proclaimed this land as theirs! They—”

I’m not Roman enough to command dead legionnaires, but I am to get pinned to the floor by a lion, Jason thought.

“Does it help if I say sorry?” Jason supplied from his position on the ground. The lion gave him a warning growl.

“It does not! I was so much more! I was magic and ancient knowledge! You turned me into this! It is only now that I’m changing! Becoming my own self! And I will not go back to your ways!”

“You did the same to a bunch of other people! Maybe even in a worse way!” Percy protested. “I’m not here to discuss history or colonialism or whatever. We’re not even staying or conquering or anything of the sort. Now, let my friend go or I will hurt you.” He looked dead serious.

She considered him a moment, deep in thought. She then nodded to her lion, which finally let Jason go. He was sore all over. The lion went back to its pedestal, motionless again.
“How long will you be a nuisance on my land?” she asked, still looking at Jason murderously. He remained quiet, not wanting to make everything worse by angering her again. He also kind of liked seeing Percy being the diplomatic one, as blunt as he was.

“Less than a day,” Percy replied, much more relaxed. “We’ll be gone before you can say ‘fish and chips.’”

“Where are you going exactly? What is your business?”

“Uh… here, we’re seeing a friend who might be able to help us with something. We’re on a quest,” he said, handing her the piece of paper with Annabeth’s address.

“Ah, demigods,” she said, suddenly delighted. Jason did not like that expression one bit. “You’re a long way from your destination, I’m afraid.”

“Wait, you didn’t even know we were demigods? And you sent a metal lion after us?” Percy said a bit boggled.

“Oh, yes,” she said with a smile, giving the paper back to Percy. “Now, what do you say if I take you to your friend so you can be gone as soon as possible?”

“That… that would actually be brilliant,” he said. “But, how do we come back? We left our ship nearby.”

“Oh, just return to the same spot I sent you and you’ll be right on your way.”

“Great, so what do we d—“

She moved fast, in the blink of an eye, her trident had gone through Percy’s body, whose face did not even have time to look shocked.

“Hey! What the—“ Jason started to say, but the same fate befell him.

Less than a second later, she was gone. They were still alive.

“Where did she go?” Jason asked, looking at his shirt that didn’t seem like it had been perforated by a trident.

“I think it was us who moved,” Percy said, looking around. “It’s a different park. She just wanted to scare us, I guess, compensating for not murdering us.”

“Well, I’ll take it,” Jason said. “Now where to?”

Percy spotted a map nearby, and went to examine it. He traced several routes with his finger, looking at the wrinkled paper from time to time, as if he had forgotten what was in it. His hands were shaky, Jason noticed.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, fine. Come on, then.”

Percy wasn’t okay. Jason was sure of it. The longer they walked, the more on edge Percy seemed to be. Jason could read dread on his face. It occurred to him what the reason might be when he actually remembered who they were going to see. How long had it been? He wasn’t sure when it had been
the last time he had seen Annabeth, but it had been several years. Surely Percy had talked to her in that time? Jason did a couple of times years ago, so Percy must have done the same. Then again, he didn’t know the exact circumstances. ‘We drifted’ had been all he and his friends could worm out of Percy, and Annabeth didn’t offer much else. Was Percy still hung up on her? A heavy feeling sat on his chest, he grimaced.

Jason rang the doorbell once they arrived at the small but charming house. Percy looked more anxious than ever, remaining behind him and ogling the facade. A few seconds passed before the door opened.

“Yes?” said the tall, black girl in front of them. She eyed them up and down with what Jason could only qualify as mild contempt. “What do you want?” Her voice was high and airy but firm.

“Ehm, hi,” Jason tried, “is Annabeth here? We’re friends of hers.”

The girl crossed her arms and narrowed her bright, green eyes but did not speak.

“Um…”

“Tell her we’re from Camp, alright?” Percy said, finally speaking. “She’s expecting us.”

“Siobhan? Who is it?” called a voice from inside the house.

“Annabeth?” Percy called back, trying to look past the girl blocking the entrance.

“Percy?”

The girl, Siobhan, widened her eyes then. She seemed to be about to say something when Jason noticed a glimpse of long blonde hair behind her. Noticing his gaze, she turned.

Annabeth was now next to her, beaming at them. Jason smiled right back. She hadn’t changed much, if anything she looked almost as tall as him now, but the rest, the stormy grey eyes, the blonde hair, the warm smile reserved only for her friends was still there. She hugged Percy immediately.

“Hi,” Percy said, his voice a low whisper. Strands of blonde hair invaded his mouth, making him cough a bit.

“Oh, I’ve missed you,” she said, still hugging him fiercely. “I haven’t seen you in ages. Gods, does it really take a quest for you to come see me?”

She sounded half-mad now. Percy broke the hug gently.

“I… I’ve been… busy…” he said, now holding her waist. “You know… studying hard and…”

She frowned slightly.

“Please don’t judo-flip me,” he said almost genuinely alarmed, his green eyes now wide.

Annabeth laughed, and so did Jason.

“Jason!” she said and proceeded to hug him as well.

“Hi,” he said. “We’ve missed you too.”

Annabeth stepped away from them. She sighed.
“I guess I can’t really blame you,” she said. “With me moving a whole ocean away and being so close to, well, you know…”

“Yeah…” Percy said, his gaze kind of lost.

“A call would’ve been nice, though,” she added.

“I’m sorry,” Percy said. He really did seem so. “It’s just… I just…”

“It’s fine, seaweed brain,” she assured him.

Someone cleared their throat behind her.

“Right! Yeah, sorry,” said Annabeth, startled. “Guys, this is Siobhan. Siobhan, these are Percy and Jason.”

The girl stepped out of the shadows.

“Hi. Nice to meet you,” Jason said politely, extending his hand. Siobhan shook it with a firm grasp.

“Likewise” was all she said.

Jason tried to let go of her hand but her grasp tightened. Her eyes were focusing on their linked hands, a frown of concentration in her face.

“What are you…?” Percy started to say, taking a step towards them.

“Siobhan?” Annabeth asked, raising her arm to stop Percy. “Something wrong?”

“Yes,” Siobhan said, finally releasing Jason’s hand. Her eyes now locked on his. “He should be dead.”

“I’m sorry?” Jason said, confused.

“There’s poison in your blood. A powerful one.”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, relaxing a little. “It was just, you know, an incident with an enchanted, poisoned sword. It happens.”

“Right,” Annabeth said. “Marcus told me about it. Something about an Ares curse?”

“Yeah, an accident during sword practice with one of his kids. It went right through my stomach,” Jason pointed at his middle region. “It was just a misunderstanding, really. Also I got distracted.”

“A lethal blow to the stomach with a poisoned sword is ‘just a misunderstanding?’” Siobhan said, her mouth twisted a bit. It seemed to Jason that she thought he was going to drop dead any second then.

He shrugged.


“I am a demigod,” she said, her eyes were still fixed on Jason. “It doesn’t happen to me.”

“You are?” Percy asked.

“No, nothing,” he replied, lifting his hands in a defensive gesture.

“We should go inside,” Annabeth said, shooting daggers with her eyes at Siobhan, who seemed to relent. “We can talk with more calm.”

They followed her inside. The house seemed to be bigger on the inside, due to the big windows, Jason guessed, and the minimal furniture. It did have an air of “this is all we can afford” but mixed with “let’s be classy about it” that worked pretty well. They all sat on the sparse living room, Percy and Jason in front of the girls.

“You were saying?” Annabeth asked Siobhan. “Jason seems fine to me.”

“Well, he shouldn’t,” Siobhan insisted. “Did you do something, Jason? Try to heal yourself somehow?”

“How do you know about the poison, anyway?” Percy said, before Jason had the chance to speak. Annabeth huffed and shot him the same daggers that had been directed at Siobhan earlier. Percy didn’t seem fazed.

“Daughter of Asclepius,” Siobhan replied with some self-importance and pride, decidedly ignoring him in favor of a continued stare at Jason. He shifted uncomfortably. “Besides Annabeth told me one of you was poisoned. Well?”

“Yes, right, ehm… you know, ambrosia and whatever else the Apollo kids did. I’m not really sure, but they did try a whole lot of different things."

“Apollo kids,” Siobhan scoffed, amused. “Bet they can’t even distinguish between aconite and wolfsbane. No, they wouldn’t be able to fight such a poison. Delay the effects at best.”

“I think it was me,” Percy said. They all looked at him.

“You what?” Annabeth asked, confused.

“But you’re a son of Poseidon, right?” Siobhan said. “Annabeth told me. What could you have done?”

Percy glowered at that but, after a couple of seconds, he seemed to decide to let that one go.

“We were attacked by a swarm of storm spirits, as one does,” he started to explain, “and they hurt Jason pretty bad with some lightning and, well, I healed him. Maybe I stopped the poison too.”

“Healed him?” Annabeth said, blinking pretty fast. “How?”

“I’m… not sure,” Percy replied. “I used sea water and I, er, held him. I was sort of trying to share my own healing ability thing? It had seemed a pretty obvious process back then. Anyway, we had this sort of Vulcan mind meld thing and…”

“What does Hephaestus have to do with anything?” Siobhan asked, seemingly lost.

Percy stared at her for a moment, just as lost.

“Oh, right, yes… No, it’s just a Star Trek thing,” Percy said, finally getting what Siobhan had said. “We shared thoughts and memories and all that stuff. It was…” he paused.
Jason stared at him intensely, holding his breath for some reason.

“ Weird,” Percy said at last. Jason felt a weird ache on his chest.

“Weird,” Annabeth repeated. “So, it worked?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “I mean, I thought I was gonna die and then, well… I didn’t.”

“I didn’t even know I could do that…” Percy murmured. “And then the next morning, Jason seemed so well-recovered and fine, we even had some sword practice…”

“Seriously?” Annabeth exclaimed, somewhat exasperated. “Only you two could think of doing that after a near-death experience.”

“Doing what?” Percy asked immediately, lost and red in the face. Annabeth sighed and ignored the question, turning to Siobhan.

“But the poison’s still there, you said?” Annabeth asked her, she nodded grimly. “So, what now? Is Jason safe?”

“I don’t know,” she said looking at Jason with professional interest. “Would you mind me making a few tests? Checking some of my books?”

“Um…” Jason felt a little nervous all of a sudden. He looked at Percy for… confirmation? reassurance? The other man simply shrugged, seeming a little disconcerted by Jason’s questioning look. “Yeah, fine, okay,” he said finally.

“That’s why we came here for anyway, right?” Percy said. “That’s what Dick said, that you could help more than anyone at camp ever could.”

Siobhan was on her feet, smiling at him for the first time.

“Yes,” she said, motioning Jason to follow her.

As he stood up, he saw some sort of grim realization dawning on Percy’s face.

“I’ll come with…” he started to say as he was getting up his seat.

“No need,” Siobhan shut him down forcefully. “Besides, I think Annabeth wanted to talk to you in private or something,” she clearly found that fact annoying. Or so it looked to Jason.

“Right, yes,” Percy said, sitting down again and smiling at Annabeth. A nervous, forced smile, Jason thought. He followed Siobhan out of the room.

They were in a room that was a mix of laboratory and library and computer center. Jason looked at some of the titles on the shelves, struggling still to read the ones written in Greek, which seemed invariably the thickest and oldest. Medicine, world history, architecture and others all mixed in a chaotic order. Maybe separated somehow by the jars with dead things floating in formaldehyde interspersed among them? There were long tables in the middle of the room occupied by bottles full of colorful liquids he dared not touch, as well as various plants and herbs here and there. The computer screens showed models of buildings and machines that Jason was sure only Annabeth (and Leo) understood.

He sat in a high stool after Siobhan ordered him to take his shirt off. She looked at his chest and
stomach.

“That is some damage,” she commented, grimacing.

“What is? Oh…”

She was right. Most of the skin over his chest and stomach was one big nasty bruise.

“What in all circles of…? I was fine this morning, I checked. All that lightning scars and burns and wounds already gone!” he touched the bruising. It really did hurt.

“Did something else happen?”

“Well, yeah, this metal lion jumped over me,” Jason said. “Just as we were arriving.”

“Britannia,” Siobhan said.

“How do you…?”

“She really does not like Romans, huh?”

“I… I suppose not,” Jason said.

“Let me just…” and she was gone. “I think I have just the thing,” he heard her murmur from below a desk.

While Siobhan looked for whatever she was looking for, Jason looked a little more around him. It evidently was a shared workspace between the two girls. He was admiring a complex simulation of a building on one of the screens when his gaze jumped to the photographs next to it.

“You’re together, aren’t you?” he asked her once she returned with a foul-smelling ointment.

“Huh?”

“You and Annabeth,” he clarified. “Like, together together.”

“Oh, yeah,” she said already rubbing the disgusting substance all over Jason. He winced in pain. He was about to ask what it was but thought it better not knowing.

“Right…” he said lamely instead. He had always assumed Annabeth was straight, he never even thought about it being any different. More and more recent events were slowly changing that perspective of the world; it all had started with Nico and then others at Camp. And then myself, he thought more inwardly. “So she’s happy?” He didn’t know why he asked that.

“I would like to think so,” she replied, looking at him oddly.

“Okay.”

“What do you think they’re talking about?”

“Who?”

“Annabeth and your friend Percy.”

“Didn’t she tell you?”

“No.”
“Well, I don’t know either.”

“Why did they break up? She never told me,” she asked, grabbing another chunk of the disgusting lotion.

“I don’t know either. It sort of just happened? It was a mutual thing, I believe,” the pain on his chest and stomach was subsiding rapidly.

She nodded, as if that had settled that matter.

“He doesn’t really seem to be over her, though.”

“He is, I think. Mostly. I hope.”

“Hope?”

“Think,” he corrected.

“Done.”

“What’s…?”

His skin was back to normal.

“That’s quite the miracle ointment,” he commented.

“My own concoction,” she said proudly. “Now, for the test…” she said, producing a syringe with a rather large needle.

Jason recoiled reflexively. Siobhan laughed.

“Big, strong guy ’fraid of needles?”

“No,” he said almost pouting. She snorted.

“Can we proceed or are you going to keep admiring it a little longer?” she asked waving the syringe around.

“No, go ahead,” he said, extending his arm.

“What a hero,” she said while extracting some blood.

He expected her to go to one of the tables and examine the blood but she stay there next to him, looking at his still extended arm. As Jason looked down, a big bruise was already forming from the spot where she had extracted the blood. It was growing rapidly, and painfully.

“Ow, ow, ow…” he complained. “What kind of needle is that?”

“It’s not the needle, it’s you,” she said. She gave him the jar with the miraculously nasty ointment. “Serve yourself; I’m going to check the blood sample.”

Jason looked at her working. She would look through an expensive-looking microscope and scribble some notes in a pad next to her without even looking, and then she would take the sample and add drops of other liquids in it, and then repeat the whole process several times with other samples and other liquids. Jason put his shirt on again, and walked towards her once the bruise on his arm was gone.
“Anything?” he wanted to know.

“Lots,” she said, not offering anything else.

“Lots good? Lots bad?” he asked.

“You’ll live,” she declared without looking at him, too focused on her microscope.

“Good, then,” he said brightly.

She made a non-committal sound. He sighed.

“Should I leave you alone?”

“If you want.”

“Right…”

He got out of the room, closed the door, and exhaled loudly once he was in the hallway. He wasn’t sure if he liked Siobhan or not, as much as it was kind of his job, he wasn’t that good at reading people straight away. People were mostly eager to prove themselves to him, baring their best—and worst—qualities that way. He walked towards the living room, where he hoped he could find Percy and Annabeth.

They weren’t there.

Fearing the worst—the worst? No, but definitely something, something that felt like the worst—he went up the stairs, following the dim sound of voices. He felt like a snoop, trying to make no noises and taking everything in as he went on. He stopped next to an open door, the voices were clear now.

“So they haven’t returned?”

“No.”

“Well, just… Percy, do me a favor, all right?” he heard Annabeth say. “Find someone.”

“What? Like a girlfriend?” Percy sounded confused, and somewhat hurt.

“A girlfriend, a boyfriend, a good friend… I don’t care, just find someone, seaweed brain,” she sounded worried; it was the kind of worried he had heard many times during their time together in the quest of the prophecy of seven, the one that didn’t want to be noticed but couldn’t help it. “All alone, I don’t know how you haven’t got yourself killed by a toaster accident or something by now.”

He heard laughter, and then quiet.

“I’m not sure I’m ready,” Percy said. “I’m still…”

“No, you’re not.”

“Sorry?”

“You’re just scared,” she said instead of an answer.

“Of what?”

“Of people.”
“I’m not…” and then he sighed.

The quiet went on longer than before, and Jason decided that it was his chance. He entered the room. They were in some sort of terrace connected to a bedroom. He felt glad they weren’t in the actual bedroom.

“Hi,” he said once he was with them. They turned to greet him.

“How did it go?” they both asked, Annabeth still stealing furtive glances at Percy.

“Not sure,” Jason answered.

“Why?” Percy asked.

“I mean, she said I’ll live but she made it sound bad, and without even saying more than three words. She’s weird, Annabeth.”

She laughed.

“I know.”

“Are you happy?” Jason asked her impulsively.

She blinked twice, fast. She seemed to be looking for something in Jason’s eyes.

“Yeah,” she said with a sincere smile. “Yeah, I am.”

“Good.”

“I asked her that too,” Percy said, leaning against the rail of the terrace and crossing his arms behind his head, “got a less direct response.”

“You asked a less direct question,” she said, elbowing him.

Percy shrugged.

Jason noticed how Percy’s uneasiness had disappeared, or at least had been reduced considerably. He wondered what they talked about while he was gone, and if Percy knew about Annabeth and Siobhan.

“What you thinkin’ about?” Percy asked him, and then frowned. “Are you still mad at me?”

“I’m not mad at you,” Jason replied.

“Why would he be mad?” Annabeth asked, her eyes darting from one guy to the other.

“That’s what I’d like to know,” Percy said, now crossing his arms over his chest. Not quite aggressive, but somewhat defensive. What was he on about?

“I’m not mad. You’re making me mad right now with this whole exchange.”

“Never mind,” Percy said with a scowl.

Annabeth rolled her eyes.

“Honestly,” she said, but didn’t elaborate. “Anyway, come on. I need to show you guys something.”
They followed her back to the room where Siobhan had examined Jason. She was still there, now deep in concentration reading a book. They didn’t dare disturb her with a greeting or a question. She had the same scary do-not-mess-with-me aura that Annabeth had. Jason thought briefly if that’s why they had gotten together.

He looked away from Siobhan and discovered Percy looking at him, an undiscernible expression on his face. Percy looked away immediately, his gaze fell to the floor.

“I am honestly not mad at you,” Jason said, hoping it was the right thing to say. Percy perked up. Annabeth was still looking for whatever she was going to show them. “Is it because of me shutting myself on my room back in the boat?”

“Well… yeah, kinda,” Percy said, looking a little embarrassed. “So, are you sure you aren’t mad at me?”

“I’m sure,” Jason said, smiling and then patting Percy firmly on the back once.

They heard a snort behind them.

“What?” they both asked.

“Nothing,” Siobhan answered, deviousness in her face. She returned to her book, her long straight hair covering her face from them now.

“Got it!” Annabeth announced from the floor. She produced a rusty shield from a box in a corner full of weird looking stuff Jason had no clue about.

“Is that the Video Shield?” Percy asked. “We lost that when Cacus…”

“It’s a Video Shield,” Annabeth clarified, holding the object in front of her for them to see. “It’s not like the previous one was unique and irreplaceable. I just hadn’t had time to develop another one until now. Losing Daedelus’ laptop really set me back, and I’m rubbish at forging. I thought it might be useful in your quest.”

“Sorry, but what does it do?” Jason asked. It wasn’t the first time they referenced something from before they all met. Out of their whole group, Percy and Annabeth had known each other the longest. He felt sort of jealous about it sometimes, silly as it was. Surely with more time that initial difference will be negligible, but for now he still felt kind of bad whenever it was displayed like that.

“Yeah, sorry,” Annabeth said. “It shows you whatever place you want if you focus hard enough. Although you have to know more or less where, who or what it is you’re looking for.”

“So how does that help us?” Jason asked. “We know nothing of the Palladium, not even what it looks like. Does that tablet they gave us has a picture, Percy?”

Percy shook his head.

“I don’t know much about the Palladium either,” Annabeth admitted, “but I hooked up the Shield with the Athena Parthenos, which was how you broadly knew where to look for, right?”

“Yeah,” the two boys said.

“Well, we hoped that once you were close enough to the Palladium, the Shield could act as a sort of repeater of the Athena Parthenos’ signal, and then it would show us the location much more accurately.”
“We?” Percy asked.

“Marcus and I,” Annabeth responded. “You know, back at Camp? It was mostly his idea. He came up with it once I told him about the Video Shield and how it worked.”

“That’s impressive,” a voice from behind Jason said. Siobhan had finished whatever she had been doing and had joined them. “Is he that Athena kid from the other day?”

“Yes, and he’s quite… enthusiastic, I’d say,” Annabeth supplied. “He Iris messages me once in a while with tons of questions. I get most of the news from Camp via him.”

Jason saw Percy shift guiltily on his spot.

“So does it work?” Jason asked, trying to go back to the original topic and to deviate Percy’s attention.

“Yes,” Annabeth said brightly, angling the shield so the sun coming through one of the windows hit its rusty yet perfectly reflective surface.

After a sudden flash of reflected light that nearly blinded him, Jason saw how blurry images started to form on the shield’s surface. Splotches of color danced around the bronze circle at high speeds, as if going at max speed on a colorful highway or bright tunnel. He got a bit dizzy staring at them. The picture got abruptly static after a few seconds. Jason could make out the image of a city in the distance. It was daytime in the image so it couldn’t have been too far, right? There were numbers on the perimeter of the circle that Jason supposed were coordinates.

“Spain,” Percy said with certainty, also looking at the numbers.

“Is it there where the Palladium is, then?” Jason asked.

“I would guess so,” Annabeth said, biting her lip.

“Something wrong?” Percy asked.

“Hmmmm, not really,” she said. “It’s just that I tested it an hour or so before you arrived and it showed me a different place, miles away from it. Hundreds. Marcus told me it was on the move, but that’s just way too fast.”

“We should hurry then,” Jason said.

She nodded, and then looked at Siobhan next to her.

“Is Jason okay, then?” Annabeth asked.

“For now, yes,” Siobhan said. “Percy did a fantastically good job at fighting the poison, even more so taking into account that that wasn’t his original intention,” she sounded genuinely impressed.

“I did?” Percy asked, a bit flabbergasted.

“Yes, and you put Jason’s body in a… weird state,” she continued. “He’ll live but the poison will keep advancing, spreading, and increasing its toxicity beyond the necessary to kill him. Any wound, any trauma would set off and help along that process. If we don’t do something, he’ll die eventually. I figure it’ll be painless, though, at least the poison itself.”

“Oh, that’s a relief,” Jason said, suddenly feeling like he was made of glass.
“So… what do we do?” Percy asked.

“You need to do what you did, again,” she replied, serious. “This time I want you to actually focus on getting the poison out, on counteracting it. It might be best to do it gradually; the process could kill you if you go all out. It really is a powerful poison.”

“So repeat it a few times, then? Clearing his body from the poison bit by bit,” he said more to himself than to her. She nodded anyway.

“Wait a day or so between each one,” she advised. “And some ambrosia wouldn’t hurt.”

“Right, so it seems I’m now your doctor, man,” Percy said, punching Jason playfully on the arm.

“I would minimize Jason’s exposure to things that could hurt him,” Siobhan warned. “Any hit could be the last, the one that breaks the camel’s back.”

Percy nodded, understanding. Jason couldn’t think of how they were going to achieve that while being on a quest. He was suddenly very aware of something evil running through his veins, consuming him slowly and without him even noticing the actual effects until too late, until it was too much for him to cope and he will come crumbling down. He shuddered.

“You okay?” said Percy at once, taking a cautionary step towards him.

“Yes, I’m fine,” Jason said irritably. ”There’s no need of babying me.”

“Okay, fine,” Percy said while retreating with his hands halfway up in a placating way. “Fine…”

“I’m still not mad at you,” Jason said.

Percy grinned.

Behind him, Annabeth narrowed her eyes.

Percy and Jason were on their way a couple of hours later, after a light, pleasant lunch with the girls. They had said goodbye to Annabeth and Siobhan and set off to the same park where Britannia had plunged them, hoping she would be there to send them back to their ship. Kick them out, she would say, painfully.

They walked in silence for a few minutes, trying to be as inconspicuous as one can possibly be while carrying a bronze shield around. “Didn’t have time to make a disguise mode,” Annabeth had said. Jason had considered spraying the shield with Mist. But once they turned around a corner and were one with the crowd, no one seemed to have been paying them much attention, so Jason dropped the idea and let the natural supernatural Mist do its work.

He took extra care of staying away from any source of punching, tripping or cutting so, well, so he wouldn’t die. But what actually occupied his mind was the conversation he had overheard back at Annabeth’s house. She had mentioned the word “boyfriend” and Percy hadn’t even flinched from what he heard. Did that mean he also liked guys? So Annabeth knew? Did they break up because of that? Was that why Siobhan had asked him about it? Was he making it all up and was just a turn of phrase or something? Why would he be making that stuff up in the first place?

He needed to know the rest of that conversation. He also needed to know if Percy and Annabeth were in better terms now, right? Yes, that was it; he was concerned about his friend. Percy had
seemed much more at ease once he actually talked to Annabeth, actually. He could see the park now.

Jason opened his mouth to speak but didn’t get a chance to do so.

“Ow!” he protested, stumbling backwards.

He had collided with a big guy on a black suit who was in front of them who had suddenly stopped walking.

“Are you okay? I’m sorry, I wasn’t paying attention,” Jason said. And you shouldn’t just abruptly stop walking in the middle of the street, he thought.

The man didn’t answer. The man didn’t move at all.

“Uhm… Jason?” Percy called next to him.

“Yeah?” Jason called back, still staring at the guy.

“Trouble,” Percy said, his bronze sword was already in his hand.

Jason looked around them. All of the people in the busy avenue had stopped walking or moving at all. They were surrounded by people frozen mid-walk, mid-talk or mid-laugh. Cars had stopped too, with their occupants equally motionless. An eerie silence reigned.

The wind was still gently blowing, and Jason saw a sheet of a newspaper being dragged down the street by it. Jason summoned Nimbus and raised the shield, hoping it would actually function as a shield. Well, there goes the whole “try not to get hurt” thing probably, he thought. He waited for an attack.

A loud hiss reached Jason’s ears, making him shiver. Then he felt the temperature dropping, making him shiver even more. The next thing he felt were the claws slashing his back.
Percy got some ice cream. They even had blue ones! Man, he hadn’t had ice cream in ages. How sad was that? He thought immediately of his mom, who would bring him sweets from her job at Sweet on America. He also hadn’t had her cooking in a really long while. All he had eaten these past few months was nasty food from the university’s court. He never had enough time to go to the forum and get some proper food. His schedule was a nightmare since he had started to fall behind on some classes, which had been almost immediately.

So what if he stopped to enjoy himself a little while? It’s not like he had anyone to answer to. He was alone. He licked his cone, walking slowly towards the park already on sight. In that moment it all felt more like a lazy Sunday walk on the park back home than a quest. Quests were much more fun and relaxing when they were solo like this one, he thought. He might even go sightseeing. He should have asked Annabeth about good places to see around there; maybe she and her friend could’ve showed him the city.

Annabeth. He felt so much better now that he had actually seen and spoken to her. It felt like closure. Maybe that’s all he needed; maybe that’s why he feared it. Once he had closure he could actually move on and that was scary; Annabeth had been one of the constants of his life. He finished the ice cream, now eating the cookie. Funny, he thought, how their relationship could survive the nightmarish horrors of Tartarus but not the simple fact of growing up.

He stood in the center of the park, waiting for something to happen. Should he say Britannia’s name out loud or something? She had seemed very eager to kick any Roman out of her territory a few hours ago. He frowned at that thought. He guessed he counted as a Roman, having been living on New Rome for quite a while and having an SPQR tattoo and all, right? Still, something felt off, his thoughts were fuzzy and his vision had turned somewhat blurry with that last thought. He shook his head; he couldn’t wait to be on the boat again, that surely would clear his head.

His hand went to his pocket, checking if Riptide was there. Something was unnerving him. Suddenly, having had ice cream didn’t seem like it had been the best idea. There was that nagging sensation on the back of his mind, like he had forgotten something… something vital. He checked his backpack. Everything seemed to be there, even the ointment that Siobhan had given him in case he got injured. He zipped close the backpack, confused. He was being silly. Maybe he felt guilty for enjoying himself so much.

Percy sighed. He was anxious to leave now. Better get going before the guilt drove him crazy. The quest seemed easier now; he at least had a destination. Probably once he got closer to the Palladium the Video Shield would show a better…

The shield…

How could he have forgotten…? Had he left it on Annabeth’s house? No, he distinctly remembered taking it and saying goodbye. He remembered feeling overloaded with an enormous shield and a full backpack, so then… What had he done then? He scratched his head, trying to recall. That’s when he saw the SPQR tattoo on his arm. That’s when he remembered.

He had given the shield to Jason.

The world snapped back into place, the fog he hadn’t been aware was on his mind cleared. Panic seized him; where was Jason? How could he have forgotten him? Especially after… No, he had to focus. He uncapped Riptide.
“Ugh!” he heard in the distance, then a screech.

“Jason?” Percy called, already running towards the apparent source of the cry, his heart hammering inside his chest. How long had he gone without Jason? If he died…

The scene in front of him was horrific. Jason was sprawled on the floor, his face contorting in pain. A small pool of blood surrounded him. Pinning him against the concrete was a humanoid figure with claws and sharp teeth. Sharp teeth that, a moment later, were biting Jason’s neck, making him scream and twist his whole body, unable to break free. Percy was frozen in place, just as the rest of the people on the street.

“Delicious Jupiter blood…” Percy heard the creature hiss. After a few seconds, the thing looked up and spotted him.

The serpentine eyes of the creature were now locked on his. The thing smiled, showing its sharp teeth dripping blood. Jason’s blood.

“Percy…” Jason said from the floor, his voice a whimper barely audible.

Percy unfroze.

“Get away from him!” he screamed, heading towards the monster and raising Riptide.

The monster obeyed… by lunging at him. Percy swung Riptide but the beast was too fast and dodged his attack. It gave him a mocking smile.

“Who are you?” Percy demanded. He walked sideways towards Jason, pointing Riptide in direction of the monster, which remained a prudent distance away.


“Magic?” Percy said, now next to Jason. He had to keep her talking to… he wasn’t sure yet. “So that was a spell back there? Me forgetting Jason?”

He helped Jason up, putting his non-butchered arm over his shoulders. Jason trembled and complained, Percy thought Jason was about to pass out, but his friend remained firmly conscious.

“One of the many uses of the Mist,” Lamia replied, eyeing them with malice. She looked like a woman, except for the reptilian eyes and deadly talons. Her hair was wild, with tufts clumped together by dried blood. “Had I been stronger, you wouldn’t have escaped from it. Your memory forever changed, forever gone.” Something inside Percy seemed to be boiling. He noticed Jason looking at him and slowly backing away, limping. “I could have even twisted your very identity, reducing you to nothing. You’d be forever wandering, forever lost. No family. No friends.”

Percy charged at her. She let out a surprised shriek, her limbs waved wildly at him, sharp claws menacing to tear him to shreds but with no success.


Lamia disintegrated into dust once he took his sword out of her head. He stood next to the pile of dust, his breathing shallow; his sword clattered to the floor.

“My, my, what a temper,” he heard a hissing voice behind him. ”Those tantrums must be
exhausting.”

Percy spun around to face Lamia, who was completely unharmed. Oh, how much he hated the tricks of the Mist.

“But now I’m stronger,” she snarled, and then licked her lips with her pointy tongue. “Thanks to the blood of your friend. You interrupted but it’s no matter; it’s enough for me to deal with you.”

“Are you like a vampire?” Percy asked, not daring to pick up his sword. Lamia’s stance indicated an imminent attack.

She laughed.

“Demigods’ blood has many uses too,” she said. “Much more than just waking earth goddesses, Percy Jackson. I needed to be stronger; I needed blood from the children of the major gods. I’ve been watching you,” her smile widened at that.

“Stronger for what?” he was now walking away from her, and his sword. Lamia kept advancing slowly. He hoped that with enough distance, his sword would take the hint and would reappear on his pocket.

“Oh, to catch certain elusive prey,” she said. “Prey your lot back at Camp so willingly offered to die, may I add.”

Why was Riptide not back on his pocket? He took another step back. She advanced. Percy felt the weight of the pen in his pocket now. A sigh of relief left his lungs. Unfortunately, with this Lamia seemed to have noticed exactly what had happened.

“Incantare: clauso gladium!” Lamia hissed triumphant, just as Percy uncapped Riptide.

Nothing happened. His pen was still a pen. Percy stared at it in disbelief. Lamia roared, looming over him. She lunged at him once again. Terror paralyzed him on the spot.

He managed to close his eyes, waiting for the strike.

It didn’t come.

“Percy!” he heard instead.

He opened his eyes.

In front of him, Jason had attacked Lamia with Nimbus. With her claws, Lamia was holding the blade of the crystal sword. Jason didn’t seem to have the strength to free his weapon from her grasp.

“Percy, run!” Jason said, grunting. His neck and arm were still bleeding. “I’ll hold her off! I’ll be right behind you! Go!”

Lamia made an unintelligible sound. Nimbus retreated a couple of inches from her head.

“But…” Percy started to protest, gaining command of his body again.

“Just go!” Jason ordered.

And Percy, feeling like a coward, obeyed. The shrieks of Lamia followed him all the way. His hurried steps the only other sound in the whole street. Barely a street away, Percy stopped abruptly. What in Hades was he doing? He turned around and ran back to the fray.
Jason and Lamia were nowhere to be seen. He tried Riptide again with no results. Percy’s backpack was on the floor, next to a pool of Jason’s blood. It was ripped open. Next to it, a packet of ambrosia was open as well. Percy figured Jason had taken it. He took out the only other item he saw that could possibly help him, hopefully. The bottle of Mist was on his hands, but he had no clue what to do with it. Spray her and hope for the best? Magic worked like that, right?

A crashing noise behind him made him turn around. From a nearby alley, he saw Jason tumbling backwards. He had two swords with him: Nimbus, and the one given to them by the Ares cabin. He threw the latter to Percy, who let go of the bottle of Mist and caught the weapon.

“Wh—?”

“Let’s go!” Jason said and broke into a sprint in the direction Percy had gone before.

Had Jason defeated Lamia? In that state? He could run? Percy started to wonder, but his marveling thoughts were interrupted by the monster herself. Lamia walked out of the same alley, looking at all sides, confused. Once she spotted Percy, she ran towards him, all confusion gone.

Now with a weapon on his hands, Percy was able to defend himself. They circled each other, without taking their eyes off their opponent.

And with one hiss from Lamia and a scream from Percy, they charged at each other.

Sword and claws clashed. Percy had the edge at first, his wild and unpredictable style took Lamia by surprise. Lamia’s equally wild nature was gone, replaced by the utmost concentration. Percy kept advancing and Lamia kept retreating, dodging, and blocking with her powerful claws every swing of Percy’s sword. That didn’t last long. Soon, Lamia was corralled against the wall, with Percy ready to mark a final, deadly blow. It was then that Lamia simply vanished. Percy cursed.

He heard a hiss next to him. Percy looked to the side. He raised his sword as fast as he could in hopes of stopping Lamia’s attack. He did it, and with force, he sent Lamia tripping backwards. But something had changed.

Advancing. Snarling. Advancing. Claws everywhere. Hissing. Lamia charged at him with renewed energy and speed. Lamia was no longer jumping around and lunging like long before. She seemed to mimic his style of fighting perfectly, adjusting at a moment’s notice. It was almost like a sword fight. One of her claws graced his arm. The monster had been holding back, measuring, observing… Wait…

It was then that both stopped.

“Jason?”

“Percy?”

They both had spoken at the same time. Percy shook his head; the world seemed to be back into focus. Lamia was no longer in front of him, Jason stood there instead, lowering his sword and the Video Shield, an expression of confusion on his face. Expression that Percy was sure mirrored his own. It reminded him of their post-healing experience.

“Mist,” Jason said, somber.

“What now?” Percy said, walking towards him. “She just left us here to fight each other? Why?”

“She needs blood, doesn’t she? She said so. I guess she wanted us to do the job.”
“So she’s bound to come back to er… feed.”

“I would guess so.”

“Right,” Percy said, taking the bottle of Mist as Jason took the rest of their stuff. “Let’s go, then,” he said with determination. Jason gave him a questioning look.

It didn’t take long for them to find her. Lamia was leaning with her back against a wall, wheezing and panting, clutching her chest. She seemed wounded.

“You!” she hissed once she saw them. She looked pale, Percy thought, not monster-pale, but sick-pale. “What did you do?”

Percy couldn’t see any obvious injuries on her. Jason was the one to speak up.

“Oh, there’s this deadly poison running through my blood,” he said casually. “I was going to tell you before you went all vampire on me, but you didn’t give me any time.” He shrugged.

“Tsk, tsk, manners,” Percy added and he smirked. “I bet you didn’t even say grace, huh?”

“Incantare: sanitas,” she said in a hissed whisper. The paleness on her skin went away, but she still seemed having trouble breathing and focusing her gaze on them. That was one vicious poison, Percy thought. He added a mental note of healing Jason as soon as possible.

Taking advantage of his momentary distraction, she lunged at Percy, who sidestepped and avoided her. That only irritated her more. She was sloppy now, but just as deadly fast as before. He only needed to keep her busy a few moments, but nevertheless. He also has magic, Percy reminded himself

“You troublesome kind, always getting in the way,” Lamia hissed. She and Percy circled each other. “The Earth Mother promised me many things: revenge at last, my deserved peace, Hera mine to tear apart. And you ruined it! You spawn of the gods will pay! I shall curse you all again! I shall…!”

Percy swung her sword at her, who barely had time to crouch and avoid the blade. He hit her with the hilt of the weapon instead, leaving her disoriented. Perfect, he thought. He ran away from her before she regained her bearings.

Lamia rose, furious. She scanned her surroundings, finally locating the demigods who were running away. She ran towards them. They didn’t make it far when she caught up with them. She jumped, using all her strength and landed in front of them. They stopped on their tracks, their eyes wide. She stroke, slashing their throats with her claws, a demonic smile on her face.

Percy and Jason disintegrated in a puff of smoke.

Lamia cursed.

“Glad that worked,” Percy said, looking behind them. They were almost on the park. “We still have Mist?”

“Very little,” Jason said behind him. He hadn’t recovered well from, well, everything. A little limp was still apparent as he ran. “Hope this plant works.”

They were both wearing twigs and leaves of moly around their necks.
“Incantare: Corpus incendere!” they heard her yell behind them.

Fire engulfed them. It roared furiously around them, but it didn’t come close. They couldn’t even feel the heat.

“It works! Come on!” Jason shouted.

They kept running. The fire did not follow.

“Britannia!” Percy yelled, breathless, once they reached the center of the park. “We’re ready to get the hell out of your home!”

Nothing happened. The demigods looked at each other. Percy saw how the moly around Jason’s neck was losing its green. Its protection was clearly fading. He guessed the same was happening to his.

“Fool!” Lamia screamed when she caught up with them. “She won’t help you! She’d rather see you dead! She led you to me! She knew I was here chasing that dreadful brother of mine!”

What now? Percy thought. Both half-bloods raised their swords, ready to defend themselves.

Lamia was two short meters far from them, pale again but with an evil gleam on her serpentine eyes that told Percy they were pretty much finished. Either by her claws or her magic, they were done.

A shadow loomed over the group. They all looked up. Lamia hissed in terror when a ball of fire coming from the floating ship above them was fired directly at her. She vanished on the last second.

“What…?” Jason said. “How…?”

A ladder descended from the ship. Percy took it.

“Come on!” he said. “Let’s go!”

Jason obeyed. They both climbed the rope ladder, while the ship ascended to the heavens. The furious sound of Lamia’s curses and spells reaching their ears, but the effects themselves did not. How much of it was due the distance between them and how much the moly still protecting them, Percy didn’t want to know.

They reached the safety of the ship and looked over the rails. Clouds and a little bit of green below was all they could see. They sighed in relief.

“We’re idiots,” Jason said, once he regained his breath. “Of course it can fly.”

“I just thought… since it was smaller and simpler…”

“Never underestimate Leo,” Jason said. “He could have told us, though.”

“I think they all overestimate us, to be honest,” Percy said. “Anyway, how did it find us?” he asked.

“Something to do with that?” Jason pointed to the helm of the ship. A small monitor was displaying a message in bright red letters.

ARGO VI - CONSOLE

--

RC: ON
INT.: 62 dBm
“Any idea what any of that means?” Percy asked, getting closer to the monitor.

“None,” Jason replied right behind him.

The monitor then flashed a couple of times, the message gone. The screen was now blank. They heard the crackling of electricity and then it was over. The device was off. They could smell something burning.

“That can’t be good,” Jason said.

“Think it’ll repair itself?”

“I’m not sure,” Jason replied; he then looked at his feet. “Hold on. I… I think we’re falling.”

He was right. Percy could see the land now over the rails, a completely different city below them, approaching rapidly.

“Can you land us? It’s a flying thing, you should be able to,” Percy suggested, much more calm than he felt. “Please tell me you can.”

“I think so, yes,” Jason said, examining the buttons in front of him. “Yeah, I can do it,” he said with more confidence, getting to work.

“Right, good,” Percy replied.

“I can fly us all the way,” Jason said. “You can rest. After all, you made us get through a whole ocean pretty much by yourself.”

“You’re the one who’s injured.”

“I’m fine.”

“At least eat some more ambrosia,” Percy said, putting his hand on Jason’s shoulder. The latter recoiled a bit at the touch. Percy retired his hand, sighing internally. Jason was still mad.

What had happened three days ago during their impromptu sword practice still lingered on Percy’s mind. It came up every time he looked at Jason and every time Jason seemed to be wary of him. At least now it wasn’t as bad as it had been. Immediately after the “incident” he had to go take a shower and, well, jack off to calm himself down. Then it had been both a blessing and a curse that Jason had decided to lock himself up in his sleeping quarters during long periods of time. If he didn’t see him there was no reason for Percy to get all flustered and nervous, but when he did see him he couldn’t control himself. He almost got them killed a couple of times. Jason had been staring at him pretty intensely while he battled a pair of minor sea monsters and in other occasions, and it was so goddamn distracting. No doubt Jason had been mulling over the best way to bring up the subject and tell him how inappropriate it had been.

Did he think Percy was a pervert or something like that? If only he could explain himself. Although he wasn’t sure he had an explanation satisfactory enough for himself. What was he? Fourteen? Surely at his age he should be able to control his erections. Surely Jason as a fellow dude would understand when it just happened randomly. Of course, the situation surrounding it hadn’t been ideal: adrenaline, sweaty bodies, rolling around, rubbing, oh so much rubbing…

“Percy?” Jason said.

“Yes?” he jumped. His blood had already started to go to certain places. Random erections? Yeah,
right. Oh, he was doomed.

“I think we should both rest,” Jason said, not even looking at him. Man, he was mad. “I set the course and I think it can take us there pretty much automatically.”

Percy stared at him, barely comprehending.

“Percy?”

“Right, yes,” Percy said, regaining his wits. “But… I mean, we still have to have guards, no?”

“I set the radar as well,” Jason explained, and pointed vaguely to a screen Percy was quite sure hadn’t been there before. “It should warn us of any threat, in theory.”

“In theory…” Percy said, not liking the sound of it. ”Better than nothing I guess,” he conceded at last. He was tired and Jason did need rest.

The sun was at his highest point, the cloudiness of Britain long behind them. The sea was sending bright, golden reflections below them. Percy inhaled the drizzly and salty breeze, making him feeling much better. Flying had never been Percy’s favorite means of transportation, he wondered if Jason had set the ship to fly that low for Percy’s benefit, to make him feel better. As if it was a sort of compromise between them. He smiled at the thought, and then felt very foolish. Jason was his friend, and wasn’t he best friends with Nico for ages now? Surely he wouldn’t care one way or the other about whatever Percy was into. He just had to say sorry. Maybe that’s all Jason wanted, some common courtesy.

He saw him going to his room.

“Hey,” he called, without thinking.

“What’s up?”

“Um…”

All his resolution had flattered, once he saw him. Why the sight of Jason on a ratty t-shirt and short pants altered him so? He was wearing pretty much the same outfit he had seen other guys wearing that many times around campus. Although none of them looked as good as Jason in it. He had the annoying habit of looking good in everything. Percy gulped.

“Something wrong?”

“I’m sorry,” he let out at last. His heartbeat had accelerated dramatically, his palms were starting to sweat.

Jason looked bewildered. Interesting…

“What for?”

“Um… well,” Percy started. Had he imagined it? Maybe Jason hadn’t even noticed, but he must have. If not, then why–? “For, you know, forgetting you back there.”

“It’s cool, man,” Jason said with a smile and a dismissive gesture. “It was a spell, a trick. I’ve been under spells before, we both have. It’s not anybody’s fault.”

“I know, but”—suddenly this was really important for him to say; it felt like the truth—“You know, like, the Mist makes one see or experience what one wants in a way, right? And that’s how one falls
for it? Well, I wouldn’t want that to happen. I would never want to abandon you like that. Maybe it played with me wanting some rest from quests, but… you know that once I’m in one I’m committed; I’ll be with you every step of the way. I want you to know that I would never forget you.”

“Oh, uh… that’s… um… thanks,” Jason looked down.

Percy’s face was hot. What in Hades? ‘I would never forget you?’ What was he? A lead in a romantic comedy? Gods…

“If that’s all…” Jason said. No, it’s not, Percy wanted to scream. “I better go rest for a while. And you should too.”

“Right, yes.”

Jason entered his room, eyeing Percy oddly. Once he was gone, Percy remembered to breathe again. He glared at the sea; he found it aggravating now.

He stood there, watching the sea for at least an hour, thinking. Jason hadn’t seemed to have any clue why Percy had wanted to apologize originally, so he wasn’t expecting it, he wasn’t mad because of that. Was he mad at all? Why did the thought of Jason being mad at him affect him so? Percy closed his eyes, and all he could see was Jason’s face, Jason’s blonde hair, Jason’s blue eyes, Jason’s strong jaw…

The sound of a door opening behind him interrupted his thoughts. He opened his eyes and turned around. Jason was in front of him in the opening of his room. He was, of course, gloriously shirtless.

“Actually, I don’t feel so good,” Jason said, playing mindlessly with the knob of the door. “Could you, you know, do your… healing thing?”

He looked sort of lost, sort of confused, and somewhat vulnerable. Percy wondered if any other person had seen him like that before. Maybe Piper did, long ago before he broke up with her, which had surprised everyone. “I couldn’t live up to it,” was all of Jason’s explanation back then, and then she left to join Artemis, so not much information from that end either.

In any case, he quite liked the look; he quite liked being trusted enough to be allowed to see him like that, with all his defenses down. It was then than it struck him, quite fittingly, like lightning. Irrational and jumbled thoughts, non-stop staring, over-awareness and overthinking of every single interaction, it all added up.

He had a crush on Jason Grace.

“Sure,” he replied.

And Jason smiled oh so brightly.
‘I would never forget you.’ Jason kept turning that phrase around on his thoughts. Replaying the moment, replaying Percy’s embarrassed sincerity in his mind. It brought a small smile to his face. He took his raggedy shirt off, wincing. Gods, he had taken quite the beating today. He considered using Siobhan’s ointment, but that seemed like attacking the symptoms and not the root of the problem. Besides, he wanted to see Percy. Maybe that was enough to appease his urges. He hadn’t thought (much) of him in that way when they were fighting Lamia together. Physical separation seemed to increase his desire to be close, to be more than close. There was a way for that to happen: an innocent, valid, and almost necessary way. So he asked him, feeling guilty of using him and trying to convince himself that it wasn’t like that. And then he said yes, and all of that disappeared in an instant.

Percy entered the room behind him. He looked much more relaxed than how Jason had left him minutes ago. Jason wondered if the sea had revitalized him somehow. He had set the ship to fly low for that very reason; they were in a middle ground, a golden mean.

Percy set to fill the bathtub with sea water like he had done days ago. Jason remembered the panic on Percy’s face that night, the pain and quiet terror he himself had felt, and how it all had been washed away by the sea, like words written in the sand. He also remembered the fury and anger before that, how Percy had destroyed those venti singlehandedly and with such viciousness. He had heard Annabeth talk about it but he had never experienced first-hand. She had been so worried. Maybe that’s when they started to drift away. Jason didn’t know how he felt about it, it had been terrifying but somehow he thought Percy needed it, at least for now.

He stripped once the bathtub was full and submerged himself in it, only his head above the water. Percy had looked away during those moments. In that moment Jason wished he didn’t; Jason wished Percy wanted him...

“Ready?” Percy asked, still looking away.

“Yeah, ready. Heal away.”

Percy kneeled beside the tub and submerged his hands. Jason took them, his heart beating fast, his body aching a bit less already.

“Close your eyes,” Percy said in almost a whisper.

Jason obeyed.

A minute passed with none of them making a sound. Jason didn’t dare to open his eyes. This was nice, this felt right, even if nothing was happening. He could stand to stay like this for a while.

It hit him then, a refreshing and gentle sensation on the palm of his hands. It extended fast through all his body, making him feel light and at peace. He wondered if that’s how Percy felt when he was underwater, and then he didn’t have to wonder, because he knew. Jason could now feel it—he was underwater and he was next to the tub. Wet and dry. Memories and thoughts shared, undistinguishable. Poisoned blood and healthy blood.

Their bodies were connected, their bodies were one. They felt bigger than ever, they felt stronger and weaker, smarter and clumsier. All virtues and vices shared and amplified. Contrasting traits balanced and acting in harmony. There was no conflict, no misunderstanding. Peacefulness, healthiness went
through their veins, cleansing all illness, all ailments, and all curses.

They saw themselves talking to Annabeth and feeling closure. They saw themselves confused and hurt a hundred times over. They saw guilt and pain and sadness; and none of it mattered. The only important thing was the here and the now, only them. They had achieved the impossible, both Poseidon and Zeus essences in harmony, both Neptune and Jupiter at peace. Sea and sky were mixed together. A perfect storm made of crushing waves and peaceful firmaments, calm sea and roaring thunder. All wars erased, all grudges gone, all conflict unimportant. It was pure unaltered bliss.

The poison was nothing now. They felt it recoil in their veins like a snake. The only thing that didn’t belong and they made it fade, they made it vanish, they washed it away.

They both opened their eyes, staring at each other more intensely than ever. They were going to do it; they were going to go for it. They both leaned closer. They both doubted.

An alarm went off in the distance.

The moment shattered, both of them looked down, the spell broken.

“We arrived,” Jason announced.

“Yeah,” Percy replied, looking away.

Their hands were still linked, none of them willing to let go.

“How do you feel?”

“Much better, thanks.”

And then they let go. Percy left without saying another word, stumbling with the furniture on his way to the door.

Jason felt awful. It hadn’t been like before. He felt better, physically. But his mind was a mess of disappointment and guilt. Before, he had felt revitalized, still ready to take on anything, to try anything, from fearsome monsters to sill sword practices. But now? Only painful longing remained from before. What had happened?

He was sure Percy had wanted it too. He had felt it. The memory of it was vanishing now but Jason knew what it had been. But that’s when it hit him. Maybe it was all his own desire, maybe he had forced it down on Percy. No wonder the other guy panicked. That millisecond of doubt had been all Percy, trying to pull away. Jason felt disgusting. He hoped they wouldn’t have to do that again. What if this time something actually happened?

He took an actual bath, a quick one, and got dressed. His hand was already on the doorknob when he heard knocking from the other side. He opened the door. Percy, on the other side, jumped back, startled. Jason sighed, feeling miserable.

“Look, man, I…” there was a knot in his throat. He pushed it down hard. “I’m sorry, I…”

“Nah,” Percy said trying to sound nonchalant and failing, his hand was on the back of his neck and his gaze had fell to the floor. “It’s cool. I’m cool.”

“It’s cool?” Jason repeated, stunned. “How can it b–?”
“I get it. I mean... One can't help one's feelings, right? And... Gods, I suck at this.”

“No, no, I... think I know what you mean.”

“Yeah?” Percy said and looked up. His eyes were bright now, Jason gulped. “So... we’re cool?”

He extended his right arm. Jason took it and they both shook hands.

“We’re cool,” Jason assured him, hoping it was so. “Let’s just... not talk about any of it again.”

“We kind of have to,” Percy said, his hand back to the back of his neck. “I mean, not ‘have to,’ but what if it happens again? I... I haven’t finished with the, you know, healing stuff.”

“Right, uh... well, we’ll get to that. For now, let’s forget about it,” Jason said, wanting to run away.

“Let’s,” Percy said, looking at his side, all brightness on his eyes gone.

They disembarked on the center of the city of Burgos, in yet another park. Hopefully the trees and the Mist would do a good job of hiding their ship. The city was the very same they had seen on the shield before. The air felt fresh and Jason inhaled deeply, starting to feel better. He shot sideways glances to Percy from time to time; the other demigod walked besides him and looked extremely focused on the mission. They arrived to a vista point. In the distance, Jason could hear a river near them, its smell had followed them all the way.

From the lookout it seemed like all the roofs, in that part of the city at least, were of terracotta, giving the city a distinct picturesque feel along with the twisted streets and old buildings. An impressive cathedral presided the panoramic. Some tourists were also admiring the view, snapping pictures and talking among themselves in a variety of languages. Jason felt back in Rome, and he wasn’t sure if it was a good or a bad feeling.

Percy brought out the now battered Video Shield, and positioned it so the sunlight hit its surface. Thankfully, their objective hadn’t moved from there. The shield showed them a multitude of streets and avenues in rapid succession, like trying to pinpoint the exact location of the Palladium but apparently without getting anywhere.

“We can’t even see how it looks,” Jason complained. A couple nearby shot them odd looks, as if trying to sneak a peek at whatever they were seeing in that old and rusty shield. "Do you recognize any of those streets from here?"

Percy looked at the shield and then to the view in front of them and back to the shield again several times. He shook his head.

“Nope,” he said. “We’re gonna have to go into the city proper, I guess.”

He tried once again with the shield making the light hit it from another angle, but the images looked blurrier and blurrier, changing fast. Jason felt dizzy, with an oncoming headache already making his head throb.

“I think you’re right,” he said, looking away from the shield and closing his eyes. “Now put that away, please.”

“Sure,” Percy said, starting to strap the shield to his left arm.
A sudden rush of wind knocked them down, sending the shield towards the wall of the lookout. Jason stood up fast and ran towards it. He was extending his arm to catch the shield before it fell over the wall to the other side when a creature landed on top of his hand, crushing it. He heard screams all around him.

“What do we have here?” squeaked the creature, a malicious smile spreading on his lips, or on what passed for lips. It was holding the Video Shield with its four charred arms, admiring it. “Oh, this both old and new, very good. What you think, Palioxis?”

“Yes, yes, let’s take it and leave, sister,” squeaked a similar voice behind the monster crushing Jason’s arm. “Mission complete. Very good.”

“Bah, you always want to leave. You no fun, we just arrived.”

“I the spirit of retreat, you can’t blame me!”

“I swear it’s divine punishment having you on my back!”

“I will tell mother you said–!”

A sword appeared in front of Jason; Percy had attacked the creature. But it had jumped just in time to avoid it, landing on the floor of the lookout. Jason’s arm was free and he wasted no time in summoning Nimbus. With a look and a nod, both he and Percy positioned themselves on both sides of the creature, facing both its faces.

They shared a lower body and from the waist up they were two distinct creatures. Both equally ugly and deformed, their brutish features did not match their squeaky, high-pitched voices.

“Now, now, finally some initiative,” said the one facing Percy. “See, sister? That’s what I’m talking about.”

“Give us back the shield,” Percy demanded. “Or else we’ll send you back to Tartarus.”

“Oh, Proioxis, he’s giving us a chance,” said the one facing Jason. “Give that back and let’s leave.”

“I swear you’re getting wimpier the older you get,” spat the one called Proioxis.

“I am not!” protested Palioxis. “You just rush into things without thinking! These demigods are sons of the Big Three, fool!”

“Stop your squabbling and give us the shield back,” Jason commanded, giving to Palioxis his most intimidating wolf stare, hoping she panicked and just gave them the shield.

For a second, he thought his plan had worked. Palioxis had taken the shield from her sister. Jason lowered his sword without thinking and that’s when it happened.

Both sisters assaulted him furiously. They were over him on an instant, Proioxis with a long, sharp spear and Palioxis with the shield and a long dagger. They shifter positions attacking him with astounding speed, Jason didn’t know how to attack or defend himself, the style of his attacker changing faster than he could react.

The battle got more balanced once Percy got into the fray. He was using the steel sword that Ares cabin had given them, since Riptide didn’t seem to work anymore. He clearly hadn’t adjusted to it yet, given that Proioxis was starting to demolish him. The clash of weapons sent sparks flying in all directions. The sound of all their cries was increasing in volume and disorder, with the sound of
metal against metal joining in. It had started to hurt Jason’s ears, and all the light and noise confused him, making him miss his target more and more frequently. He felt like he was in the middle of a hurricane of metal and screams, unable to get his bearings or see much of anything.

The monsters jumped up, making Jason and Percy almost impale each other with their swords.

“Very good,” said Proioxis, from atop a soda dispenser machine. “You’re very good, and oh my, that sword!”

“Yes, yes, I hadn’t seen it in centuries!” Palioxis added from behind her sister. She didn’t look as wimpy as before. “How fitting it is that you’ll die with it in this place!”

The demigods looked at each other, confused. Percy shrugged and directed his attention back at the monsters.

“Whatever, uglies,” he said, pointing at them with his sword. “Are we going to finish this or what?”

“Oh, we will,” Proioxis said. “Your skill has brought them here so very soon.”

“Brought who here?” Jason asked, his eyes already darting to his sides, anticipating an attack. To his left, Percy did much the same.

“ME!”

Jason was knocked to the floor from the right, falling on top of his arm. What was it with these creatures and arms? He tried to stand up as fast as possible, but was knocked down again, this time by something hitting his back. The something had been Percy, Jason figured.

“Ugh,” he heard Percy said. “Sorry.”

They disentangled their bodies and stood up, facing their new opponents. These guys looked buffer and meaner than Palioxis and Proioxis, although they shared their burnt skin look and deformed features. At least they weren’t a 2-in-1 package, Jason thought.

“Ah, Homados, dear brother,” Proioxis said, pleased. “I hadn’t seen you in ages!”

“And Kydoimos, too, what a delight!” added Palioxis. “I did feel your presence back there, I was getting quite dizzy.”

The new arrivals limited themselves to smile and grunt. They didn’t look as much of a talky bunch as their sisters. That could only mean, in Jason’s experience, much more danger.

“I trust Alala and Alke are on their way?” Proioxis asked with a perverse smile. One of the buff spirits nodded.

“Oh, and Ioke and Polemos?” Palioxis said, with Jason guessed, the very same smile. The other spirit nodded this time. “Oh, very good, a family reunion. Mother will be ever so pleased.”

Oh, great, more enemies on the way, Jason thought, just what we needed.

“Who is this ‘mother?’” Percy asked to the sisters, but without taking his eyes off Homados and Kydoimos. “Did she send you all here? What does she want from us?”

“Oh, she wants fun, as usual,” Proioxis replied. “But did she send us? No, no. I bet she wishes she would, though.”
“Isn’t it fun when it all works out?” Palioxis mused.

“Then who sent you?” Jason asked. “Why do you want the shield?”

“Oh, you’ll find out soon enough, boy,” Palioxis responded. “Chain of command and all that.”

“In the meantime,” Proioxis said, while jumping behind Percy and Jason. “Let us have some fun!”

The bigger monsters, Homados and Kydoimos, attacked first, moving faster than Percy and Jason could react. The demigods were on the floor instantly, each with a monster looming above them pointing a spear to their faces. They heard a booming laugh from above and a shriek of delight to their side.

Jason closed his eyes, adrenaline filled him and used this boost of energy summoned the winds and with a powerful current of air knocked the monster away; he was free now. He stood up and swung Nimbus against the monster pinning Percy to the floor. The beast countered with his spear and, in that moment of distraction Percy got to stab him in the leg, making him roar in pain. Percy smiled lopsidedly at Jason.

“Huh, so this does work on monsters,” Percy said, examining his steel sword. “What do you think is made of?” he said, while jumping to the side, avoiding an attack from Proioxis. He hit her in the head hard with the hilt of the sword, making him fall to the floor.

“I don’t know,” Jason said, kicking her against the wall. “Ares… aresian steel or something? Is that even a word?”

Percy frowned for half a second, and then grinned widely to himself.

“Martian steel!” he announced triumphantly, while cutting Palioxis’ head off. Proioxis screamed in pain and shock.

Jason laughed. His heart was pumping insanely fast. He smiled at Percy, who smiled back. They both had missed this, an actual fight, one without magic or tricks of the Mist or crazy, chaotic venti throwing bolts of lightning at them. As if reading his thoughts, the monster Jason had knocked away with the winds had apparently recovered now, and opened his mouth. It let out an ungodly scream that multiplied all the way through the lookout and beyond, rocking the walls of the city below.

Jason and Percy covered their ears almost as a reflex. An immense crowd seemed to have materialized all around them by the sound of screams, cries and clashing metal, a whole army seemed to be fighting a mad, furious battle and Percy and Jason were in the center of it.

That’s when he saw the spear going through Percy’s left side.

“NO!” he yelled, his voice drowned by the noise around him. “PER–“

He was quickly silenced with an enormous fist to the face, which sent him flying against a wall. He heard and felt a couple of his ribs crack, or maybe it was his nose, or both. He sank to the floor, dizzy. Through the blurriness and pain, he saw that yet another monster had shown up, probably the one that had punched him. Jason’s shirt was drenched in blood from his nose. He scanned the still chaotically noisy battlefield until he found Percy, leaning against the border of the lookout, semiconscious. Jason saw him lazily chewing something, probably ambrosia. He himself could use some right then.

The noise around him subsided gradually, leaving behind a painful ringing in his ears. The newly arrived monster lifted him from the floor by his scalp. Jason groaned in pain.
“Puny demigods,” the monster roared, and threw him against the border of the lookout, nearly crashing with Percy. It laughed at him.

“There goes the rest of my ribcage,” Jason said with a moan. He was a heap on the floor. He heard something land somewhere above them.

“Oh, so… you’ve… met Alke,” Proioxis said, atop of the lookout’s enclosing wall. She looked in pain, and Jason could see that the head of Palioxis was still missing. “She’s a nasty one. Spirit of battle strength, she is.”

Percy offered him some ambrosia while Proioxis prattled about giving a great show and something or other. Percy looked better now, better than Jason at least, which wasn’t saying much. Jason chewed it, even though his jaw hurt like hell. It tasted like a heavenly mix of burgers and pizza. His headache and aching face subsided almost immediately. The ribs were going to take a while. He wondered how many more monsters were going to show up to soundly kick their behinds. He sat against the wall.

“We’re not dead,” Percy said to his right.

“Yay for that,” Jason replied. The effort made him double over and puke. Percy gave him more ambrosia, which could probably burn him up to death but in that moment that seemed like the less painful option. He took it gladly.

“I mean that they aren’t trying to kill us,” Percy whispered. “At least not immediately.”

“Slow, painful death. Yay again,” Jason said, not puking this time.

“We can use that. Jason, come on, think…” Percy urged him as all of the monsters made a semicircle around them. There were six of them now. Who was the newest one? The spirit of the finishing blow? Jason half-hoped so. “Come on…” Percy repeated as his body was lifted above Alke’s head. Percy’s body twisted, and he slashed the air with his steel sword, all in vain.

Jason’s eyes widened in absolute terror as Alke’s massive hands started to bend over Percy’s body backwards. Percy was screaming. She was going to break him in two. She was grinning at him. She was teasing him, it was probably nothing for her to just snap Percy like a twig, but she was prolonging it. Percy’s loud and shrill screams were worse than the unnatural crowd roar from earlier. Jason’s whole body was trembling. His limbs were numb, his heart pumping violently against his broken ribs. He met Percy’s bulging, blood-shot eyes and Jason snapped.

It was like an explosion. As if something deep inside Jason had expanded rapidly and viciously and then had breached the border that was Jason himself.

“STOP!” he screamed, now back up on his feet. No, he was flying. Thunder roared in the sudden overcast sky.

Proioxis, and now Palioxis as well, laughed.

“Very good,” they said in unison, cackling madly. “That’s it! Very good! Bring on the pyrotechnics, boy!”

Alke was looking at him, still holding Percy at an impossible angle, grinning. More thunder, closer. Cold rushes of wind moved the branches of the nearby trees with violence.

“Let him go!” he ordered.
Kydoimos and Homados ran quickly towards Jason, jumping high and raising their spears, ready to stab him. He raised his hands, sending them back with a furious gust of wind, and made them crash hard into the stone floor. They exploded into a cloud of monster dust. The wind increased in intensity, as did the thunder and lightning in the sky. Jason’s mind was clear and focused; he had forgotten to feel any terror or pain. He had to destroy them all.

The latest spirit to arrive, this one with long white hair, opened his enormous mouth, ready to launch some sort of attack that way. Jason raised one hand and sucked out the air from the monster’s lungs. The beast choked and gasped desperately for air, but Jason had created a vacuum around it.

“Alala! Brother!” screeched either Proioxis or Palioxis, trying to get close to Jason and stop him, but with no success. He had created a whirlwind around him, pushing any threat away.

Alala was on his knees, with his monstrous eyes even bigger now. After a short while, he collapsed and dissolved into dust. Proioxis y Palioxis screamed in rage. Alke had kept her distance, still holding Percy above her as a hostage. Before she was able to do anything, Jason screamed, a lightning raced down from the sky. It struck Alke and annihilated her in an instant. Percy’s now unconscious body floated gently to the floor.

Jason descended, the sky still thundering and twisting, the wind stronger than ever. He walked towards Proioxis and Palioxis, who cowered in fear.

“That’s quite enough of that,” Jason heard behind him. Before he had time to turn around, a blow to the head sent him to the floor. All pain returned.

A twenty-something guy was in front of him, a couple dozen feet away. He had his arms crossed, clearly displeased.

“I was expecting more of a fight from the Makhai, honestly,” the guy said, adjusting the red bandanna, as red as his eyes, over his hair. “Proioxis, you keep rushing everything in too soon. Ever heard of planning?”

“See? I told you!” scolded Palioxis.

“But, the element of supr—” Proioxios started to argue, but was cut short by the guy in the bandanna snapping his fingers and making them disappear in a burst of flames. It looked painful.

“Those two always give me a headache,” the guy commented, brushing his hand against his ratty, black t-shirt under his black leather jacket. Jason caught a glimpse of a knife strapped to his belt.

Jason tried to summon the winds again, or some lightning, or some thunder, or anything at all. But he couldn't. All furious determination and purpose were gone, and his lightshow had drained him considerably.

“Who are you?” he croaked instead. The guy laughed.

“Phobos…” Jason heard a faint voice say. To his left, Percy laid semiconscious on the floor. ”Jason, don’t… don’t look…” and Percy passed out.

“He doesn’t look so tough now, does he?” Phobos commented with a sneer towards Percy. “I guess there aren’t any goldfishes around to help him.” He laughed.

Jason made an effort to stand. Phobos watched him with amusement on his face that didn’t quite reach is fire-red eyes, that seemed to look enraged all the time. After he succeeded, he made a supreme effort to summon Nimbus. Once with his weapon at hand, he pointed it at Phobos.
“What do you want?” That’s what Percy did, right? Stall them... He walked slowly and painfully towards Percy’s form on the floor.

“Oh, nothing much, really,” Phobos said, examining his nails casually. “Have some fun, you know, some fighting, some killing, the like.”

Jason kneeled besides Percy, without lowering his sword. He started to look for some ambrosia on his friend’s pockets. He found a small, crumbling cube. If he was quick...

“Oh, go ahead, don’t mind me,” Phobos said with a malicious smile. “You’ll need it.”

Jason ate the cube. It didn’t help much but at least he could stand now without much difficulty.

“Oh, you’re still not that much of a challenge, are you?” Phobos said, considering him. “I guess… oh why not?” He snapped his fingers again. Jason recoiled instinctively, but nothing seemed to happen.

“Wha...?” he heard besides him. Percy was on his feet, although not cured at all. His wounds were still fresh, and he still was covering the side of his body where the spear had gone through. “What happened? You!” he said, once he spotted Phobos.

In a second, Phobos was behind Percy holding his knife to his neck.

“Now, Jason Grace, I want you to pay close attention,” Phobos said, staring at him intensely. “I have unfinished business with this one so I don’t want you interfering, is that clear?”

Jason scoffed and raised his sword once more, ready to attack.

“Oh, thought so,” Phobos said in a chiding tone. “Well, you made me. Now, look into my eyes.”

“Don’t!” Percy yelled, but it was too late.

Jason had already been looking, after all, they were hard to ignore. But as soon as Phobos had said those last words, the red of his eyes had engulfed Jason, surrounding him and filling him up. He fell like falling into a bottomless pit.

He was on cabin one at Camp Half-Blood, but it looked different. Everything looked bigger, much bigger. He glanced up but couldn’t see the ceiling, just the walls all around him getting lost in the darkness above. The air was cold and sweet, cavernous. A terrible voice boomed, nearly knocking him to the floor but he stood his ground, barely.

“Oh, it’s you,” the voice said.

Jason looked around and spotted the source of the voice. Standing in the center of the room, where the statue of Zeus was supposed to be there was...

“Jupiter,” Jason said, catching his breath. His legs felt like jelly.

Jupiter was even taller than the statue had been, and irradiated power and rage and merciless judgment. Jason fell to his knees.

“What are you…? What’s going…? Wh...”

Jupiter sighed, making the room tremble and chilling Jason to the bone. He lowered his head.

“He can’t even form a coherent sentence, what a disgrace,” Jupiter said. “You know, I don’t know why I have bothered with you.”
“What?” Jason said, his hands cold and shaky.

“You were the next best thing, I suppose,” Jupiter mused to himself. “Now, Thalia, that was a daughter worthy of my legacy. Too bad she left.”

“Father!” Jason protested, his voice barely a whisper.

“What, boy? Don’t you want the truth? Don’t you want to talk to me? Isn’t that what you’ve been wishing your whole life? How did you think it was going to go?” Jupiter advanced towards him, Jason crawled back to one of the walls. “Me saying what a good son you’ve been? A warm embrace and some wise advice? Why would that happen when you’ve done nothing to be deserving of the king of the gods?”

“I… I’ve done things…” Jason murmured. The room was now as cold as ice.

“Oh, you’ve tried so hard for so long, but it has never been enough, has it? No, never enough,” Jupiter said, towering over Jason’s shrinking form. “A disgrace to me, a disgrace to Rome. What have you lost? What have you sacrificed? Always the fearless leader, always perfect, always liked, always coming out on top. Bah, what kind of hero is that? You would crumble before the faintest of hardships. You would be nothing, you are nothing.”

“Dad, I…”

“Oh, don’t call me that, you’re no son of mine. You’re useless. Useless…”

“Daddy, I… I…”

Jupiter’s form faded away, as did the cabin itself, leaving Jason standing in the middle of Camp Half-Blood. Around him, hundreds of bodies littered the floor. Pools of blood were everywhere, burning buildings crumbling, and monsters were scuttling around, like vultures.

“All those you’ve led into battle, all those who’ve died serving under your command,” Jason turned around. Thalia was there next to him, her eyes cold and staring into the distance. “All those who will… And all because you are so useless.”

Jason the face of every single one of his friends, their eyes devoid of life and their features distorted into expressions of horror and pain. Nico, Leo, Hazel, Piper, Annabeth, Reyna, Frank… He felt more and more despair with every face, but he couldn’t help but keep looking for more, he deserved this punishment.

And then he saw Percy, his green eyes now opaque, lifeless. The air of his lungs left him completely, and he sank to the floor for the hundredth time. That’s all he did, didn’t he? Sink quietly into despair, never revealing anything to anyone. Smoke from the fires started to obscure his vision.

Maybe if he had showed something other than phony empathy, and offered something else than the required empty motivational words… If he let himself just be, maybe none of this would’ve happened, maybe Percy still… And then he saw Percy blink.

“Now that’s nonsense,” Percy’s corpse said, his voice was loud and clear.

“What?” Jason managed.

“I mean, all this death and ruin?” Percy said, still lying on the ground, his body broken. “It does make one hell of a post-apocalyptic scene, I’ll give you that. But, anyway, all this death and loss being your fault, and then your dad says you haven’t sacrificed enough? Like, pick one, man.”
Jason blinked twice fast and shook his head, trying to comprehend.

“What? I don’t…”

“Come off it, man,” Percy said with a smile, a couple of maggots came out of his mouth but it didn’t seem to bother him. “All that stuff you’ve done was just to please some absent dude? Who cares what he thinks anymore? Nah, you do what you do mainly because of your friends, I know it. Because they need you and you always come through. And I need you now, man, I’m kind of getting killed right now.”

And then Jason remembered where he was and what was he supposed to be doing. Camp Half-Blood vanished and in its place the now half-demolished lookout appeared.

“Jason… Jason, please, come off it…” he heard next to him. “Jason…”

Percy was half-lying next to him, his face full of dirt and blood.

“Percy?” Jason said. “I… what…?”

“Phobos, minor god of fear, just don’t look into his eyes, and–”

Phobos had dragged Percy away from Jason, who immediately tried to get up. Now Phobos was standing over Percy’s body, a spear on his hand, looking over him with nothing but hate. The minor god also looked injured, although not as much as Percy, with golden ikhor stains on his clothes, and cuts on his arms. All around them the remains of one pandemonium of a fight: walls demolished, broken pillars, and the floor cracked in places.

Jason raced towards the god, ignoring all his aching and broken parts, and stabbed him right in the heart with Nimbus. Phobos screamed in pain and rage, which sent Jason stumbling backwards, making him pull out his sword from the god’s body. An endless fountain of golden liquid came out of Phobos’ chest, and he vanished into yellow vapor.

“Percy…” Jason said, helping him to get up. “Are you okay?”

“No,” Percy said.

“Come on, we need to leave,” Jason said. He didn’t know who was helping to walk who at this point. Nonetheless, they advanced slowly but surely. “He might come back.”

“Or his brother could show up,” Percy said.

“His b–oh, come on, really?”

That had been Deimos’ cue.

“Hello, boys,” the god said.
Everything before the crash had gone, miraculously, more or less smoothly. They evaded Deimos, who looked even bigger and had even more ugly scars all over his face than Percy remembered, and ran to the ship as fast as their lamentable condition allowed them. They even had managed to snatch the Video Shield away without Deimos noticing. Percy’s back hurt like hell, which he guessed was what happened when a hulking monster tried to snap you in half. At least it distracted him from the gaping wound on his side. Jason didn’t look much better, blood everywhere, a bulging, broken nose and who knows how many other injuries. They tripped constantly along the way, but they helped and encouraged each other to keep going. The chasing god riding a chimera was also a pretty good incentive to keep running as fast as they could.

The park looked devastated, broken branches everywhere, trees almost uprooted, destroyed lamp posts, and a couple of fires here and there. Percy glanced at Jason; he had never seen him get mad like that. It had been bone-chilling, that cold stare, the merciless way in which he dispatched their attackers. He had fallen unconscious in the middle of it all but he could imagine how it had gone, just looking to their wrecked surroundings. The sky was still overcast, making difficult to see where they set foot. Had he looked like that when he destroyed those venti? He shook his head, trying to get rid of those thoughts. He didn’t like remembering that.

“Watch out!” Jason yelled, yanking him backwards.

The stone floor in the pathway before them had erupted, sending rocks and debris in all directions. Percy covered them both all he could with the Video Shield, which now looked more like a scrap of metal than anything resembling a shield.

“Oh, great,” Percy said once he lowered the shield and the dust had dissipated somewhat to let them see in front of them.

A dozen of skeleton warriors, Ares’ specialty, had risen from the ground. Percy didn’t recognize their uniforms, and he sure wasn’t going to stick around to find out or ask them about it. The demigods looked at each other for a fraction of a second, and ran to their right, through the trees and away from the stone path.

They could hear the skeletons chasing them through the woods, and the mad shouts of Deimos in the distance, but they also could hear movement in front of them. Before they could decide on a new course, more skeletons appeared in front of them. They raised their weapons, and five warriors did much the same, all of them ready to attack.

That’s when it happened. The couple of skeletons that had decided to take on Percy froze midway and let their weapons fall to the ground. They looked terrified and, if they had had actual eyes, Percy was sure they would’ve been wide open in terror. And then they ran away.

“What the…?” Percy looked behind him, expecting to find something worse than skeleton warriors. There was nothing there that he could see, just the noises of their pursuers on the distance.

“Percy?!” Jason’s voice called from his side. “Little help?!”

Jason was battling three skeleton warriors at once. Percy stared at the scene for a second, dumbstruck. Jason looked just as bad as him but he was still holding his grounds against three simultaneous opponents. After one of the skeletons nearly stabbed Jason with its knife, Percy got out
of his daze and ran to help, raising his sword and protecting himself with the Video Shield.

One look at Percy, and Jason’s attackers did much the same as the ones before; they ran away, one of them simply gave up and crumbled into a pile of bones that promptly sunk into the ground. He could swear he even heard some actual screaming coming from them.

“How did you do that?” Jason asked, amazed.

“I don’t know. It’s like…” it hit him then. He had seen a similar behavior from foes before. “This shield doesn’t have any other magic in it, does it?”

“I don’t think so, why?” Jason said, shaking his head.

“It’s the sword then,” Percy said, looking at his weapon. “It kind of acts like Thalia’s shield, Aegis.”

“Didn’t scare those monsters back there,” Jason said.”Poroxis, and Alka-Seltzer or whatever.”

“Thalia’s shield didn’t work on everything either,” Percy recalled, still looking at his sword. Sure, it wasn’t Riptide but it had helped him so far.

The sound of a crashing three and tens of steps stomping the ground made them start fleeing again. More skeletons came after them along the way, and went away as soon as they caught a glimpse of Percy’s sword, who held it high in front of them in full display. With that, they made it to the ship in no time.

They were flying away when Deimos finally caught up with them. The god growled and sent arrow-throwing birds after them, but the animals didn’t get too close thanks to Percy still holding up the sword. Still, their arrows had quite the range.

“Who deemed you worthy of Tizona?!?” roared Deimos. “Who gave you that sword?! This is yet one more affront against the war god and his hordes, Jackson!”

Ignoring him, they rose higher into the heavens. Percy crashed on a chair next to the control panel, Jason piloted.

“Thanks,” was the first thing he said. “You know, for saving my butt back there.”

“No problem,” Jason said. He seemed ready to also crash on a chair or a bed, but tried to conceal it, focusing on the control panel. He also looked somber all of a sudden.

“Hey, but seriously, that thing with the lightning and wind and everything was awesome,” Percy tried.

“Was it?” Jason replied with a low, dark voice. Percy saw him gripping hard the edge of the panel with his hands. “I don’t think I liked it,” he admitted, looking down.

Percy stood up.

“I get it,” he said. “I know what it’s like to lose control like that,” he continued putting a hand on Jason’s shoulder. Jason shrugged away from him.

“That’s the thing,” Jason retorted. “It didn’t feel like losing control. It felt like I had all the control on the world, like I could do anything, like…”

“Like every single thing was at your mercy,” Percy said, looking at him. “It sounds weird, I know. But that’s losing control. We have all this power, and I think we are almost always trying to contain
it. And when you let loose it feels… great, although I felt scared out of my mind the first few times. Annabeth did too, I could tell. But then I started to like it and just… it wasn’t good. It led to trouble. I don’t like that I like it.”

Jason stared at him for a while, his eyes sad and pensive.

“It had never happened to me before,” Jason admitted, breaking eye contact.

“You’re more restrained that I am,” Percy offered. “I’m an impulsive little boy, still.”

“Is that your nice way of saying that I’m a ‘pompous stickler-to-the-rules prick?’” Jason asked, smiling darkly.

“What?” Percy said, a bit lost. ”No, why would…?”

“Nothing, just… Something someone said…”

“Well, screw them,” Percy braved a step towards Jason, who didn’t retreat this time. “I’ve laid into you about it a few times but it’s just… I don’t actually mean it, however irritating it can be at times. I actually really admire that part of you,” he added sincerely, his hand firmly in Jason’s shoulder now.

“You do? I… Well, thanks… Thanks a lot, I guess,” Jason mumbled. He looked up at Percy’s face again, his face reddening a little, Percy noticed. “Funny how that whole losing control thing affected me more than what Phobos showed me. Maybe if it had gone a little longer…”

“What did he show you?” Percy asked, squishing Jason’s shoulder in concern, and stepping even closer.

“Doesn’t matter,” Jason answered, he got closer too. “You helped me there as well.”

“I did?” Percy said, confused.

“Yeah, it was… weird.”

“ Weird…”

Percy’s gaze fell to Jason’s lips. He saw his scar twitch a little, sweat drying on his upper lip. This was it, the moment of truth. He was going to go for it…

The ship rocked and shook, sending them tumbling down the hall. Percy cursed. An alarm blared, red lights illuminated the room.

“What in the world?”

“I knew I had forgotten something,” Jason said, standing up with difficulty and sprinting up to the deck, his crystal sword already at hand. “The radar…” was the last thing Percy could hear him say before he disappeared from view. Percy followed, his heart still racing.

They saw the problem immediately. Deimos was following them, this time mounting a flying drakon. Jason was already preparing their weapons to launch an attack. Percy did the same from the other side of the ship. The thing was, Deimos didn’t seem in a rush to attack them. He was merely following them, with his red, angry eyes fixed on them.

“What is he doing?” asked Jason from his position, his ballista already loaded and ready.

“I don’t– Whoa!”
The ship shook again, harder than before. It tilted towards Percy’s side, losing some altitude. Percy could smell something burning. He looked over the rails to the expanse below.

“Oh, no,” he said.

“What?” Jason asked, at the same time the ship shook yet again. Smoke from somewhere in the ship was visible now. “What’s he doing?” He was next to Percy now.

Percy pointed at the snowy mountains beneath them. The Pyrenees, he guessed, were getting closer and closer.

“GOAWAYGOAWAYGOAWAY!” They heard one of the mountain gods say while he launched another boulder at them. The rest of the ourae followed suit, launching more boulders using all the power that their muscular twenty feet tall bodies gave them. Most of them missed.

“He’s terrorizing them,” Percy guessed, “with us.”

“I’ll try to steer the ship to safety, you get rid of Deimos!” Jason ordered, over the panicked yelling of the ourae, who seemed to get more agitated at every second.

“Got it!”

They got to work, with Jason making the ship do impossible pirouettes across low clouds, obscuring their position, which didn’t help Percy in aiming his Greek fire at Deimos. The god kept chasing them relentlessly; Percy wondered if those red eyes allowed him to see through the clouds like some sort of X-ray or, more mundanely, a lantern. An image of Deimos dressed as Rudolph the reindeer amused him for a couple of seconds before a boulder passed right above him. This time, the boulder hit the sweet spot; the ship plummeted inexorably into the ground. Percy screamed. His last ball of Greek fire finally hit Deimos, who screamed as well, and then vanished.

Percy was sent tumbling all through the deck, until he caught hold of something fixed and he could focus on just one important task: keep screaming. The crash itself hadn’t been so bad, more violent shaking and being tossed around. No, the really bad part had been the explosion that followed. Percy was sent flying beyond the ship, crashing into the ground. He heard a crack and pain shot up from his leg.

“Son of a…”

“Are you okay?” Jason said next to him a minute later, his face covered in ashes and his clothes in still red cinder.

“No,” Percy said, his eyes closing.

“No, stay with me. Stay awake, Percy. Oh, Gods…”

That’s the last thing he heard before everything went black.
Percy was screaming. Jason ran to the tent, Nimbus on his hand, and opened it. Percy was screaming and twisting, his eyes still closed. He was sitting up and thrashing around, fighting off some unseen horror. Then he opened his eyes, wide and terrified. Jason’s heart was pounding against his chest.

“Percy!” he called. “Percy calm down!”

Percy stopped screaming and thrashing around, limiting himself instead to look around, breathing heavily and with his eyes still open wide. He was in complete panic, all his skin shining due to the sweat. Jason got closer, catching the unmistakable scent of urine. He kneeled next to him, putting Nimbus away.

“Percy…” he said, calmer this time. He tried to scrap his own panic away. “Percy, hey…”

Percy looked at him, eyes still bulging, his hands gripping the blanket at his sides with all their might.

“It’s me, Jason. It’s fine. You’re fine. We’re fine,” he didn’t know what else to do.

Percy’s breathing slowed down, and he let loose of the blanket. His hands went to his face, covering it from view. He bowed his head.

“Percy?”

“Go away,” he said, his voice muffled by his hands.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Percy grunted in frustration.

“What’s wrong? What happened? I can help…”

“No, you can’t. Go away.”

“Percy, please…”

“GO AWAY!” Percy yelled, with his face still buried in his hands.

Jason didn’t move for a whole minute. When it was obvious Percy wasn’t going to talk to him, he got out of the tent, shooting one last glance at Percy before closing it. His friend hadn’t moved.

Outside, Jason inhaled deeply. The fresh air of the night filled his lungs, soothing him. In the distance, the ship repairing itself filled the night with the faint sound of creaking wood, clashing metal and moving mechanical parts. Above him, the stars shone brighter than he had ever seen them; he could distinguish the Milky Way. Even in that place, so far away from the smog and lights of the cities, he still couldn’t make out all of the constellations he knew. He stood a little while there, trying to find them but with no use, maybe some cloud was on the way. He looked around. What was it? Nine o’clock? The mountains, now free of terrified mountain gods, contrasted even darker against the black sky, well beyond the trees. A fire roared nearby. Jason sat in front of it on top of a large rock. He sighed.

Every time he thought that things might possibly start to go his way, something happened. Back at the ship he thought that Percy was totally going to kiss him. No weird healing connection, no shared emotions or anything of the sort. Percy, of his own volition, was going to kiss him. And then Deimos
happened, and the numina montanum happened, and the crash and explosion happened. Now Percy didn’t want Jason near him. Had he done something wrong? He had confided a bit in him and Percy had done the same in return. Was Percy regretting it?

He shook his head, scolding himself. He was being stupid, stupid and self-centered. There was clearly something going on with Percy, something that most likely had nothing to do with Jason. Percy had looked so scared, more than he had ever seen him, and he had seen him—and all of his friends—in pretty extreme and terrifying situations. A movement to his right caught his eye; he inhaled sharply, some ashes got into his lungs making him cough violently.

A hand patted him on the back with force. Percy was sitting next to him. Jason stopped coughing.

“Okay?” Percy asked, gently. He looked tired, which was a much better look than ‘terrified beyond belief.’

“Okay,” Jason said.

Percy nodded, a sad smile on his lips. Both shifted uncomfortably.

“So…” Jason started to say, losing all train of thought almost immediately.

Percy turned to look at him. He looked so small. Jason wanted to hug him fiercely, but restrained himself. He was good at restraining himself.

“Nightmares,” Percy said at last, his stare lost in the distance.

“Sorry?”

“It was a nightmare. A bad one,” he clarified.

“Okay,” Jason said.

“It hadn’t… it hadn’t happened in a while. Not like this,” Percy continued, every word seemed to cost him a lot to say. Jason just nodded encouragingly, he scooted closer. Percy didn’t seem to mind.

“I think that what Phobos showed me triggered them again,” Percy mused.

Jason didn’t ask what Percy had seen when he looked into the god of fear’s eyes. Percy looked thankful for that.

“They started shortly after we went back from the quest. The one with all seven of us,” Percy continued. Jason didn’t need the clarification; ‘the quest’ was enough to tell him what Percy was referring to. “I think all of that time in Tartarus…” he stopped speaking.

“Hey,” Jason said. Their bodies were almost touching. “It’s fine. We’re fine now. You’re going to be fine.”

Percy made a skeptic noise, then his gaze got lost again.

“Did Nico get them?” he asked without looking at Jason.

“I don’t know,” Jason answered honestly. “He might have… I’m not… We never…”

“It’s fine,” Percy cut him off. “Annabeth didn’t.”

Jason bumped him slightly. He hoped it came across as playful, friendly.
“If you’re thinking you’re weak or whatever because of that…”

“Maybe,” Percy admitted.

“Well, you’re not,” Jason said, firm. “You’re not, okay?”

Percy looked at him, his expression serious. He seemed to be looking for something in Jason’s eyes.

“I’m not lying,” Jason said, guessing Percy’s thoughts. “I do believe that.”

Percy sighed.

“I hate them,” he said.

“We’re going to do something,” Jason assured him. “I’ll do something, I swear.”

“You can’t.”

“I’ll do something,” Jason insisted, holding his ground.

Percy’s uncertain nod was all the reply Jason needed, for now.

They sat in silence for a few minutes.

“Do you know if there’s a lake or a stream nearby?” Percy asked, breaking the silence between them. “I… want to wash m— ”

“Over there,” Jason said, indicating the direction. “Through those woods.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Percy got up and went inside the tent. A minute later he got out carrying a bundle in his arms, and his backpack on one shoulder, and went towards the woods. Jason didn’t follow.

The fire was almost extinct when Percy returned. He was wearing nothing but boxers and sandals. He walked towards Jason, who tried with a lot of effort not to ogle him.

“You okay?” Jason asked.

“Yeah, I… I’m going to try to sleep some more. If that’s fine…”

“Yeah, absolutely. I’ll be right outside guarding the camp if you need me.”

Percy nodded, troubled. He turned around in direction of the tent. Before he was about to get inside, he stopped and returned to Jason. He was constantly shifting his weight from foot to foot, weighing something in his mind, Jason could tell.

“Actually… I was… I was wondering if you could…” Percy exhaled, embarrassed. “I was wondering if you could sleep with me.”

“I’m sorry?” Jason asked, stunned. His heart skipped a beat and his hands started to sweat.

“I know how it sounds,” Percy said, his face somewhat rosy. “But I mean, like, actually sleeping.”

Jason’s will broke and he allowed himself to actually look at Percy. The skin all over his body was
pale, paler than he remembered—the fact that he recalled the exact tone of skin that Percy had years before didn’t even faze him anymore. It reminded him of Nico’s, not fresh-out-of-Tartarus Nico but well-on-his-way-to-actual-healthiness Nico. How long ago had Percy been actually out, under the sun?

Old battle scars crossed his arms, chest and stomach, and Jason followed them with his gaze. His chest was hairy, but it wasn’t like he had a carpet glued there, it was just some fuzz all over it. Jason wondered how it would feel… Percy’s belly wasn’t quite as toned as before, Jason noticed then, when his look went down. Percy’s body had still quite the athletic frame, one he felt against his own body days ago when they were pressed together, he just lacked some cutting and the muscles would pop right up. It wouldn’t be hard for Percy to return to an excellent shape, he was well on his way. But Jason also quite liked this. And then there were Percy’s legs…

Percy shivered, breaking Jason’s daze. His mouth had been watering; now it was his turn to get red in the face.

“Why?” Jason asked, nearly tripping at that one-syllable word. “I mean, right,” he amended, his brain slowly guessing the answer.

“I just… I need someone. Someone to wake me up, to just be there in case I—I mean Annabeth did it and then my mum and Paul, for a while… They slept in the same room until I started to get better…”

“Right… Sure, I’ll be right there. Just give me a minute,” he offered him a weak smile.

Percy opened his mouth to say something, but then closed it and sighed. He went back inside the tent. Jason’s stare followed him all the way.

“You mess with my mind, Percy Jackson,” Jason said in a whisper. He shook his head, feeling cheesy and followed him inside, carrying a bag with his stuff.

Percy was sitting on the floor of the tent, over a new blanket. He was examining his left leg, exploring it with his hands all along. Jason gulped. Percy noticed him and with a small shake of his head, invited him in.

“I swear I broke it,” he told Jason.

“You did. It was quite bad” Jason confirmed it. “Thank ambrosia and Siobhan’s ointment for healing it.”


“Friends?” Jason said without thinking. He frowned. So Annabeth hadn’t—and he hadn’t… He chided himself.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Wh—oh, so they… um, well, that explains some things, I guess,” Percy said.

“It does?” Jason asked.

“Yeah” was all of Percy’s response.
They didn’t say anything for a while. Jason started to change into his sleepwear, a sleeveless white shirt and ratty shorts, with Percy looking away while he did so. The only sound was the rustling of clothes and the crickets outside.

“It finished,” Jason said. “The ship…”


“Do you think it would be safer if we sleep in it?”

“Too tired,” Percy said, lying down. ”I ain’t moving all this stuff tonight.”

He covered himself with a blanket. Jason shrugged, and started to make his own arrangements to get to sleep.

“If I start thrashing around,” Percy said, facing away from Jason. “Just wake me up, okay? Don’t wait until I’m screaming my lungs out.”

“Okay,” Jason replied. “Won’t that give you an awful night’s sleep, though?”

“Don’t care,” Percy’s voice was weakening. “As long as you stop ’em.”

“Okay.”

Percy mumbled something.

“Pardon?”

“Am glad you here, Jason…” Percy said. “So glad…”

And he was asleep.

The rest of their night was long and troubled. Percy kept starting to moan and thrash around and Jason kept waking him up. Jason was sure this was even worse than not sleeping at all. Not just for Percy, but for him as well, he kept falling asleep and waking up too. By the fifth or sixth time it happened, Jason had a mean headache.

“I’m sorry…” Percy said, laying on his side looking at him through sleepy, blood-shot eyes. “You look awful…”

“It’s okay,” Jason said, his eyes in a similar state. “Just go to sleep again.”

Percy just nodded, closing his eyes and, Jason thought, bracing himself for the nightmares to come. Jason didn’t close his eyes, choosing instead to get closer to Percy. He stared at his face a few moments, loving how peaceful he looked before the bad dreams started again. Frowning, he resolved to do something right there and then. He wished it worked. He got closer.

“What..?” Percy said, confused.

“Ssshh…” Jason said, embracing him.

“What are you…?”

“Just sleep.”
Percy’s eyes got very wide and then, smiling tiredly, he closed them. Jason got even closer, embracing him tighter, one hand playing with Percy’s jet black hair and another doing lazy circles on his friend’s naked back. After he had slowly embraced Jason back, Percy was asleep immediately, his face buried in Jason’s chest. The nightmares didn’t seem to come anymore, at least not really bad ones that Jason could tell. There was a little restlessness, a little mumbling at the start, and then nothing at all, just Percy’s even breathing against his chest. After a while, Jason fell asleep too, with a small grin on his face.

Jason woke up slowly, not wanting to move. He was too comfortable, too content. And as far as he could tell, it was still dark outside. What time was it? He really needed a clock. Percy and he were still completely entangled together. He felt something cold on his chest; he shifted a bit.

“I drool in my sleep,” he heard a murmuring voice say.

“Oh, sorry, did I wake you?”

“Not really,” Percy said, this time more clearly. He separated himself a little from Jason but without letting go. “And it’s me who’s sorry. Morning…”

“Morning. It’s still dark, though.”

“Is it like… five? Five-thirty?”

“Probably.”

Percy nodded, and closed his eyes again.

“This is nice,” he was back on mumbling mode.

“Yeah,” Jason agreed, his eyelids heavy.

“Let’s drop the quest and stay like this forever.”

“I wish.”

“Me too.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. This is nice…” Percy repeated.

“Not weird or anything?”

“ Weird…” he said, his voice barely audible.

Peaceful sleep took them under its wing again.

A noise outside.

Then another.

The tent shook along with the ground.

They opened their eyes.
Jason was up in an instant, with Percy close behind. Jason summoned Nimbus, Percy uncapped his pen out of habit but nothing happened. He cursed in a hoarse whisper.

“Where’s the steel sword?” Percy whispered.


“Never mind.”

“All right, I’ll go check out. You stay inside, just watch,” Jason said.

“But—”

“If I need help you come and rescue me. Your sword’s by the fire,” he interrupted Percy, whose expression was unmistakably a pout that, along with his messy bed hair, made him look adorable.

“What are you smiling at?” Percy asked; the ground kept shaking. “Go slay a monster.”

“It could not be a monster, maybe it’s just some wild ani—”

The top part of their tent got ripped off violently. The ground shook once again, making them stumble and fall.

It was a monster.

After it got rid of the remains of the tent on its way, the enormous dragon-like creature growled at them. Its body was covered in shaggy green hair, with a scale-y serpentine neck and tortoise-like feet. Its malevolent eyes stared at them both, and it stomped the ground again.

Percy ran towards the extinguished fire with the monster—that ignored Jason—following. Percy snatched his sword and held it up in front of him. The creature hissed but gave no other sign of retreat. Jason approached it slowly from behind, catching Percy’s eye, who nodded. Jason raised his sword gently. Percy kept taunting the beast, moving from side to side, his sword in front of him.

Their plan was foiled almost immediately. The beast clearly knew what were they doing and used its long tail to strike Jason square in the chest, sending him away. It got closer to Percy and raised its front legs, apparently ready to stomp him down. Its body got suddenly bigger… No, realized Jason, its hairs were quills and they were ready to fire.

“Percy!” he yelled from the ground.

Percy rolled to the side, barely avoiding the many projectiles that stung the ground instead. The grass around them withered and died. Jason got up and raced towards the monster, which this time did not anticipate his attack, and stabbed him. Or at least tried to, his sword merely bounced uselessly against the creature’s body, nearly knocking the weapon out of Jason’s hands. The tail sent him flying backwards again. Was that yet another rib breaking? Couldn’t he catch a break?

It chased Percy around, who dodged, jumped and rolled away every time the monster sent quills flying his way. He didn’t try to use his sword, having seen Jason have such little success. When the quill-throwing strategy didn’t work, the creature sent a stream of fire against them, burning a couple of trees down. Then a torrent of acid that melted the big rock they sat the night before.

“Just how many weapons this thing has? Is it a Pokémon?” Percy said, next to him now. That close, Jason could see that a couple of quills had gotten him in the shoulder, nasty protuberances where
forming on his skin. Jason pulled the quills out. “Ow!”

“Sorry,” he managed to say, before another stream of acid was shot their way.

They split up and the beast decided to chase Percy, sending its various attacks against him all the way. It corralled him against a close-knit group of trees. It sent a gush of acid that showered Percy completely.

“NO!” Jason yelled, running towards them. He was already picturing Percy dissolving to the bones. He stopped running. Percy was okay, soaked and confused but otherwise completely unharmed.

“It’s just water this time,” he said. “Yo, Shaggy! Do that again!” he goaded the beast.

The beast complied with gusto.

For a brief moment Jason feared that the beast had decided to switch back to acid, but the stream of water bouncing back at it with even more potency put those fears to rest. Percy was grinning, his hands up in the air. The monster was on the floor, twitching confusedly. Before any of them could think of their next attack and before the creature started to get up, a shower of arrows came raining down the sky.

Several of the arrows got the beast in the tail and another number of them in its serpentine neck. The creature was still alive, but immobilized. Jason and Percy gawked at it. Someone came running from the direction the arrows had come from.

“Êtes-vous blessé?” said the new arrival.

They looked at him, puzzled. It was a boy—no older than sixteen by Jason’s estimation—with pale skin as marble and white, silver-ish hair. On his back he carried a quiver full of arrows and a couple of rabbits dangled from its neck. His clothes were made out of some animal’s skin, maybe several of them. He looked at them with an expression between concern and wariness.

“Um, sorry?” Percy finally asked.

“Oh,” the boy said, blinking rapidly. “Ehm... are you okay?” he said with a distinct accent that Jason couldn’t identify.

“Yeah, we’re fine” Jason replied.

The beast kept twitching and moaning.

“Excuse me,” the boy said and produced a big knife. Without any other warning, he cut off the tail of the beast, which finally died. Its body slowly disintegrated into golden dust that also vanished into the air.

“Who are you?” Percy asked now next to Jason.

“I’m...” the boy seemed to struggle. “Hunter, I guess.”

“Well, thanks, Hunter,” Percy said, extending his hand and smiling.

The boy frowned and looked suspicious, but he finally took Percy’s hand and shook it.

“I’m Percy, and this is Jason.”
Jason waved his hand. Hunter nodded at him.

“Are you a demigod?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Hunter replied. “Are you? Well, I guess you are; you couldn’t have survived Peluda’s tail attack otherwise.”

“Pe-what?” Percy interrupted.

“The monster,” Hunter said, pointing to the place where its body had been. “Peluda, La Velue, um… Shaggy Beast.”

“Is that really its name?” Percy asked, looking slightly at where Hunter had pointed. The boy nodded and Percy grinned. “So I got the name right.”

Hunter looked at him with curiosity.

“So, what are you doing in these woods?” Jason asked. The boy looked strong, but way too young.

He must have seen something in Jason’s face or heard something in his voice, because Hunter crossed his arms and glared at Jason. He suddenly remembered that he had been that young once and had been in worst situations, probably.

“What are you doing here?” Hunter asked. “And wearing that,” he nodded at their clothes, mainly at Percy, who still was wearing only boxers.

“We’re on a quest,” Percy replied, with the same bratty attitude, “and we asked you first.”

“A quest?” Hunter said, still ignoring their question. “How did you…? Delphi’s been silent for centuries! And so are Dodona and Trophonius! And good luck getting anything out of the Iamidae!”

“It would be really nice if you spoke English, you know?” Percy said, blinking in confusion.

“I’m not?” Hunter said, his silver-y eyes wide in surprise and confusion.

“You’re speaking it perfectly,” Jason assured him. “It’s just an expression. And those are all oracles and prophets, Percy.”

“Right, yes. I knew that,” Percy said, a bit flustered. “Delphi sounded familiar, that’s Rachel isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Jason replied.


“Our oracle,” Percy replied.

“Your…what? What do you mean?”

“You know, back at Camp.”

“What camp? This camp site?”

Jason sighed. This was getting out of hand.

“All right,” he said, raising his hands. “I think we all need to unwind, sit down and talk calmly and more, you know, orderly.”
The sun had already come up by the time the three demigods sat around the fire. Hunter looked completely out of place during daytime, Jason noted, as if he wasn’t real. His paleness, white hair and grey eyes made him look almost like a ghost. He had looked bright and strong under the refuge of the night but daylight, even early morning daylight, made his skin look transparent and sick and his eyes full of sadness. His clothes were the most real part of him, and even those looked as if belonging to someone much bigger and older.

Percy on the other hand, looked more alive and vivacious than ever, or so it seemed to Jason. Maybe it was just in contrast to last night, but Jason was glad to see him rushing around arranging and disarranging things, and talking Jason’s ear off about random stuff. He wondered if Percy would mention last night’s—there was no other word for it—cuddling, once they were alone. It didn’t look promising.

Percy and Jason had changed clothes, and the latter had been watching Hunter healing Percy’s abscesses made by Peluda’s quills. Those two were already joking around. He envied that about Percy—no, not envy—he liked it. He sighed, yet another disarmingly charming trait.

Once they were settled, healed and fed by Hunter’s rather amazing cooking, Jason got to business.

“You saved us so I guess you deserve to know our story first,” Jason said, and he and Percy began to talk. Hunter listened attentively, his eyes ever-widening and looking as if he was saving all of his questions until the end.

“…and then we crashed here so we spent the night and got attacked and you saved us,” Percy said. “And here we are.”

Hunter didn’t say anything for about a minute. He knitted his brow, as if processing everything they had just said.

“So this Camp…” he started.


“Right, so these camps are safe havens for demigods, and they’re in America because the gods are there now,” he looked at them for confirmation. They nodded. He looked slightly taken aback. “All this time I’ve thought they had just… disappeared. And you are the first demigods I’ve seen in a really long time. All that’s left here is monsters and spirits and the like. And if you’re lucky—or unlucky, it depends—some minor gods.”

“So, you’ve been alone? For how long?” Percy asked, leaning forward.

“I don’t know, I…” Hunter started to answer; he looked distressed. “A long time…”

“And what you’ve been doing then?” Jason asked.

“Hunting,” the boy replied. “That’s it, mostly,” he looked at them as if saying, ‘What else is there? Show me.’

Percy and Jason looked at each other. They both seemed to be thinking the very same thing: ‘maybe we could take him…’ Hunter spoke up again, breaking their silent exchange.

“That’s what I was doing last night, hunting,” he continued. It was his turn to tell his story now. “Well, I was actually going to visit the temple of my mother in Ephesus. See if she was around and
try to talk to her, but that seems pointless now…” He frowned, but then shook his head and continued: “Anyway, I felt something was here, in these woods. I had felt it back in Iberia. A beast, an ancient, rare and powerful one, so yeah, I wanted to do my thing and relax.”

“Mr. Shaggy?” Percy asked.

“No, no, this was… different. I guess now I’ll never know, it seemed to have moved very far away now,” Hunter said, and didn’t offer anything else. “Well, that’s about it, I think. Sorry I can’t help you more in your quest. It sounds important.”

“You could come with us,” Jason let out without thinking.

Hunter looked shocked, but shook his head once he recovered.

“I must go on, alone,” he said, getting up and readying his things. “I’m also visiting my mother’s grave on Massalia. I’d rather do that on my own. Good luck on your quest.”

“Wait, hold on,” Percy said, also getting up. “I thought you said your mum’s temple was in Ephesus or whatever and there was no point going there anymore. You still going there or what? We can—”

“I think he means his mortal mother’s grave, Percy,” Jason said, he was also confused. Hunter nodded.

“But didn’t he say…” Percy scratched the back of his head. “All right, I’m confused now. Who’s your mom?”

“Which one?” Hunter asked.

Percy exhaled with some exasperation. Before any of them could say anything else, they heard a sound like an explosion coming from the sky. Almost immediately they heard something falling hard to ground, braking branches all the way down. They could see smoke coming from the woods. Hunter was already pointing one of his arrows towards the woods, even before either Jason or Percy had had any time to process what had just happened.

“Wait here,” he said already walking into the foliage, an arrow at the ready.

Jason had finally summoned Nimbus.

“Coming with you,” he said, his tone didn’t allow room for discussion.

“Yeah, I’ll stay here, you guys,” Percy said, sitting down.

“Percy,” Jason said.

“Kidding, kidding, I’m coming,” Percy said, laughing. Potential danger didn’t seem to hinder his newfound good mood. Jason laughed too, shaking his head.

They caught up with Hunter quickly. He wasn’t too far ahead, examining something on the ground and still pointing at it with his arrow.

“Any idea what this is?” he asked them once they were next to him. He walked circles around the object.

“Um…” they both said.

What was it? It looked like some sort of small machine, a flying machine, like a mini-helicopter. It
kept pouring out smoke and trying to get on the air again, each try feebler than the last. Its innards—gears, camshafts and electronics—were exposed through a pretty big hole made by…

“An arrow,” Jason said, pulling the arrow out of it. The machine finally died with one last pitiful puff of smoke and splash of oil. He held the arrowhead in front of his face, examining it. It was a golden arrowhead, and it had the same familiar vibe that Jason felt next to weapons made of Imperial gold. He handed it to Percy.

“Recognize it?” Percy asked Hunter, once he finished his own examination. “One of yours, somehow?”

“No, all of mine are silver,” Hunter said, showing the one he had been pointing at the machine. It was, in fact, silver. It was a very familiar design.

“Oh,” Jason said, finally realizing. The arrows, Ephesus, even Hunter’s appearance matched up. “No, that can’t be.”

“Of course it can, I’m showing it to you,” Hunter protested.

“No, not that, I mean, Hunter, is your mother Artemis?” Jason asked, still dumbfounded.

The boy nodded.


“We should go back,” Jason said, taking the machine with him. The other two followed him back to their camp site. The fire was out again.

“All right,” he said, putting the machine aside with care. “Explain,” he asked Hunter, he sat in front of him.

The boy seemed to be about to sprint away into the woods but looked at Jason and Percy, now sitting next to Jason. Hunter evaluated them quickly and, sighing, sat down as well. He started to talk.

“My mom, my mortal mom, lived in Massalia. She was sort of part of the cult of Artemis there, but she didn’t ascribe to the whole maidenhood thing. So she was married to some guy, some trader who sold to other Greek cities things like wine or salted pork and fish, stuff like that. He was rarely around. He did want children, he demanded them, quite strongly. Maybe so he could get help in the business or maybe just a male thing, I don’t know… Only, my mom didn’t seem to be able to give him any…”

Jason had an inkling of where this story was going, he nodded encouragingly. Hunter continued,

“So she prayed; she prayed every single night for a child. And then, after months and months in which she never lost faith, Artemis showed up. She’s the goddess of childbirth so she said she would make it happen, with one condition: I was to be claimed by her on the day of my sixteenth birthday, to join the hunt forever.”

“What happened then?” Percy asked; he looked as enthralled as Jason.

“My mom agreed, upon the river Styx. Nine months later, I was born. And, well, I wasn’t what any of them expected. First, I didn’t look like my father at all. I looked like, well, Artemis. So he got mad, accused her of cheating; he wouldn’t listen to my mom’s explanations. He didn’t believe in any of that stuff with the gods, and… and one night he was drunk, he lost it and he killed her. I was four
or five.”

At this point, Hunter’s expression turned somber. He looked down.

“If you don’t want—"

“It’s fine, it’s… I’m fine. He did end up raising me I guess. Maybe out of guilt, I don’t know. It was mom’s friends from Artemis’ temple who told me of my mom’s agreement with the goddess. I was actually pretty excited about it. I hated working with my father, or living with him. I don’t actually consider him my dad. So yeah, I was anxious to leave. I practiced hunting every day; I was really good at it. He later found out about the agreement, too. He used to say that it better be true, since he couldn’t stand me anymore. He said all of his friends mocked him for my appearance. So it seemed like a pretty good arrangement for everyone.

“The day came I turned sixteen. He, of course, was drunk and kicked me out of the house. I was wandering out in the city at night, and it was then that Artemis showed up. I was ecstatic, but she seemed surprised. She hadn’t planned on me being a boy. She rejected me; she said I had no place among her hunters.

“I pleaded, I told her I had nowhere else to go, that she had sworn upon the river Styx. She argued that my mom was dead so it wasn’t actually valid anymore, and that she herself hadn’t sworn to anything. In the end, she took pity on me and granted me the same immortality she gave to the girls who actually join her hunt. But I won’t ever be a part of it.”

He looked up.

“I haven’t seen her since then. I guess she has forgotten. It was so long ago,” he told them. “I’ve been alone all my life. This is the longest conversation I’ve had in ages. Long ago I saw other demigods on these lands, but they gradually disappeared and the world turned strange and unfriendly.”

“Come with us,” Percy said.

“No,” Hunter said.

“Why not?”

“I…”

“Come on.”

“No, I…” he looked angry. Not at them, Jason guessed, but at himself. “Okay, look, I’ll try to reach that Camp of yours in America. But on my own.”

Percy was about to protest, but one look at Jason’s warning expression shut him up before he could say anything.

“Okay,” Jason said, smiling at the boy. “We’ll see you there.”

Hunter returned the smile and got up, so did Percy and Jason.

“Good bye, then. See you soon,” he said.

“See you soon,” Percy said.

“Oh, and… Percy? Maybe if you’re both in the water it would work?” Hunter said with shrug. He
then ran to the woods and disappeared.

“What did that mean?” Jason asked, baffled.

Percy’s smile was wide and playful. It was an ominous sight.

“It means we’re going skinny dipping,” Percy said.
Percy’s smile did not falter all the way to the lake. His good mood did not waver while he was basically dragging a reluctant Jason towards it. His spirits were still up while he explained his plan to Jason. No, it had been the sight of his clothes from the night before—drying by the morning sun—that wiped the smile right off his face. It had been the reminder of what had happened that killed his mood and soured his spirits.

“Are you okay?” Jason asked, behind him.

“Yeah,” Percy said.

He turned around, and offered Jason a bright, fake smile. Jason’s expression of concern didn’t change one bit. Damn him for knowing me so well, Percy thought. He closed his eyes and exhaled, thinking of what was going to happen next.

“Right, let’s heal you and kick that poison out of your body once and for all,” he finally said, taking his shirt off and throwing it away.

That did the trick. Jason’s alarmed expression was a sight to behold. It raised Percy’s spirits, mood and threatened to do so to other parts of him. Percy crossed his arms, feigning confidence and trying to keep the shakiness off his voice.

“Well? Are you going to do it? Or do I have to take your clothes off myself?” he said with a smirk. He could feel his left leg giving up and start to shake. He gulped.

“All right, all right,” Jason said with resignation.

Percy looked the other way while Jason started to undress. He took off his shoes, pants and underwear. He stole one single glance at Jason, while taking off his socks. It had been just a quick one, but Jason looked just as Percy had imagined him, maybe even better. Percy didn’t even get surprised that he had been picturing how Jason would look under his clothes. Jason was also looking away from Percy, so all he saw was his wide, toned back. He even looked taller, how in Hades was that possible? And… were those dimples on his butt?

Percy looked away, and then down on himself and, predictably, there was his penis ready to go out and play. He did the only, mildly reasonable thing that occurred to him in that moment: he ran and jumped into the cold waters of the lake. He was pretty sure he had yelled ‘KAWABONGA!’ all the way until he crashed the surface of the lake.

Being in the water immediately made him feel better. He, as a rule, always felt much better when he was on the water, even fresh water. In the end it was all the same. But it was the cold of it that made him feel grateful; his little friend had calmed down. And then he broke the surface of the water with his head and got a full frontal of Jason Grace’s naked body, and not even a glacier could have helped him with that one.

He blinked fast twice. Jason didn’t even bother to cover himself as he entered calmly into the lake, giving Percy time to appreciate the form of every single muscle, all the bumps, nooks and veins on Jason’s body, all highlighted by light reflected off the water. Percy had tried to look away from the main attraction, but if this little adventure had proven something, was how bad Percy was at holding off on some of his impulses. He caught a small glimpse of Jason’s cock before it was under the water. He felt his face redden. Jason swam, all strong arms and shoulders, towards Percy; who
suddenly felt completely inadequate and self-conscious. His own frame was much skinnier now.

Jason was in front of him now, his blue eyes piercing Percy’s and his golden hair shining under the sun. His handsome features impossibly enhanced by the glittering light of the water.

“So, how do we do this?” he asked.

Percy realized he had had his mouth wide open.

“Right, yes,” he said as firmly as he could. “I guess I…”

He took Jason’s muscular shoulders, dying a little on the inside. He felt inside a damn romance novel but, the worst part was, he didn’t actually mind it.

“You should do the same,” he braved to say, and managed to suppress a giggle when Jason obeyed.

“Do I have to close my eyes?” Jason asked.

“I… I guess…” Percy babbled. “Yes,” he said, now more firm. This was actually important, he thought. It was time to get serious.

Jason took a couple of seconds to obey Percy’s orders this time, but in the end he closed his eyes.

“I’m going to submerge us both, all right? You should be able to breathe,” Percy said, gaining confidence in that this was going to work.

Jason nodded, his face completely trusting, and Percy, encouraged by that, took them both under water.

Before he could steal any more glances and break his own concentration, Percy closed his eyes. The effect was instantaneous and took him almost no effort at all. They were connected. They were one. One single organism submerged under water, already healing. The poison was completely neutered in a couple of seconds. They grinned. This time, the link was perfect.

They remained like that for a long time, experiencing each other’s feelings, doubts and desires. They saw themselves as the other saw them, and they saw the other as they saw themselves. It was mind-blowing. They saw themselves as brave, as scared, as kind, as a pain in the ass, as incredibly loyal, as petty, grudge-holding and completely forgiving. They loved their contradictions and were amazed at their similarities.

Their heads broke the surface of the water at the same time and, in unison, they opened their eyes. They laughed, they did not let go of each other’s shoulders.

“I love this,” they both said, staring into each other’s eyes. Another laugh.

“I might get poisoned more often,” Jason joked, and then turned a bit serious. “Percy, that’s… it’s incredible, what you do. This thing…”

“Is it?”

“Yeah,” Jason assured him, squeezing his shoulder.

“Um, thanks,” Percy said, a bit embarrassed.

“So it’s done then,” Jason said. “The poison’s out.”
“Yep.”

They looked into each other’s eyes. There was an odd expression in Jason’s, and Percy was about to lose it. Jason was totally going to kiss him. He did want him, he had felt it just seconds before. It was clear as day. Those doubts back then had been all his own.

And then Jason broke away.

“We better get going,” he said, already out of Percy’s reach. “Now that we’re at one hundred percent,” and he swam fast towards the shore.

Percy was left in the middle of the lake, confused and upset.

He helped pack all of their belongings, bitterness and bad thoughts accumulating within him, mad theories and paranoia now forming in his mind. He didn’t bother to try and hide his unhappy expression. He waited for an “are you okay?” that never came, and Percy knew why. Jason knew perfectly what had happened or, more accurately, what hadn’t happened.

They were at the ship, now as good as new, and Jason was looking at the Video Shield.

“Do you know where that is?” he asked him, showing him the image of yet another city in it. “That’s Rome.”

Percy just nodded.

“Man, I so do not fancy another trip to Rome,” Jason said in a half-hearted lament.

“Do you mind if we go by sea?” Percy asked forcefully. “I so do not fancy another crashing,” he added in a nearly mocking tone.

“Yeah, sure,” Jason said sheepish. “I’ll get us to the coast flying and you’re the boss the rest of the way.”

“Okay,” and he went right to his room and laid on his bed.

The knock came much earlier than he expected, and much later than he wanted. Jason opened the door after Percy didn’t reply.

“Oh, I thought you were asleep,” Jason said.

“I’m not fond of sleeping lately,” Percy replied.

“Oh, um…” Jason looked down and played with the knob of the door. Percy nearly smirked.

“Anyway… You’re it. Ship’s all yours.”

“All right,” Percy said, jumping off his bed.

He was at the helm of the boat. The sea breeze was on his face, calming him down, but not quite enough. Percy hoped the smell of the sea would soothe him, chase away the memories of his nightmares from last night, the drowning, the screaming, the darkness... But it was in vain. His shoulders hurt. His chest felt tight. He set the course and went to the very front of the ship.
Even more breeze and even a clearer smell awaited him there. The sight was even more beautiful, but the sea didn’t seem to be able to help him now. He felt miserable. Then he felt a body behind him, a head leaning on his right shoulder.

“Rose, you’re flying…” he heard Jason’s voice whisper.

“Wh—?”

His arms were caught by Jason’s. Percy caught on then.

“Close your eyes,” Jason said softly.

Percy did so.

“Hold on to the railing,” Jason said, guiding his hands. “Keep your eyes closed. Now, step up to the rail.”

Percy was smiling now. He felt Jason’s hands over his, and felt him lifting his arms.

“Open your eyes,” Jason said.

“I’m flying! Jack!” Percy said in his best girly voice. “Jack, I’m flying!”

It did feel like flying. All he could see was the open sea and all he could feel was the wind and Jason behind him, holding his waist. They were both laughing.

“I’m flying!” Percy repeated.

“Not yet,” Jason said into his ear.

And they both took off.

“What?!” Percy yelled while Jason laughed hysterically next to his ear. “What? Oh my gods, Jason! Put me down!”

Nothing but laughs from his kidnapper.

“Put me down this instant, Grace! Oh my gods!”

They were impossibly high, their ship a mere dot down below amidst the sea. Percy felt dizzy.

“What are you doing?!” he said when he felt Jason pulling him away. “I am going to kill you!”

He would have jerked, punched and kicked if he hadn’t been so afraid of falling down.

“Relax, I won’t let you fall,” Jason said at last. “Right, now face me.”

With extreme caution, they both maneuvered until they were face to face, Percy’s arms around Jason’s neck. Jason was controlling the winds, supporting their weight. It was almost like standing up, except there was no floor below and gushes of wind roared on Percy’s ears from time to time.

“I’m going to kill you,” Percy repeated. “You are out of your mind.”

“I just thought I’d share the gift of flying, since you shared the gift of not drowning,” Jason said, still smiling wide.

“You idiot…” Percy said, but he was smiling just as widely as Jason.
If did feel great. Percy felt free, and everything else but them looked so very small. For the first time in ages, he didn’t feel about to get strike down by a lightning bolt. A couple of dark figures flew past them, probably seagulls. Percy didn’t care if they were monsters about to attack. He didn’t care about anything else but the guy in front of him in that instant. They were above the clouds now. Their gazes locked into each other. His heart pounding against his chest, Percy went for it.

He kissed Jason.

Jason kissed him right back.

If flying felt freeing, kissing Jason was felt like total deliverance. Any preoccupation, doubt or leftover misery melted away. Their lips were pressed yet dancing and free against each other. Their hands were all over each other’s bodies. They broke the kiss to breathe just a second, and then were right back into it. Jason’s eyes looked bluer than ever, and his lips the most desirable. Percy kissed the side of his mouth, just over Jason’s scar and then moved right back to his lips. The kisses were becoming fiercer and fiercer. None of them seem to get enough of the other. Then they separated again and their foreheads touched, they both were breathing heavily.

“I’m sorry… about before…” Jason said, almost out of breath.

Percy silenced him with yet another kiss. He held Jason’s head tight with his left hand, enjoying the feeling of his hair between his fingers, and his right hand was on his lower back. Jason was doing much the same. Their feet touched the deck of the ship. Percy hadn’t even felt their descent.

“Wow,” was all Percy could say once they separated. They were still in a tight embrace.

“Yeah,” Jason agreed.

“So,” Percy said, unable to contain himself. “Are you going to draw me like one of your French girls?”

They both laughed.

“I might,” Jason replied in all seriousness.

“What?” Jason asked, suddenly worried.

“Really?”

“Yeah, I mean, if you want to,” his eyes searching for something in Percy’s.

“I… I don’t know,” Percy said, not helping looking away. “I—I’ll think about it,” he added lamely. He felt like a shy, inexperienced schoolboy.

“Oh,” Jason said, he planted a kiss on Percy’s cheek with tenderness that only increased the feeling-like-a-schoolboy thing for Percy. ”I really like you.”

“Me too,” Percy said, looking at Jason’s face away. He really, really did like him. Jason smiled, and it was now his turn to look down all embarrassed. Percy felt a bit of a confidence boost, being able to cause that.

They kept kissing and testing the limits of their embarrassment—which proved to be quite flexible, almost nonexistent—all the way to Italy. Percy loved every minute of it.
The disembarking took them longer than usual, since they kept sharing glances and smiles the whole time. Jason had gotten pretty good at helping with the boat, so Percy took this as a chance to lie back and enjoy the view; the view of his now sweaty boyfriend, that is. Were they boyfriends now? They hadn’t said anything about it. Should he ask? Were they too old for the whole asking thing? Percy shook his head. He decided that to worry about that later, if ever. For now, he was pretty content. He knew Jason couldn’t stand just, well, standing around doing nothing while he did all the work. It was amazing how many things he just knew now, like now he knew it was okay to hug Jason from behind while he did last minute checks to the ship so everything was in order for a quick escape if necessary.

“So, how’s everything?” Percy asked, his chin on Jason’s shoulder. He liked doing that, it was strong and warm and Jason smelled of, well… Jason.

“Pretty good,” Jason replied, looking at a screen. “I got it ready for an escape by flying, if you don’t mind. It’s quicker.”

“I don’t mind,” Percy said, with his eyes closed, now burying his nose on Jason’s hair.

“Percy,” Jason said.

“M-hm?”

“Nothing,” he said. “It’s just… you’re very touchy-feely. It’s… new.”

“New?” Percy asked, pulling apart from Jason, and frowning slightly. “So Piper didn’t…”

“What? Oh, no, I mean, yes. I meant Nico…”

It took a while for Percy’s brain to process that.

“You and…? Nico and…? But…? How did…? When that…?”

“I think there’s smoke coming out of your ears.”

“Oh, shut up, Grace.”

“Make me.”

And they were kissing again. Percy forgetting the Nico issue completely, for now.

“You should really shave,” Percy was saying, touching the irritated area around his mouth while they walked. “Or let it grow.”

“So do you,” Jason commented distractedly, still looking at the Video Shield with a frown of displeasure. “This is useless…” he stopped walking.

“What is?” Percy asked, also stopping.

“It keeps showing the whole city,” Jason replied, giving the shield to Percy. “So that means we have to look around ourselves, which wouldn’t be that much of a problem if we knew what the thing looked like.”
Percy took a quick look at the shield, confirming Jason’s assertion, and sharing his frustration.

“Isn’t there anyone we could ask?” Percy suggested after a while. “You’re the Roman, you should know someone.”

“I don’t,” Jason said, shaking his head. “If we had a letter of introduction or something like that we could ask Tiberinus or someone like that. You’ve met him, right?”

“Yeah,” Percy answered. He and Annabeth had received Tiberinus and Rhea Silvia who at the time looked like Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn. They never did get to watch that movie, Percy realized. “He’s a good guy, helpful, too. I think he would help us, even without a letter from Camp Jupiter.”

Percy saw Jason thought about it for only a second or two.

“All right, let’s go then.”

They walked through Rome, helping each other with directions: Jason with his knowledge of Rome and Percy by having walked those exact same streets years ago with Annabeth, accompanying her on the start of her Mark of Athena mission. The deja-vu was just too much. They seemed to be dodging the very same cars, Vespa drivers, mobs of tourists, and even the same flocks of pigeons than when he had been there with Annabeth. Was he destined to make the same tour with every relationship of his? He looked over at Jason, who was quite different from Annabeth; for starters, he was a guy. But, at the same time, Jason and Annabeth were very much alike. Maybe his type was blondes who could kick his butt with ease?

“What are you smiling about?” Jason asked.

“Nothing,” Percy said. “I thought this would be bad, you know, bad memories. But, I don’t know, it’s… nice.”

“I see what you mean,” Jason said, looking around them. “We could stop by the Colosseum. Maybe there are some giants to fight,” he said pointing north.

Percy shuddered. They doubled a corner.

“No, thanks.”

“Thought so,” Jason said with a smile.

They had reached the river. But then, the very same place where Percy and Annabeth had stopped for pizza was in front of them, and Percy couldn’t resist any longer. He took Jason’s hand, who seemed surprised by it, but didn’t make any comment nor tried to pull away.


“What is it?”

“I think that’s him,” Percy said, nodding towards one of the tables of the café.

A man dressed in a smart suit was sitting there, watching something on a laptop, a cup of coffee and a plate of untouched food at his side. Whatever it was he was watching, it seemed to amuse him a lot, he smiled at the screen.

“Are you sure?” Jason cocked his head, appraising the man.
“I think so,” Percy said, squinting a bit.

The man looked up at them and his smile got even wider. Percy and Jason got closer. The man straightened up in his seat and closed his laptop. They were now in front of him. He kept on smiling.

“Uh, Tiberinus, sir?” Percy said.

“Yes?” he said, his voice deep and amused.

“I don’t know if you remember me, but—”

“Of course I do!” he said. “Percy, right?”

Percy sighed in relief.

“Yes,” he said. “Um, Tiberinus, sir, we were wondering if you would be able to help us.”

“I’m always happy to help,” Tiberinus said, lounging back on his char. His mannerisms seemed much more modern to Percy than those of the last time he had seen the god. Maybe modern America kept influencing the Ancient Lands, or Tiberinus had finally caught up with the times. “What do you need?”

Jason took the lead, explaining to him about their quest, and how the shield had led them to Rome but didn’t have any other clue on how to go on or where to look. Tiberinus nodded, deep in thought, but didn’t interrupt at any point.

“So, uh, that’s it,” Jason finished. "So, have you seen the Palladium around these parts? Or do you happen to know what it looks like?"

Tiberinus didn’t answer for a few moments. He took a sip from his coffee, wrinkled his nose in distaste and threw it away in a nearby trashcan.

“Well, yes, I happen to have seen such an object around Rome,” he finally said, sitting his now empty cup on the table. “A Palladium isn’t hard to miss… for us gods anyway.”

“Really?” Percy asked. “Could you tell us where?”

“Sure, my boy,” Tiberinus said and looked in his pockets for something. Finally, he produced a piece of paper. “Do you have a pen?”

“Um…” Jason said, looking at Percy.

“Here,” Percy said, handing Riptide to the god. He had the steel sword with him, and the sword form of Riptide was still useless, but he kept the pen with him at all times anyway. He didn’t have the heart to left it behind, and who even knew if the always-return-to-his-pocket function still worked.

“Thank you,” Tiberinus said. He looked at the pen with what Percy qualified as curiosity. Percy wondered if the god would be able to fix it. Before he could even think to ask, Tiberinus stood up and handed them the paper and pen. “Here you are, young men. You’ll find what you seek there. Now, I must be off.”

“What does it look like?” Jason asked, reading the piece of paper and giving back Riptide to Percy.

“Oh, you’ll know when you see it, trust me,” Tiberinus replied. He took his laptop from the table. “Up close, a palladium isn’t hard to miss even for the most mundane of mortals.”
Tiberinus was already walking away from them when Percy remembered something else from his previous encounter.

“Hey, where’s Rhea Silvia?”

Tiberinus stopped on his tracks.

“Oh, her,” he said without facing them, his voice rather cold. “Um, she’s fine I’m sure.”

And with that, he was off.

Percy looked him walk away, quickly than before. He knitted his brow.

“You think they broke up or something?” he asked Jason. The though made him sad, both for the couple and for himself, in a way. As if their break up mirrored his with Annabeth, or represented something greater about it that he couldn’t quite put his finger on. They had seemed so in love, just like he and Annabeth.

“I don’t know. Maybe,” Jason’s voice brought him back to reality.

He was staring at Percy. They linked hands immediately.

Perhaps it just signaled that all things ended, Percy thought then, even seemingly everlasting love. Perhaps they had to end for others to begin, he thought while he walked hand in hand with Jason through the streets of Rome, things that had the potential to be even better, if one had learned.
JASON PLAYS WITH DOLLS

Jason had no idea what he was doing and, for once, he loved that feeling. He was letting himself get swept away by whatever happened. He was letting himself be led by Percy. He had panicked before, at the lake, and ran away. It had taken seeing Percy just so mad at him for Jason to trash away his doubts and caution and lunge himself right into it. For now, it seemed totally worth it, if only for the feeling of freedom alone. The feeling of being a leaf in the wind, in a sea breeze, was exhilarating. He only had needed to let go.

He almost pranced walking through Rome, his hand and Percy’s firmly linked. Percy had seemed so deep in thought earlier, his face all serious and melancholic, so un-Percy-like. It was still irresistible, even more so. Jason laughed at himself.

“What?” Percy asked.

“Nothing,” Jason said. “I’m just happy.”

“About the quest? Having finally some direction?” Percy guessed.

“About us.”


They arrived at the address noted in the paper that Tiberinus had given them. It was an old store. The walls had been once bright red, Jason guessed, but now they were more maroon, painted so by the dirt deeply ingrained in them by time. The windows were bright new, though, and through them, they could see a wide variety of toys on display, even a couple of faceless and naked mannequins. The letters above the wooden door were peeling off, but still readable and bright:

MAL’S FUN EMPORIUM OF TOYS AND VARIOUS ATTRACTIONS

“That’s in English,” Percy noted.

“Huh,” Jason replied, scratching the top of his head with his free hand. He squinted his eyes and that’s when he saw it. “No, it’s not. It’s Latin.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“I guess I did get better at reading it,” Percy said, glaring at the letters. “ Weird.”

“Why? You’ve spent all this time on New Rome, so maybe—“

“That’s not it,” Percy said. “I did learn to read it, all right, but never in such a… fluent way. It wasn’t never like Ancient Greek to me.”

Jason smiled at that last phrase.

“That’s why some of the classes were hard,” Percy went on. “The professors insisted on giving their materials in Latin, and some sections of their classes as well. They didn’t bother translating when they read from some ancient text.”

“That sounds hard,” Jason conceded. He would have had problems too if he ever had classes like
that. He had considered going to New Rome University briefly, but didn’t find any of the majors offered any appealing. Maybe he could try again, Percy would be there…

“It was,” Percy said. “Remember when you found me reading from the tablet that Marcus had given us?”

“Greekepedia, yeah.”

“Well, it also had some of the original texts in Latin, but it also had translations and a vocabulary thing. It was kind of interactive, like a game. What if…” he got lost in thought.

Jason looked at the sign again.

“If it’s in Latin then it has to be linked to the gods,” he said. “Or to some monster. We better be careful.”

The door opened then, and both demigods took a step back. Their hands unlinked and swords already pointing towards the door.

“Oh, my,” the woman in front of them said. She was wearing a bright blue dress with white stripes here and there. An old-fashioned hat adorned her head. Her face was pale as marble and her skin just as smooth, her cheeks extremely rosy. She seemed taken out of another time. Jason couldn’t even begin to guess her age. Thirty? Twenty-something? She could even be forty.

They lowered their swords, only just. She may be able to see through the Mist, Jason thought, judging by her reaction to their weapons, or maybe she just saw their swords as revolvers or something, but he gathered that any mortal would have already ran away screaming. Then again, many would do the same when confronted with swords. He needed more information.

“Sorry,” Jason said. “Um, do you work here?”


“As a matter of fact, yes,” he replied. “Do you know what a Palladium is?”

She looked thoughtful at that, her hand now under her chin.

“It doesn’t ring any bells,” she said cheerfully. “But you’re invited to come in and have a look around.”

Jason and Percy looked at each other. They gave a resigned nod at each other and then they were walking right inside the store, followed by the woman.

The interior of the store was as mismatched as the exterior. Cobwebs and dust covered almost every surface, yet all the toys and merchandise looked clean and brand new. The only light inside the store came from the partly blocked by toys window. Percy and Jason explored the shop, while the woman went back behind the cash register. They went deeper and deeper, not quite sure of what they were looking for.

The deeper they went, the darker it got around them. The rows and rows of wooden shelves towered at all sides, reaching the roof, filled with delicate porcelain dolls in exquisite dresses, little cars and puppets that looked manually carved in wood, yo-yos of all sizes and spinning tops littered in random places, sad looking teddy bears and plastic action figures fresh out of their packaging. Those looked to be the most interesting of the bunch for Jason; there were little centaurs, cyclopes, and
other monsters. They weren’t the typical hilariously inaccurate depictions that proliferated in the mortal world; they were like miniaturized versions of the creatures, exact in every detail.

Jason kept scratching the back of his neck. The dusty environment was making his skin itch, but he also had the feeling that he was being watched. He kept looking back, as if he was being followed. The place seemed filled with energy, as if Percy and him had just entered a party in full swing yet everything around them was perfectly still. The sooner they could get out of there, the better, he thought while brushing a particularly large cobweb away from his face.

“Seen anything yet?” he asked Percy, who was walking in front of him, in a whisper.

“No,” Percy replied, also in a whisper. “It would be easier if we knew what to look for.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying,” Jason said.

“Hold on,” Percy said, stopping.

He produced the tablet from Athena’s cabin and turned it on. He lifted it in front of him. Immediately, a small red light in the back of the device turned on and Jason heard a chiming sound.

“Look,” Percy said, showing Jason the tablet.

It displayed an article. Jason saw his own face alongside a text that read:

Jason Grace

Son of Jupiter, half-blood…

“See?” Percy said, his expression getting brighter. “It’s like a Pokédex or something. We can use this to look for the Palladium.”

“Poké-what?”

“Gods, you had no childhood.”

Jason was about to reply, but a sound behind him caught his attention. He turned around to see nothing but dusty penumbra. It had been like a rustling, like someone dragging something on the floor.

“What?” Percy asked.

“I thought I heard something,” Jason explained. He frowned and squinted to look for anything unusual, but nothing else caught his attention. “It’s nothing, I think,” he looked back at Percy. “So let’s use the tablet to find the Palladium and get out of—ow!”

Something fell from one of the highest shelves on top of Jason’s head. Percy picked it up from the floor. It was a rag doll, its button eyes staring almost accusatorily at them, its stitched smile almost menacing. Jason took it and examined it, he then looked up.

“Maybe it just fell…” Percy said, his eyes also scanning the top shelves.

“Yeah,” Jason said, returning his gaze to the doll. “Gods, these things are creepy. This whole place is.”

“Yeah,” Percy agreed. “It’s making me see things. I swear that puppet clown just winked at me.”
Jason looked over to where Percy’s eyes were fixed on. Sure enough, there was a wooden puppet clown there, with a small spider running through one of its strings, and sure enough, it winked at Jason too. He jumped, dropping the doll to the floor.

“Everything all right back there?” they heard the cheerful voice of Gally say. “Need any help?”

“No,” Percy answered. “We’re fine.”

Jason looked down to pick up the doll but it wasn’t on the floor anymore. It seemed to have vanished. He looked up to inspect that creepy clown again, only to discover that it was also gone.

“Okay...” he said. “Something’s up. Use that thing to scan around,” he told Percy, pointing at the tablet.

Percy did so, lifting the device in front of them and slowly turning around. It didn’t seem to pick up anything, the screen remained blank.

“Does it have like, an app for that? Maybe you have to open it,” Jason suggested. The itchiness was all over his body now. Maybe he was allergic to something there.

They walked along a row of shelves, still scanning their surroundings.

“I think it kind of just works,” Percy’s voice said. The darkness was enveloping them quite quickly, and Jason could see almost nothing. “Anyway, I hope this thing knows what a Palladium looks like. It didn’t seem to have the information on it when I was looking stuff up on it the other night.”

“Does it even work in the dark? Does it have a flashlight or a flashlight app or—?”

He heard a bang in front of him, followed by the sound of something heavy being dragged through the floor.

“Percy?” he called. No reply.

He walked in a straight line. There was no sign of Percy.

“Percy?!?” he tried again.

“Anything wrong?” he heard Gally say, this time much closer.

“Nothing,” he replied, now with Nimbus at hand. “Percy?” he called in a harsh whisper.

He couldn’t see anything, and now he was definitely sure that there were noises all around him. Rustling and creaks could be heard at random intervals, along with what Jason could only classify as the sound of faint laughter. He heard a bang below him and the whole floor rattled, sending up clouds of dust. Jason coughed.

“Anything wrong?” he heard the familiar voice behind him.

He turned around in an instant. If anyone was there, he couldn’t see them. Was the shop that big?

“Anything wrong?” he heard above him.

The question was repeated all around him, by dozens of identical, cheerful voices. He swung his sword randomly around, knocking various items out of the shelf in front of him. The voices ceased, only to be followed by the unmistakable sound of childish laughter.
“Show yourself!” he demanded to the darkness.

A dozen or so of small, bright lights appeared near him, little dots of multicolor light that, just as suddenly, disappeared. He heard something small scurrying on the floor, between his feet. Something grazed his ankle.

“What did you do to Percy?” he addressed the darkness. “You know why we’re here, don’t you? Just let us take the Palladium and—”

A lot of soft things, most likely more rag dolls, fell on top of him, sending him stumbling across the row of shelves. He tripped with something on the floor and fell backwards against one of the shelves, even more stuff fell on him. He managed to get up, but things insisted on keep falling on his head. He ran, being chased by a rain of more solid and hard toys. It was getting more painful.

Something hard and angular hit his head, a sharp pain now on top of his head. He kept running until he found himself on a dead end. At least random stuff had stopped raining down from above.

Yet another bang from the floor, and more dust filled the air. Jason tried to run again but he tripped on something and fell, face first, to the wooden floor. He got up, his nose and mouth now wet with blood. He was mad now, and the constant laughter coming from all sides just infuriated him more.

“All right, enough!” he said, and an arc of electricity formed from his right hand, went all through his sword, and shot from the tip of it to a spot on the floor nearly two yards away. A small fire began. He heard a high-pitched scream.

The dancing ember light from the fire allowed him to see somewhat now. Most of the toys of the shelves were on the floor, but they weren’t just strewn around, they were standing up. They were standing up and advancing towards him.

Limping rag dolls, stiff-moving action figures, porcelain figurines and more toys, all walking toward him. He would’ve laughed if they hadn’t looked so evil in the firelight. He tried to run but something had caught his feet, making him fall over for the umpteenth time. The light was getting brighter and brighter, the fire had caught on quite rapidly on all the wooden surfaces surrounding it. With that light, Jason could see that his feet had been tangled with dozens of strings. He also saw a pair of clown puppets crawling toward him, evil smiles painted on their faces.

Jason looked behind him, one of the biggest rag dolls was nearly next to him, and this one was carrying a big knife. He cut the strings with his sword and untangled the ones that still joined his feet as fast as he could. He stood up, and that’s when the mannequins attacked.

Coming out of nowhere, they hold him with considerable strength against the shelf on his left. Their faceless heads were directly in front of him. He could almost picture smiles on them. A teddy bear with a long razor blade sat on his shoulder, pointing the blade to his neck.

The fire kept crackling, consuming everything on its path. Jason heard someone getting closer, and then the familiar cheerful voice. This time, its original owner was the one speaking.

“Now, what do we have here?” Gally said, now in front of Jason.

He didn’t speak. His mind was on overdrive, trying to think of a way out. He tried to wrestle his arm free and then raise his sword but one of the mannequins took it and threw it away. That was a mistake from their part. He rushed to close his eyes and then focused on his weapon still on the air, he pictured becoming wind again. He guided the gust of wind towards him and then imagined it solidifying right on top of one of the mannequins. The sword fell with its sharp tip pointing down,
embedding itself on the head of the mannequin, which fell to the floor. Jason’s right arm now free, he punched the other mannequin and sent the teddy bear flying towards the fire, to the despairing and furious screams of Gally. She lunged towards him and he hit her with one elbow.

Sharp pain immediately began on said elbow, as if he had broken a window with it. Small white pieces of ceramic were incrusted deep in the skin. He looked at Gally, half her face was gone, a huge hole in its place, and cracks forming all through her skin. A life-sized porcelain doll, he thought. She screamed in rage and he ran, stepping over small, furious dolls and kicking noisy, enraged, wooden cars out of his way.

He knocked over shelves and kicked anything that came on his way. He ran without destination, chased by dozens of malevolent toys, and hoping he wasn’t getting even deeper into the shop. The loudest bang yet came through the floor, almost making him lose balance. A plank shot upwards from the floor in front of him and Percy’s head appeared through the whole.

“Percy?” Jason said.

“Oh, thank the Gods,” Percy said. “They took my sword and Riptide’s still useless. Come down here!”

“What? No! Look, there’s this murderous life-sized—“

“Do as a say!” Percy demanded, and his head disappeared back into the hole.

With no other objection from his part, Jason used Nimbus as an axe and made a hole big enough on the floor for him to jump into. He landed on his feet, coughing and disoriented, but practically unharmed—if one didn’t count the bloody nose and mouth.

“Jason,” Percy called him.

He was crouching next to a frail, old man on a corner of what, Jason guessed, was the basement. The man looked on the verge of death, Jason observed once he got closer. Percy’s arms were a mess; the skin was full of long, fine cuts. Puppet’s strings, Jason guessed.

“Cut those,” Percy said, pointing at the wide ropes tying the old man’s hands and feet to a bar on the cement wall.

Jason did so.

“Thank you,” said the old man, speaking seemed to require an enormous effort for him.

“You’re welcome,” Jason replied, and then looked at Percy. “Do you mind telling me what on Olympus is going on?” he asked.

“It’s a bit complicated,” Percy said, helping the old man to get up.

The chaos above seemed to be getting closer; soon, Jason’s pursuers would see the hole in the floor.

“They’re all looking for you then? Even the mannequins?” Percy asked, looking up.

“Yeah, I think I killed one of those,” Jason replied.

“Right, yes,” Percy said, shouldering the old man and starting to walk slowly but surely. ”Mind opening that?” he added, pointing at a metal safe box attached to the far wall. “They got my stuff in there.”
Jason used Nimbus to slice open the box, and took out Percy’s steel sword and backpack. He tossed the sword to Percy.

“Thanks,” Percy said. “Check if there’s enough Mist for three people.”

“You sound like a man with a plan,” Jason commented while rummaging through the stuff inside the bag, the magical lyre from Apollo’s cabin was broken, the strings had snapped. He tossed it aside. “I like it,” he said, Percy smiled at him. He finally found the bottle of spray-able Mist and shook it. It didn’t sound promising. “No. There’s enough for one, tops.”

“Right,” Percy said, knitting his brow in concentration. “I can use that, but… What else we got? Something that would allow us to escape. Anything?”

And then Jason remembered. He reached into his pocket and produced the small golden ring Nico have given him.

“There’s this,” he said, holding it up. “Ring of Gyges, makes you invisible.”

“Nico?” Percy asked.

Jason nodded.

“Right,” Percy said. Jason could almost see the gears turning inside Percy’s head, coming up with a new plan. “Give it to Mal,” Percy ordered.

“He’s Mal?”

“Short for Pygmalion. And our friend Gally up there is Galatea, not the original, though. He likes the name,” Percy explained, all in one breath.

“She would never have done this, my Galatea,” the old man said with sadness. The words seemed to be costing him less and less.

“He was revived by Gaea. He didn’t want anything to do with her. He settled here instead, made toys. Toys came to life and then went crazy,” Percy summarized. “Now, the ring?”

“Right, sure,” Jason said, blinking and shaking his head. “Here,” he said putting the ring in Pygmalion’s wrinkly finger. He disappeared.

“Spray me with Mist,” Percy said, closing his eyes.

Dozens of tiny footsteps were now heard right above them. The fire had also reached them, the heat was becoming unbearable.

Jason sprayed Percy, whose form shivered and changed into one of the mannequins in front of Jason’s eyes. The bottle was empty now, so Jason tossed it aside.

“Okay, plan,” Percy’s voice was still his voice. Although it unnerved Jason to hear it coming from a faceless figure. “They won’t attack me, and they won’t see him. They’d think we’re still trapped here.”

“And me?” Jason asked.

“You run like Hermes with diarrhea.”

“Great,” he deadpanned, but readied himself.
Jason opened the now unguarded door. They walked through a narrow hallway that led to some stairs. Another door was at the top.

“Anything else? Did you find anything about the Palladium? Is it even here?” Jason asked in a whisper once they had almost reached the top of the stairs.

“Oh,” Percy replied behind him. “Yeah, about that… There was a Palladium down there in the basement, but not the one we were looking for. It was the Ancile.”

“The Roman one? How did that even…?”

“They have lots of good luck charms down there, to protect Pygmalion.”

“Protect him?”

“He’s their creator and they think his life is tied to theirs. So if he dies, they die,” Percy explained. “They got a bit overprotective so they locked him up, out of the dangers of the outside world.”

“Huh,” Jason said, and then listened attentively. The sound behind the door had subdued. “That’s as clear as we’re going to get, I think. Ready?” he said, looking back.

The Percy-mannequin behind him nodded.

Jason opened the door and ran. He hoped Percy and Pygmalion would be able to escape alongside him. The innumerable shelves were now empty and the place was filled with smoke. He coughed and wondered if the toys would be affected by the smoke. With his luck, it was most likely not the case.

His eyes stung and his lungs got more and more filled with smoke, but Jason kept running towards the exit. He smashed a couple of cars that crossed his path, not giving them the chance to sound the alarm just yet. Once he was a prudent distance away from where the hole had opened in the floor, he knocked over a shelf. Hopefully they still hadn’t spotted it yet. They will follow him now and leave that spot alone without realizing their prisoners had escaped. He ran faster, making as much noise as he could, which wasn’t hard with the help of his increasingly violent coughing.

“Over there!” he heard a cheerful voice say almost right behind him, confirming the success of his plan.

He could see daylight now. He ran towards it, with a legion of half-burned, pissed off toys in his tail. A puppet fell from above, his strings cutting Jason’s face and his small arms doing all the damage they could to the rest of him. He pushed it aside with some difficulty and kept running.

He was next to the exit door now. There was no sign of Percy yet. His left hand was on the knob of the door, ready to open it. His right hand held Nimbus, ready to attack. His vision was blurry and his thoughts all scrambled.

From the thick cloud of smoke a figure emerged, a mannequin.

“It’s me!” the figure said, while struggling to walk towards him. Percy coughed as violently as Jason. “Come on,” he said once he reached him. “I think Mal passed out.”

They opened the door and exited the store. Blessed fresh air started to fill his lungs, pushing the smoke out. They kept walking as fast they could for a couple of streets. They saw a pair of firefighters trucks drive past.
They leaned against a wall. Percy was Percy again, he seemed to be palpating something in the air. After a while, Pygmalion’s figure appeared, his face tired, his eyes closed.

“He’s still breathing,” Percy said.

Pygmalion stirred, after a minute or two, he opened his eyes.

“Did we make it?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Jason replied.

After a worrying fit of coughing from Pygmalion’s part, he pulled apart from Percy. His hand was against the wall for support. He beamed tiredly at them. He seemed like he was going to be okay, eventually.

“I don’t know how to thank you enough,” he said.

“No problem, man,” Percy said with a smile of relief that Jason mirrored. “So is it true, then? If you die they die?”

He shook his head slowly.

“I have no power over any of them,” he said solemnly. “They’re as free as you and me; free to choose their own paths. I tried to tell them but they just wouldn’t listen. The fact that I created them has no relevance, none whatsoever,” he smiled sadly. “Aphrodite is a twisted goddess, or maybe just careless. I was scared and alone in this new world of yours, and longed for company. I guess she thought the same trick would work again. I suppose—”

He didn’t finish, the blade that went through his chest killed him instantly.

“Well, that’s taken care of,” a voice said behind Pygmalion. “See, that’s what happens when you don’t pay your debts.”

The blade retracted and the body fell, revealing his murderer.

“Tiberinus!” Percy exclaimed, fury and shock in his expression.

“What the—?” Jason said, feeling much the same.

Tiberinus smiled at them. It was a cold, mocking smile that Jason had seen glimpses of back when the talked to him back at the café, but now it was on full swing. Jason had dismissed it without a second thought; after all, it was Percy the one who had met the god before.

Percy was pointing his sword at the river god now, who did the same.

“Who are you?” Percy demanded, trembling with fury.

The river god gave a step back, his smile still on.

Jason took the tablet out of the backpack and pointed its camera towards Tiberinus.

Remus

Twin brother of Romulus, founder of Rome, born to Rhea Silvia...

“Remus?” Jason said in disbelief.
“The very same,” not-Tiberinus said, his form shivered and changed much like Percy’s had done back at Mal’s basement. “Mist is quite useful, isn’t it? You can even get it on practical spray form! Gotta love those Monster Mart sales.”

“How are you even alive?”

“Oh, I’m sure you know,” Remus said.

“Gaea,” Percy spat the name. Remus nodded.

“Well, this sure has been fun,” he said. “But I must be going; my dear mother and step-father shouldn’t be too far behind, ready to yell at me. Thanks for doing me this favor, demigods. I’ll be seeing you!”

Percy lunged at him, but Remus deflected the attack and threw a small object at them, which exploded in mid-air.

A legion of monsters appeared all around them. Harpies, cyclopes and telekhines, all armed to the teeth. They leaped at them and Jason swung his blade wildly.

“It’s just Mist!” Percy said next to him.

Jason paused immediately. He blinked twice and all the enemies were gone, including Remus. They were alone. Percy threw his sword to the floor. He screamed in frustration, his hands were buried in his hair, making it more wild than usual.

Jason kneeled next to Pygmalion’s body, and lifted him up with both his arms. Percy kept punching the wall, not caring about hurting himself, apparently.

“We should take him with us. Bury him,” Jason said.

Percy was heaving, his forehead and arms pressed against the wall now.

“Yeah,” he said. Jason couldn’t read him. “Least we can do. It was our fault he died.”

“Percy, don’t—“

“Come on,” Percy said already walking away from him.

The walk back to the ship was a miserable one.
Percy had lost his sword during the fight, but that didn’t actually matter much; he enjoyed punching Maenads on the face. It was way more satisfying than slice them neatly in half and making them explode into monster dust. Besides, Jason had warned him what would happen if they killed them—Dionysus would get all ‘fury of the gods’ on them and curse them with madness or something worse. Percy could have replied that he was already mad enough, ignore the advice and start killing the damn things left and right; but in those moments, Jason’s serious expression was the only thing that could possibly make him pause and heed a warning.

The initial joy of punching Maenads on the face and smashing their heads against rocks didn’t last long. His hands and arms were a mess. The Maenads seemed to be made of rock so it was basically like punching that wall back at Rome all over again. Their long, sharp nails scratched his arms much deeper than any puppet string. The Maenads didn’t seem very fazed by his attacks either. They kept singing in a drunken jumble of Greek and Latin what sounded suspiciously like the theme song from *Psych*. It was getting infuriating.

Jason didn’t seem to be faring much better than he was, hitting them with the hilt of his sword and throwing any object within his reach at them, even hitting them with their own thyrsus, when he managed to get hold of one. But, mostly, both demigods dodged, ducked and sidestepped as fast as they could, avoiding the sharp claws and fangs of the monsters. Some could say they were terrible at it, judging by their clothes torn to shreds and the innumerable cuts on their arms and legs but, Percy reasoned, the fact that they were still alive had to count for something.

In a desperate move, Percy hit one of them in the head with the Video Shield, breaking the thing in two and making it shoot sparks. The unmistakable smell of something burning filled his nostrils. The Video Shield was history. It wasn’t like it had been useful so far. He threw the pieces away. He heard something approaching and sidestepped almost as a reflex. A gigantic boulder fell where he had been standing just a second ago. The closest Maenad giggled and hiccupped, delighted.

“Party!” she yelled, and was quickly joined by a demented chorus of voices. “Murder!” was their next cry.

A couple of them sneaked behind him and threw him with extreme force against a tree. He huffed trying to get up as fast as possible, avoiding their next attack. His whole body hurt now, between scratches, deep cuts, nasty bruises, and broken bones, he was in no condition to keep avoiding them. He was getting slower and the Maenads showed no sign of stopping, or the slightest trace of fatigue.

He had had it. Pygmalion had died in front of him after he promised him to get him out of that crazy place and it all had been his fault. He had noticed something odd about Tiberinus, but didn’t bother to enquire any further and thus he had fallen right into Remus’ trap. Next, he and Jason had come to Pygmalion’s birth place, arguing all the way. Then, while they were burying the body, the Maenads had showed up and had ripped it to pieces, and now, Dionysus’ fan club was beating the crap out of them.

Percy caught sight of his lost sword on the ground a few meters away. He ran towards it, snatched it and with a wide and blind swing, cut off one of the Maenads’ head. The look of surprise on the demonic eyes of the girl remained while she dissolved into dust.

“NO!” Jason yelled, and Percy saw him look up, as if waiting for lightning to strike and turn them into turnips.
Nothing happened.

Percy smiled, his grip around his sword tightened.

“Oh, you’re done,” he told the approaching Maenads. He charged at them.

“Percy, stop!” he heard Jason’s voice say. He ignored him.

Moving like a whirlwind, he cut off the head of another one. He was pretty sure he was laughing now, a cold, unnatural, mad laugh. The other girls didn’t seem so enthusiastic now, looking warily at him.

“Our lord will punish you!” one yelled at him, shaking her thyrsus. “He does not tolerate party-poopers!”

“Oh, yeah?” he taunted them, almost jumping up and down like an overly excited puppy. He laughed at them in a way that could only be qualified as a maniacal cackle. He raised his sword once again and went after the one who had spoken. He never reached her, something pulled him back and sent him, butt first, to the ground.

“What the—?” he said.


It was a girl’s voice, much different to those of the Maenads, a kind of familiar one.

In a flash, the owner of the voice was in front of him, extending her hand to help him get up. He recognized her then.

“Elisa?” he asked, flabbergasted. “Wh—?”

Elisa, the other praetor of New Rome, rolled her eyes and sighed in exasperation. She grabbed him by the mangled arm and lifted him up with ease. All of his mad energy had left him, confusion and pain took hold of him now.

“Are you Dionysus?” the Maenad that Percy was about to kill asked.

Elisa turned around.

“No,” she replied, casually. “But, oh hey, I think you got something on your face,” she added, as if she was simply making small talk with a deadly follower of Dionysus.

“Do I?” the girl asked. Confusion was an odd expression for those crazy, blood-shot eyes of hers. “What is it?”

“MY FIST!”

With a sonic boom that sent Percy’s butt back to the ground, Elisa raced towards the Maenad. The Maenad was now on the floor, unconscious. And then, one by one, all of the Maenads were getting punched in the face or kicked on the back of their head with tremendous force. All Percy could see of Elisa was an intermittent blur. It all had lasted less than a couple of seconds. All that remained of their vicious, drunken attackers was a bunch of bodies in the ground.

“Did you kill them?” Jason asked, his eyes wide.

“Nah, I ain’t stupid like our friend Jackson here,” she replied, cleaning her hands on her purple t-
shirt. “But they might wake up so I better clean this whole thing up; move them a hundred miles or so away.”

She disappeared with a sonic boom again. The bodies on the floor started to vanish one by one.

“Is that girl Flash?” Jason asked him. He was now kneeling next to him.

Percy shook his head, his eyes still trying to catch a glimpse of Elisa.

“No,” he replied. “She’s Elisa, daughter of Mercury, praetor of New Rome.”

Jason let out of whistle of appreciation and then helped Percy up.

“Are you okay, dude?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” Percy replied. “Well, not really, but I’ll survive. How are you?”

“Likewise.”

A minute later, she was back with them. She didn’t even break a sweat.

“So what did you do?” she said.

“What?” Percy asked.

“So ooooorrrry,” she said, his hands raised midway as if she was trying to pace herself. “I meeean… whaaaaaat… are you… doiiing heeere? Diid I geeet the speed right?”

“Yeah, almost. And uh… we’re on a quest,” Jason replied vaguely, still staring at her with something akin to shock. “Um… Jason Grace,” he added, extending his hand.

She took it. Percy was afraid for a second that she would shake it at supersonic speed, ripping Jason’s arm off. Thankfully, it didn’t happen.

“Elisa Arriaga,” she said at normal speed. “So, a quest? I thought you two were, like, retired. Jackson here, at least.”

“We were retired,” Percy replied. “Exceptional circumstances.”

“Really?” she said, unimpressed. “Well, I gotta go.”

“Wait! So… you haven’t been at Camp?” Percy asked.

“No,” Elisa said. “Been running errands for dad for days now. Right now I’m supposed to deliver that at the Empire State,” she added, pointing to the package next to her that Percy hadn’t noticed until then. It was a big, ordinary cardboard box.

“What is it? And from where?” Jason asked.

“Some cable TV thingy from Japan, state of the art or something like that. He broke the last one on a discussion with Hermes over something or other. A bet, I think. I didn’t actually ask, but those two snakes of his are way too chatty.”

“Right,” Percy said. “Well, uh, thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” she shrugged. “Honestly, you’re lucky Dionysus doesn’t really care that much
for Maenads these days. But one more kill and I’m sure you two would be toast. Literal toast, probably. I thought you were smarter than that, Jackson.”

Percy was about to reply but Jason cut him off.

“He’s had a bad day. We both have,” he said while taking hold of Percy by the shoulders and massaging them distractedly. Percy relaxed a bit.

“Yeah, I can tell,” she said.

“So, where’s your transport?” Jason asked with his hands still on Percy’s shoulders. “Could you give us a lift or something? I mean, you said you’ve been running errands for days and you seem pretty unharmed. We’ve been attacked constantly: venti on the sea, shot down from the air by Deimos, you name it.”

“Oh, I just run,” Elisa answered.

“But… we’re hundreds, nah, thousands of miles away from Japan and you said…”

“Yeah,” she said, impatiently.

“So, how are you going to get to New York?”

“I told you, I run,” she said, picking up her package. “And I should be doing just that right now or dad will get pissy if he doesn’t get this thing soon. Olympus knows why he doesn’t just get Netflix or something,” she rolled her eyes. “I guess they still don’t have his telenovelas. Anyway, it was good to see you, Jackson. I hope Zhang is holding up the fort fine without me.”

“He is,” Percy said. “And yeah, it was nice to see you too.”

“Right. It was nice to meet you, Jason,” she said. Jason nodded.

She gave them both a quick, friendly salute and sprinted away at the speed of a bullet.

“So that was something,” Jason commented.

“Yeah,” Percy agreed.

They went back, wounded and miserable, to the ship.

“I’m getting really tired of being beaten up,” Jason said, collapsing on a chair. “Where to, then? I can’t wait for the next attack.”

Percy was at the helm, they were traveling by sea, but they still hadn’t sailed off. They had no destination with the Video Shield rendered useless.

“I kind of broke the shield on a Maenad’s head so I don’t know,” Percy said without looking at Jason.

“You what?” Jason said, straightening up and looking at Percy in disbelief.

Percy shrugged.

“Honestly, the thing’s been useless. We still don’t know how the luck of Olympus looks like or who
took it or why. We’ve been wandering aimlessly, just being attacked at every other step and getting other people killed,” he ranted on. “Well, more like me being the one getting another killed. If I hadn’t—“

“Oh, don’t start with that again,” Jason said.

Percy saw him roll his eyes in exasperation. Jason didn’t show it much, but Percy knew he was also on his last rope. He sighed.

“We’ve been so careless, falling into traps like we’re on our first quest,” he said, turning around to face Jason. “Next thing you know I’m going to wander into Medusa’s lair again, not seeing through a paper thin disguise.”

Jason stood up and walked to Percy. He took him by the waist and Percy let him. Their foreheads touched. Percy closed his eyes and breathed Jason’s zestful, electric smell in. He was always giving off that electrical smell, mixed with his masculine musk. Percy’s arms went over Jason’s shoulders.

Jason’s hands moved from Percy’s waist to his back, holding him closer. His hands went lower and lower. Percy moved his head until his nose was touching the side of Jason’s neck, still breathing in Jason’s scent. Percy felt Jason’s hands firmly on his lower back, his old Achilles’ heel. It was as if it still was there, because Percy felt more vulnerable than ever. Only this time, he didn’t feel in any danger, he felt safer than ever.

Then Jason’s hands moved even lower, now firmly holding Percy’s backside. A shiver went up Percy’s spine. Jason seemed to have noticed, because he tried to pull apart but Percy did not let him. He got the message, and stopped trying to separate from Percy. There was no room between their bodies now. Percy’s lips caught the border of Jason’s ear; it was his turn to shiver. They started to kiss, long and breathless, and Percy felt Jason’s hand go up again, this time under his shirt.

Percy’s dick was hardening fast, and he could feel Jason’s doing the same through the layers of clothing separating them. His heart beat faster and faster but, he realized, it was due to panic, not arousal. He broke the kiss.

“What?” Jason asked breathless, his face flushed and his hair already a mess. “What’s wrong?”

Gods, he looks devastatingly hot, Percy thought. Their bodies separated a little.

“Can we… can we, like, go slower?” Percy asked, lowering his gaze to the side.

“Oh okay,” Jason said while retracting his hands from under his shirt. Percy missed them immediately.

“Sorry,” he said.

“It’s fine, man,” Jason said, his eyes looking for Percy’s. He smiled once they met. “It’s cool, nothing to be sorry about.”

“It’s just that I never…”

“Percy, it’s fine. I get it.”

“I mean, like, not ever…” Percy’s face reddened even more, if that was possible.

“Never? As in never ever? Not even…”

“No, I think,” Percy replied, and he bit his lip. Those times hadn’t counted, right? Gods, now Jason
was going to think he was a… a what, exactly? No term came up to him, but he felt horribly embarrassed by the possibility.

“Dude, it’s fine,” Jason said, his frank smile wider. “It’s fine, you call the shots. You call the pace. I just want to…”

“Want to what?”

In response, Jason kissed him. It was quick and sweet yet oddly intense.

“That,” Jason said once they separated. “We’re… uh, we’re, like, together, right?”

“Yeah,” Percy replied, a smile creeping up in his lips. “Yeah, we are.”

“Good.”

“Good.”

Percy Jackson was Jason Grace’s boyfriend. The idea boggled his mind, and made him want to go skipping around the ship at the same time. His feelings were a mess; had he ever had such polarizing ones at the same time before? He was in a sort of grief over the whole deal with Pygmalion, frustrated over their null progress with the quest, embarrassed over his lack of experience, not knowing if he regretted or not having stopped Jason’s advancements, still reeling from his nightmares, and yet he felt as if the world suddenly had become brighter, as if everything was going to be okay. He hadn’t felt like that in a long time, and the fact that it was mixed in a soup of other emotions… he wondered if now there was actually smoke coming out of his ears. He was Jason’s boyfriend…

“You’re right,” Jason said, entering the kitchen and sitting in front of Percy.

They had decided to stay docked and come up with a plan, or any resemblance of one, before going anywhere. The world didn’t seem to be crumbling, yet. So it was probably okay for them to stall for a bit and just relax. Their food was cooking in the stove. Percy’s stomach rumbled, craving a proper meal. He and Jason had survived with far too much ambrosia, crushed sandwiches his mom had given him, and junk food. That couldn’t possibly be healthy, he thought while doodling in a napkin with Riptide, that’s all it was good for these days. The smell of the meat cooking made his mouth water.

“Percy?”

“Sorry, what?” he said, getting out of his hunger-induced stupor.

“I said you’re right,” Jason repeated. “You know, about this quest. We have no idea what we’re doing.”

Percy stopped his doodling and set Riptide aside. He leaned back on his chair, his arms behind his head. He exhaled loudly.

“We need actual direction,” Percy agreed. “I’ve been thinking…”

“Yeah?”

“That for a start, we need a real prophecy, not that nonsense Apollo gave us.”
Jason considered him for a moment.

“All right, but how?” he asked, leaning forwards over the table, his elbows sat on the cold, metallic surface. ”I mean, have you even had any dreams these past few days?”

Percy gave him a look.

“No, no, I mean… gods, sorry.” Jason amended, his arm made a gesture as if trying to reach for Percy’s hand, which was clearly out of reach. “I mean, you know, dreams.”

Percy’s look softened, finally understanding, and he shook his head.

“None, before that night at the tent I had been having dreamless sleep or just, you know, typical dream nonsense like being chased by a plate of chilaquiles.”

“Same here, not that colorful but yeah, not a single helpful one;” Jason said. “I mean even as counselor at Camp I would get flashes of other camper’s progress on their quests, or useful hints. And then I would contact them and let them know if I had seen anything critical. Hey, have you tried —”

“Contacting Camp? Iris messages don’t work since we were at my mom’s house,” Percy said. “I told you I was thinking of getting an actual prophecy so I tried to contact Rachel or even that new no-irritating nor backstabbing augur at Camp Jupiter we have now; but yeah, no luck with either of them. Hey! Maybe it has something to do with the Palladium; maybe not having it at Olympus is messing things up all over in non-obvious, non-fire-and-brimstone-raining-from-the-sky ways.”

“Maybe,” Jason said.

He looked deep in thought. His hands were now under his chin and his elbows on the table. It made his biceps pop up considerably, Percy observed. He observed that kind of stuff a lot recently. He didn’t mind, but it did make him lose a bit of focus sometimes. Like in that very moment, Jason had kept talking and Percy hadn’t caught any of it.

“…like Hunter said, right?” he managed to get.

Jason looked at him expectantly.

“Sorry, what were you saying?” Percy asked. Jason gave him a look. Percy raised his hands defensively. “Sorry, sorry, I got distracted by the sexy,” he now gestured to all of Jason.

Jason laughed that silent laugh that Percy loved, and shook his head.

“Idiot.”

Percy grinned.

“I was saying that Hunter was surprised by us being on a quest,” Jason explained, lowering his arms to the table so Percy wouldn’t get distracted. “Since there doesn’t seem to be any actual oracles or prophets around these parts anymore. So I think we need to keep trying to contact any of the Camps in any way we can.”

“I could try to—“

In that moment, Percy’s train of thought was derailed by the sight of his pen floating in the air between him and Jason, just a foot above the surface of the table. They both were on his feet
immediately. The pen rotated and twisted around, changing its trajectory and direction constantly.

“What on Elysium…?” Jason said, stretching out his right hand to his side. No doubt to summon his sword, Percy thought.

Riptide fell to the table, tip first. It landed vertically and, after a couple of seconds of standing still, it began to trace irregular lines of golden ink.

“I… I think it’s trying to write,” Jason said, his right hand back down.

Percy took the pen, it felt hot to the touch, and put it above the napkin he had been doodling on earlier. The pen gave a series of small taps on it, as if it was really excited to be on a writable surface. It was kind of a cute image, Percy thought.

And then, as Jason had said, it began to write:

hIPPOCrene MT heLICON -

And then it went very still and fell to the table, rolling towards the edge of it. Percy caught before it hit the floor. He raised the instrument in front of his eyes, it was cold again. He capped it and then uncapped it several times, but nothing happened. He left it over the table again, but Riptide was just a lifeless pen again.

Jason had taken the napkin and was reading it, examining it.

“Had it done this before?” he asked.

“No, never,” Percy replied still eyeing Riptide, that lay motionless on the table.

Jason was looking at it too, a look of mistrust on his face.

“What are you thinking?” Percy asked.

“That maybe is another of Lamia’s tricks,” Jason replied, taking the pen and inspecting it. “She was the one that messed with it in the first place.”

“Yeah, but just to, like, stop it from turning into a sword,” Percy argued, feeling oddly defensive of Riptide. “If she wanted to hurt us and was controlling it somehow, she could have made it turn into sword form and slice our throats or something.”

“I don’t think she works like that,” Jason said with his eyes still on the pen. “She’s more… crafty.”

“Writing cryptic messages doesn’t really strike me as her style, either,” Percy said, his arms were crossed over his chest now.

“That’s not cryptic, it’s just the name of a place,” Jason informed him, finally looking up. Something made him blink twice rapidly and then smiled slightly. “Here,” he said, giving Riptide back to Percy.

“So, what? A trap?” Percy asked while pocketing Riptide. “That sounds even less crafty. Yo, go here, guys! Totes not a trap!”

“I’m just saying that it’s not normal for a pen to start writing on his own, and the fact that she was the one to mess with it just fits too well,” Jason said.

“I hate it when you make sense,” Percy replied, thankful that Jason hadn’t brought up Percy’s failure to recognize Remus’ trap.
Jason clapped him on the shoulder.

“Let’s check that place out,” he offered. “It’s like the most meaningful thing that has happened so far. We just need to be careful.”

“What? Go there?”

“I thought you were the one who wanted to go!” Jason said, perplexed. “You were all ‘In Pen We Trust.’”

“I was just defending Riptide! And your arguments made no sense at first!” Percy said, not sure why he was that agitated. “Of course it’s a trap!”

They stared at each other for a second, and then promptly broke into a laugh.

Percy checked out the information on Hippocrene and Mount Helicon on Greekepedia. It didn’t look like a dangerous place from what he gathered, quite the opposite in fact. Hippocrene was a spring that had been created when Pegasus aimed his hoof at a rock on Mount Helicon, striking it with such force that the spring burst from the spot. The spring seemed to be the place ancient people went for poetic inspiration. Maybe they were supposed to go there and compose some sick rhymes and a prophecy would appear in them? Percy wondered half-seriously.

They reached Mount Helicon at almost night time. Once they had landed and were out of the ship, the sun was no longer visible in the sky, yet its diminishing light tinted it light purple with long clouds making dark stripes on the firmament. Around them, they could only see trees all over the slope of the mountain and a couple of deserted roads in the distance. So far, they had spotted no danger, but they knew very well that that could change at any minute. They had their weapons at the ready. They followed a trail that seemed to go deeper into the woods and up to the top of the mountain.

The wind carried the unmistakable sound of water to Percy’s ears. Jason didn’t seem to hear it.

“Over here,” he indicated, deviating from the trail. Jason followed him without protest.

As soon as they passed an especially thick patch of trees, they saw it. The spring from a high rock fed a pool of clear and crystalline water. Percy could totally see why people would come here to get inspired. The moon was reflected on the surface of the water, sending glimmering light all around it. The water looked so pure and refreshing, he wanted to drink it.

“Whoa,” he heard behind him and felt a hand on his arm. “What are you doing?” Jason asked.

“Wha—?” he asked, still on a daze. “I was… I was gonna…”

“Drink it?” Jason asked. Percy nodded. “Yeah, I want to as well but, you know, trap,” Jason said, and Percy noticed that he was indeed fighting the urge to walk towards it too. He kept licking his lips, as if already tasting the liquid.

“Right, yes,” Percy said, furrowing his brow.

It didn’t feel like a trap at all. Drinking the water felt like the thing they were meant to be doing. No other body of water had had that effect on Percy; it felt like he had found something long lost, something he didn’t even know he had lost.
Still, he trusted Jason so he didn’t try to approach the water. His resolution seemed to have increased Jason’s will power, who didn’t seem that anxious now to go to the pool.

“You can drink it. It poses no danger,” they heard a voice say. “No physical danger, at least.”

Percy scanned the place, trying to find the voice’s owner. It seemed to be coming from the high rock. The voice kept on talking.

“You will gain knowledge, and who knows what that would do to you?”

Percy and Jason nodded at each other, and each of them circled the pool of water from a different side, getting closer to the source of the voice. It was a woman’s voice, but it seemed to be formed by the sounds of the spring itself, the murmurs and splashing of the water, the quiet roar of it all.

“Who are you?” he heard Jason ask. “Show yourself.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to alarm you,” the woman said, sounding genuinely sorry. “I am so rarely wanted, so rarely sought that I rarely show myself.”

The flashes of the moon on the spring multiplied and shimmered, they augmented in intensity until they were one single source of light. The light moved and solidified into a figure sitting on a nearby rock.

Jason was next to him now, his sword still at the ready. Percy’s was hanging beside him along with his arm.

The woman looked at them, his face serene and gentle. Looking into her hazel eyes made Percy’s brain go into overdrive, making him think about all of the things he had seen, said and done; and it made his mouth open and close, not sure where to begin to tell her all of those things. He closed his eyes, waiting for the feeling to go away. When he opened them, he decidedly avoided her eyes, focusing instead on the rest of her.

She wore a simple Greek white tunic, and on her lap sat an open scroll of parchment. Her auburn hair was braid into a ponytail. Despite looking nothing alike, she reminded him of Thalia in a way.

He glanced at Jason, whose sword was lower and lower, and who kept blinking as if not quite getting what he was seeing.

“You okay, dude?” Percy asked, elbowing him lightly.

“What?” Jason said, looking at him now. “I was born on July 1st, 1994 to the mortal Raquelle Grace and the god Jupiter,” he let out in a single breath.

“What?”

“Sorry,” he said, scratching his head. “I… She… Doesn’t she remind you of…?”

“Thalia, I know,” Percy supplied, and Jason nodded, still with a look of confusion.

“Oh, so you’ve met my sister?” the woman said, making them jump. “I do miss her, always a good laugh with her,” she said, her gaze lost in the distance.

“What? Your sister?” Jason asked. “Who are you?”

“I am Clio,” she said. She stood up slowly, leaving her scroll on top of the rock with care, and
walked towards them. “The muse of history.”

Jason made a sound of sudden understanding that Percy did not share.


“Her sister Thalia, as in the muse Thalia, not our Thalia,” he explained.

“Right…?” Percy replied, his mind trying to remember all he could about the muses, but nothing of use came up. Didn’t they sing at Apollo’s parties? Clio didn’t look like a member of a pop group at all. “So, where are the other members of the band? You know, the other muses?” he asked conversationally.

“Band?” Clio asked, it was her turn to look confused. “I’m afraid I do not know what you mean by that, young demigod. As for my sisters, well, they’re on Olympus of course, or wherever they’re needed to inspire mortals and gods alike. They’re always so busy.”

“And you?” Jason asked. “What are you doing here? Why aren’t you out there inspiring people?”

She looked lost in thought, and then started to walk. They followed her.

“I’m not wanted, as I said,” she said. “I’ve been cast aside by the Gods. Not quite condemned to this place, but largely forgotten with nowhere else to go.”

“Why?” Percy asked.

They paced all over the edges of the pool while they talked. She looked sad to Percy, once he braved to look again at her eyes.

“Insolence, my father Zeus called it,” she said. “And Apollo accused me of overstepping on my duties, of trying to take his place.”

“And did you?” Jason asked. His sword was now gone, Percy noticed. He seemed as interested as him on listening to what Clio had to say. She could talk for hours and hours, and Percy was sure anything she said would be interesting.

“In a way,” she admitted. “I warned them of things, things that they refused to accept would happen again if they didn’t change their ways radically, if they kept insisting on ruling as they have always ruled. History repeats. They didn’t like that.”

“What kind of things?” Percy asked, feeling as if he already knew the answer.

“Fall of empires, ancient grudges coming back, old enemies rising again,” Clio said. “Like Kronos and the Titans, or Gaea and the Giants.”

“So you were right,” Jason said, while dodging a low branch. “Why didn’t they welcome you back?”

“They don’t like to admit when they’re wrong,” Percy answered and Clio nodded. “And if you were right, then they had to change, like, completely.”

“They argued that the worst was already behind them, and I was of no use,” she said. “Oh but the worst was yet to come, I warned them, and once I told them what it was I was laughed out of Olympus.”

“The worst?” Percy asked, dread filling him. “What would that be?”
“I was forbidden to speak of it to anyone,” she said. “I’m sure even them have forgotten.”

“But maybe that’s why we’re here!” Jason protested, blocking her path and facing her. He was taller than her.

“It doesn’t matter, Jason Grace,” she said with a smile. “Everything is already in motion, I’m afraid, or most of it. But tell me, when the time comes, will you be like lightning, seeking the path of less resistance?”

That seemed to shake Jason, since he stepped aside and looked at her keep on walking. They were back at where they had started.

“So you won’t help us at all?” Percy asked, his eyes darting at Jason behind them. He still appeared troubled. Percy looked back at Clio. “Not even a hint? We’re completely adrift here, no useful knowledge, no prophecies. Can’t you, I don’t know, inspire us?”

“I do not speak of the future anymore, not directly,” Clio told him. Was that a wink? Percy wondered. Her face was a mask once again. “I can only tell you about the past, and I will ask you, son of the sea god, will you let history repeat in the exact same way? Will you let bloodshed and war encroach this ever-expanding world? Or will you change things once again?”

“Oh, that’s… that’s kind of a hint, we can work with that,” he said, nodding but not very convinced. “Sort of. Anything else?” he prompted her, hopeful.

“Look for the future in the remote past, look for those who foretold happenings millennia ago,” she told him. “They are still around, forgotten, but very much alive.”

“Okay, okay…” he said.

She touched his face. It felt almost maternal. He suddenly missed his mom terribly.

“Much has been hidden from you,” and she looked at Jason as well, who seemed to be recovering from whatever mental crisis he had been having. “You’ve been robbed of your own history, you both already know how that feels.”

Percy thought of Hera and her whole switcheroo gambit, and those amnesiac months.

“It does pain me like it did to you back then, that you don’t know the whole truth, however small,” she said, retiring her hand from Percy’s face. “Even the smallest of moments can have a great impact, can teach us something, let us see more clearly.”

Percy furrowed his brow. She smiled, amused.

“Much like history itself, I repeat myself far too much, but heed this: You will gain knowledge, and who knows what that would do to you?”

And she was gone.

Jason was next to him.

“Any clue what was all that about?” he asked him, not as casual as he intended to appear, but Percy let it slide. Whatever was bothering him, if Jason didn’t want him to know in that moment, he must have had his reasons.

“Not really,” Percy answered. “That last part sounded like the most clear to me, though.”
“Oh?”

“We should drink from the water,” he said.

They were both kneeling at the shore of the pool, her hands submerged in the water. Percy made a cup with his hands and looked at Jason, who copied him.

“Ready?” Percy asked.

“Are you sure of this?”

“No.”

“Okay.”

And they both drank the water.

Percy was right, it was infinitely refreshing. It seemed to clear his head and energize him. Besides him, Jason’s expression told Percy that much the same was happening to him. They smiled at each other. Then everything around them changed.

They were in the outskirts of a town near some mountains, and it was daytime. Bianca di Angelo walked past them. Percy’s head turned to follow her, his mouth half-open. Next to her, there was also Zoë Nightshade. The sight of those two made Percy’s heart feel light and aching. Not far behind them, he saw Thalia Grace, glaring at the other girls. A younger Grover and a much, much younger version of himself, wearing a ridiculous golden-brown coat, were the last ones to climb down from the train.

“Man, you were tiny,” Jason commented, smiling. “A tiny, little, preci—“

“It’s the coat,” Percy said, scowling at himself, his younger self.

They followed the group of five, who got past a sign reading WELCOME TO CLOUDCROFT, NEW MEXICO. Percy remembered this, it wasn’t a lost moment. Anytime now, the Erymanthian Boar would show up and Jason would witness Young Percy getting his ass handed to him.

Only, it wasn’t that what happened then. Percy heard a screeching coming from behind, and turned around, as did Jason and the heroes from the past. They heard shouting joining the screeching. A group of other three teenagers, two boys and a girl, were running toward them, all wearing purple t-shirts. Behind them, at least two dozens of birds were chasing them, and diving to attack them once they were close enough to one of them. When they got closer, Percy could see that were owls, really pissed off and weird-looking owls.

“Striges!” he heard Zoë’s voice behind them.

Silver arrows shot up to the sky, courtesy of Bianca and Zoë. One by one, more than half the owls fell to the ground, each exploding into yellow dust. Young Percy and the others raced to help, two of them with their weapons out, and Grover with his pipes.

“Agh!” one of the newly arrived teenagers said, he seemed to be the oldest.

He was holding his neck with his hand. There was blood trickling from it. One of the owls was flying above his head, its sharps talons and long, golden beak ready to attack again. Another arrow
took care of it.

At the same time, another monster owl had been trapped on the girl’s auburn hair.

“Gwen!” called the other boy, the blonde boy.

“Oh my gods…” Percy said, recognizing him as a younger version of Jason.

“I don’t remember any of this,” Jason, his Jason, said next to him.

“Me neither,” Percy agreed.

Young Jason tried to get the owl out of Gwen’s hair with his golden lance. Once he impaled the creature, it predictably exploded, showering Gwen with monster dust.

“Ugh!” Gwen said.

“Are you all right?” Young Jason said and she nodded.

“Hey, watch out!” Young Percy said, while running to them at full speed. He had spotted two owls diving straight towards Young Jason and Gwen. After failing to get the creatures with a swing form Riptide, he pushed the two teenagers to the ground.

The monsters didn’t slow down, and half a second after they were all lying on the ground, their horribly sharp talons were already on Young Percy’s back. Instead of slashing the fabric of Percy’s coat, and proceed to do the same with his flesh, the talons of the owls broke. They screeched in pain before being silenced by more arrows.

“Nemean Lion?” Jason, next to him, asked. Percy merely nodded.

The threat of being shot at with even more arrows, and the sight of Thalia’s shield, made the owls retreat, flying from where they had come from.

Young Percy got up from the ground and then helped Young Jason and Gwen up.

“You all right?” he asked them.

“We’re fine,” Gwen said. “Right, Jason?”

The blonde boy nodded. And then, seeing both him and Jason from all those years ago, standing next to the other, Percy laughed.

“You are shorter than me!” Percy exclaimed, delighted, and almost punching the air.

“We’re,” Jason corrected.

Zoë was the first to recover and point an arrow at the new arrivals.

“Who are you?” she said.

Percy couldn’t get enough of seeing her and Bianca. They looked just so… alive. They felt truly there. He noticed Jason looking at Thalia in a similar way. She wasn’t currently dead; but the separation, and circumstances that led to it, had been quite jarring.

“Who are you?” the oldest of Young Jason’s group asked back, pointing at her in return with a thing, long sword. “You’re not from the Legion. What are those weapons? What’s that faun doing with
“You are the ones bringing an ill-omen with you,” Zoë said, not flinching one bit. “One shall be lost... One shall perish...” Percy heard her recite under her breath. “You talk first!” she said.

“We’re on an official quest!” the other boy nearly shrieked at her. Zoë merely raised one eyebrow. “The fifth cohort’s honor! The rescue of Diana from the perilous eastern lands!”

“I want to point out that I still don’t trust that new augur Octavian,” Gwen said, crossing her arms. “Wasn’t he going on and on about a quest to the “Sea of Mobsters” a few months ago? If this one’s a bust there goes the fifth cohort’s reputation, again.”

“What are you all prattling about?” Zoë asked, tensing the string of her bow a bit more. “You mentioned Diana. What do you have to do with Lady Artemis?”

“Hey! Everyone, stop!” both younger versions of Percy and Jason said at the same time.

The boys looked at each other. Young Jason recovered first.

“I think we all need to calm down,” he said.

“Oh, shut it, Grace,” the older boy said. “You don’t give the orders here, you might be the son of Jupiter but I still outrank you as centurion!”

“For now,” Young Jason grumbled.

“What? What was that?” the boy spat out.

“They’re right! We need to calm down, and just try to talk this out!” Thalia said, over all the shouting. “You know, as civilized people?”

“Hey,” Young Jason said suddenly. “Do I know you?”

He got closer to her, his eyes widening. Zoë pointed at him with her arrow.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she asked.

“Thalia?” Young Jason asked, his electric blue eyes almost sparkling.

Something exploded in the middle of the two groups. It had been some sort of smoke bomb, and when the smoke dissipated, there was only the original group of five walking toward the Main Street of the town. It was as if nothing had happened.

The scene changed around Percy and Jason again.

They were the tallest ones amidst a sea of children. Percy calculated them to be between ten and eleven years old. They all were gathered next to a beaten down school bus. A teacher was addressing the crowd.

“Now we’re moving on to the next part of our field trip,” the teacher explained.

Right, Saratoga Battlefield, Percy thought. Gods, he hadn’t thought about that field trip in ages.

“We’ll learn so much more about the final stages of the Revolutionary War, isn’t that exciting?” said the teacher, what was her name? Mrs. Brecht? Mrs. Brandt? Percy had liked her quite a bit, actually, too bad he had to ruin it by getting expelled that very same day. She smiled at the kids, who couldn’t
look less excited. “There will be actual cannons on this part of the trip,” she said, and excited murmurings broke among the crowd of students. She smiled wider.

“Now,” she continued. “Does everyone have their partner with—Yes, Ms. Paddington?” she addressed the girl whose hand had shot up before even the word “their.”

“Percy isn’t here,” the girl, a small black-haired thing, said.

The teacher sighed.

“Has anyone seen Percy?” she asked.

The student gave multiple negative responses.

“I think that’s him over there, Mrs. Travers,” a boy at the back of the group said, pointing behind them, towards a tree with an impressively wide trunk.

The youngest Percy yet was leaning on it, sneaking a peek at something in the distance. Mrs. Travers walked to him. Percy and Jason followed her. Jason looked more baffled than ever.

“Percy, what are you doing?” she asked him, making the boy jump in surprise.

“I’m… I’m just… There are monsters over there, Mrs. Roberts” he whispered. “They’re attacking a kid!”

His teacher crossed her arms, but looked to where Percy was pointing.

“They’re normal people in costume, Percy,” his teacher said. “They’re rehearsing.”

“No, they’re not!” he insisted. “They’re monsters.”

“Well, if they are, just leave them alone, and they won’t bother you,” the teacher said, and then offered her hand. “Come, we are on a schedule.”

Percy followed her, pouting, and making a point out of not taking her hand. He joined the group, who exploded in giggling and teasing all around him. He looked miserable.

Older Percy and Jason were not a little bit surprised when kid Percy seemed to have sneaked out of his group, and went to stare at the so-called monsters behind the tree again. They took a look with him, and he was right. A couple of monsters, humanoid and hulking gray things, were trying to grab a small, blond-haired boy. A small, blond-haired boy that was kicking their butts.

“You were one little badass,” Percy commented. Jason smiled at him, getting red in the face.

The boy swung his sword, which was way too big for him, at the monsters with feroicity. Kid Jason made them retreat more and more, he even managed to cut one on the knee. His winning streak didn’t last long, since a couple more monsters showed up. Soon, he was overwhelmed. Kid Percy gasped and jumped, while watching the fight unfold before him.

When one of the monsters managed to take Jason’s sword out of his grasp, making him stumble and fall to the ground, Percy left the safety of his tree and shouted at the monsters.

“HEY! OVER HERE, UGLIES!”

The monsters all stopped, and looked at him. Percy gulped. And then he ran like hell, because the monsters were chasing him now. Jason shouted in the distance, but the monsters didn’t pay him
anymore attention. Percy managed to lose the monsters. He hid behind a bunch of cannon replicas. The monsters looked for him, sniffing the air and grunting in frustration. They didn’t hear Jason coming from behind, and the boy succeeded in slashing a pair of them in two, turning them into dust.

Encouraged by this, Percy decided to help. He took a lighter, because of course he had one, out of his pocket and positioned one of the cannons right at one of the monster’s head. He lighted the cannon and hoped that there wasn’t anything else to do. Miraculously, the thing fired, and reduced one of the monsters to dust. Unfortunately, it tried to do the same to the school bus behind it.

Jason looked astonished at the wrecked school bus and then to the origin of the projectile. The remaining monster did the same and, reacting quicker than Jason, it went after Percy. The enormous thing snarled and roared and Percy was rooted to the ground, incapable of even screaming. The beast jumped at him, and it exploded into dust in mid-air. Jason had stabbed it from behind.

“Are you okay?” Jason said, panting.

“Y-Yeah,” Percy replied. “What were those things?”

“I’m surprised you could even see them,” Jason commented, his sword back into coin form. “They were pugnae, spirits of fighting and combat.”

“Oh.”

“Are you a demigod?” Jason asked

“Are you?”

“Well, yeah…” he said, scratching his head. “It’s just that that was… that was really brave, kid, and really stupid.”

“Don’t call me kid!” Percy protested.

“You’re a kid!”

“So are you! And I’m taller than you!”

“No, you’re not!”

Older Percy and Jason sniggered.

Kid Jason then stopped, and stared at Percy with all the intensity a ten year old is capable of.

“You are a demigod. I think I can feel it. You’re way too old,” he commented at last. “I know I started earlier than most but…”

“Started what?”

“Training.”

“If I train will I be like you?”

“Oh, yeah. One day you will be trained by Lupa and sent to Camp Jupiter and—”

“What’s Camp—?”

That’s when the rest of Percy’s classmates, and his teachers, and the employees of the place showed
up. Their mouths were hanging open.

“Percy! What did you do?” his teacher yelled.

“I killed one of the monsters,” he announced. “He can tell you!”

But Jason was gone.

Everything vanished, and a second later, Percy and Jason were back to the present.
Jason stood there looking at the Hippocrene long after the visions had stopped. Percy was at his side doing much the same thing. The sound of the spring went away bit by bit, along with the sight of the spring itself. After a while, they were facing an empty clearing. He took Percy’s hand and squeezed it gently, the other demigod nodded. They walked hand in hand back to the ship, with Jason illuminating their way by producing small arcs of electricity between his fingers.

He didn’t quite know what to think. It hadn’t seemed real. He tried and tried to actually remember living those moments, but had no success. He didn’t even remember the events that the Mist had fabricated to cover those holes in his memory; those were also lost, lost in a sea of identical days and everyday life. The visions were merely stories that seemed like they had happened to someone else exactly like him, and yet, he knew with total certainty that they were true. He might not remember them, but deep inside him, he felt them true.

He felt closer to Percy somehow. It was yet another similarity, yet another way in which their minds had been played with. Jason was sure other demigods had had the same done to them in the name of keeping Romans and Greeks apart. How many potential friendships and relationships lost? Maybe all of their lives could have been easier; maybe they all could have been less alone. Maybe he could have had Thalia back, maybe she would never have left him to go with Artemis. Maybe…

Yes, he was sure that Percy and he weren’t the only ones with holes in their lives, but surely none of those other demigods had encountered the same person more than once, helping each other in crucial moments. Or maybe all those other people did, there was no way of actually knowing; and he just wanted Percy and him to be special, he wanted them to be meant to be. It was a huge, impossible world of fate, destiny, prophecies and greater purposes so, in his mind, it was completely possible for it to be the case. He wanted them to matter more, to be more important, almost vital. And then he felt guilty for thinking that, as if just having each other here and now wasn’t good enough. He had his reasons for thinking all of that, but he didn’t like to contemplate them. Not just yet.

Percy was sitting on his usual spot next to the control panel of the ship, eating from a bag of chips he had bought during their trip, completely oblivious to Jason’s inner struggle, completely at ease. There was chip dust all around his mouth. Jason stared at him.

“What?” Percy asked, furrowing his brow.

“Didn’t if faze you?” Jason asked. “What we just learned.”

“Yeah, sure. I mean…” he threw the empty bag into a trashcan and cleaned his fingers on his jeans. “I knew that my mind had probably been messed with, that I had probably met some Roman demigods. I have been in too many quests and stuff for it to not be the case. It is weird that it was you all those times, but I’m not really sure if it actually means something, or what Clio expected us to do with that information.”

Jason nodded.

“Thanks for saving me those times, though,” Percy added.

“Yeah, same,” Jason replied.
“What I do wonder is what are we going to do next,” Percy said, getting up his chair and stretching his body, letting Jason see part of his hairy tummy.

“I don’t know,” Jason said, after he realized he had been quietly staring at Percy, who seemed to be actually expecting for some kind of answer. “That Clio was frustratingly vague. What did she say?”

“The future is in the past or some such. Hmmm, hold on,” Percy replied, and then looked up distractedly and reached into his shirt to scratch his shoulder in deep concentration, his mouth a thin, lopsided line. Jason found himself again ogling the extra skin exposed. Percy looked at him again, adopted a solemn expression, and straightened his posture. “Look for the future with those who foretold it millennia ago,” he said in a pompous tone that reminded Jason of Octavian. “They’ve been forgotten, but are very much alive,” he relaxed once again and grinned at him. “So, what you make of that?”

Besides the fact that you have a freakishly good memory sometimes? Jason thought.

“I’m not sure,” he said, crossing his arms and leaning against the control panel. “So we need to find someone to know the future, to get an actual prophecy. Someone who is really old and did so years and years ago, someone not many people know about now.”

Percy’s eyes lit up and took out something of the much mistreated backpack. It was the tablet Athena’s cabin had given them. Jason smiled.

“I did say you were gonna be the guy doing the nerdy research,” he said, looking at Percy already tapping away on the tablet.

“Yeah, yeah, and you are the big and powerful muscle part of the operation,” Percy said almost distractedly. “I mean, using all this brain power does tire a guy. I need some distraction now and then.”

“Do you?” Jason asked, getting closer to him.

“Yeah, go and put on something sexy while I solve all our problems,” Percy said, looking down and smiling.

“I can do much better,” Jason said, going towards Percy and then hugging him from behind. He bit Percy’s ear lightly. Percy laughed a silly, girlish laugh and inched his head away from Jason.

“Stop it,” Percy said, and Jason immediately broke the embrace. “No, not that,” Percy protested. “Stay there but don’t actually distract me. I’m trying to work here.”

Jason hugged him from behind by the shoulders, resting his head on one of them, looking at Percy navigate through the tablet interface at a speed impossible to follow. Jason glanced sideways, Percy’s green eyes were deeply focused on his task. He resisted the urge to break his concentration.

“I think this is it,” Percy said, after a little while.

Jason stopped staring into his eyes and looked at the article displayed on the screen.

“Wadjet?” he said, reading the article’s title. “Known to the Greeks as Uto… goddess of Dep, later Buto… protector of kings… snake-headed woman… Oh, ‘her oracle was in the renowned temple in Per-Wadjet that was dedicated to her worship and gave the city its name. This oracle may have been the source for the oracular tradition that spread to Greece from Egypt.’”

“So, what do you think?” Percy asked. “It’s the oldest one I could find on this thing.”
Jason considered it for a moment. He separated from Percy, who looked at him expectantly.

“So Egypt, then?” he replied at last. “All right.”

Percy beamed at him and went straight away to set the course.

Percy’s good mood didn’t last long. They should have been on Buto by high noon; the trip would have taken them a little more than half a day under ideal conditions, Percy had said. But they were Percy and Jason, and this was the most frustrating quest ever, so ideal was far from realistic.

A couple of hours after they had sailed they were attacked by an Aspidochelone, a giant turtle that they had mistaken for an island—which, taking into account that the beast had a whole forest growing on its back, was an easy enough mistake to make at night. It forced them to go by air in order to escape. Up in the air, they were immediately ambushed by a swarm of particularly nasty venti accompanied by an electrical storm that Jason as unable to control. They crashed in southern Italy, way, way off course of their destination. And then, to top it all off, they had crashed into a fumarole that emitted sulfurous gases, where they were promptly attacked by Mefitis, goddess personification of poisonous gases from the ground. Yeah, not their best day, Jason thought.

They had nearly choked and poisoned to death. It was only thanks to the intervention of another god of poisonous gases, probably Mefitis’ brother or something—Jason didn’t quite catch his name—, that they were able to escape. Their ship was in bad condition, and the trip to be back on route was going to be a slow one.

It was nearly midnight of the next day, and Jason was on sentry duty nearly falling asleep—the venti seemed to have forgotten about them. It was then that he heard it: a scream tearing through the night. Jason got up with a jolt and raced, tripping and hitting himself with every obstacle on his way, to Percy’s room. Nearly kicking the door down, he entered and was next to the thrashing demigod in bed in an instant.

Percy kicked and kept screaming, seemingly unable to wake up. Percy sat up, his eyes still closed, and Jason held him firmly, wrapped him with his arms, trying to calm him down. He struggled against the violent jerking motions of Percy’s body, but didn’t budge; if anything, he held him even tighter. Percy’s eyes opened and looked frenetically in all directions, finally settling on Jason’s.

He was shaking from head to toe and his arms wrapped around Jason, who started murmuring quiet, almost nonsensical words of comfort into Percy’s ear and kissing him reassuringly, almost desperate. Percy eventually stopped shaking, but his erratic breathing took a while to even out. Jason kept rubbing Percy’s back until the latter pulled apart from him.

“You okay now?” Jason asked, his hand on Percy’s shoulder, his eyes never leaving Percy’s.

“Yeah,” the other replied. “Yeah, thanks…” Percy looked down and passed a hand over his messy hair. “What time is it?”

“Barely past midnight,” Jason answered.

Percy nodded and laid down again, his eyes fixed on the ceiling.

“I’m going to stay,” Jason said, expecting a negative that didn’t come.

He laid down next to Percy, facing him. His hand went tentatively to the other’s chest, where it began to trace lazy circles. Percy yawned and struggled to keep his eyes open.
“Sleep,” Jason said. “I’m here.”

“I was thinking,” Percy said apparently more to himself than to Jason. “I was thinking about that whole thing with Clio and what you said, or didn’t say… Anyway I was thinking and I fell asleep, I didn’t mean to fall asleep.”

Jason’s hands stopped moving and his fingers curled over Percy’s chest.

“What do you mean?”

“I wasn’t going to sleep, but last night I didn’t either so—“

“You didn’t sleep last night?”

“No.”

Jason said nothing. He didn’t know what to say. Percy turned his head away from him.

“I just… I don’t know what to do,” Percy let out in almost a sob. “I nearly killed us. I should have known that damn giant turtle wasn’t an island. There is no island in those coordinates and I can feel when there’s land ahead, I can feel ocean ending… I was just so tired… I—“

“Shut up,” Jason said forcefully, almost angry. “Just… shut up.”

“But—”

“It is not your fault. Just stop. Stop…” he said, closing his eyes and with his heated tone dropping with every word, the last one more a pleading than anything else.

He felt Percy’s body shift, and opened his eyes. They were face to face, lying on the bed on their sides.

“I guess… I used to be careless, and selfish. I would leave people behind once they were of no use to me,” Percy said. “And I don’t want to be like that anymore, so I overcompensate, I think. Sometimes I try to control everything and if something goes wrong I assume it is my fault, because it always used to be.”

“I know how that is,” Jason said. “Only it always has been kind of my natural state. You want to save everyone and that’s just not possible, and sometimes they don’t actually need your help and it seems like you only make things worse. It’s hard to distinguish which one’s which.”

Percy just stared at him, sadness in his eyes. A whole minute passed in silence.

“What were you thinking,” Jason asked, “when you were trying to not sleep? Something about Clio?”

“Yeah, and… well, I was thinking of you and whether or not I should go talk to you.”

“About what?”

“That I think I figured it out. The whole point of those visions,” Percy said.

“Oh?”

“Yeah, if we hadn’t had those moments robbed from us we could have been friends much earlier, and maybe something else too, much earlier,” he looked at Jason with intensity. “Maybe everything
would have been much easier, for everyone.”

“Yeah…”

“And now, I feel like… I feel like it wasn’t only a few moments here and there that were stolen from us. This whole thing… this whole demigod mess made us see things no other kids had seen, like, awful things. And we grew up too fast, but I still feel like a teenager sometimes, lost and scared… Do you feel like that?”

“Sometimes… I guess… I don’t know. I hadn’t thought about it that much or at all really, but… yeah.”

“And we tried to squeeze moments of normalcy, of just having fun with our friends, but they were still not enough to balance out all the awful stuff so we’re, like, stuck.”

“Stuck?”

“Yeah, like, holding onto those teenage years, trying to keep squeezing those moments but we can’t because we grew up, but only partially, all uneven. And we can’t try a lot of new things because of that, we’re not actually ready, we’re scared of growing up completely. So, yeah, stuck between all those places, never fitting in.”

“I see what you mean, I think,” Jason said.

“So, I guess my point is that I don’t want to hold onto that anymore, it would only make me unhappy. There’s things I want and that have the potential of actually making me happy, so I’m gonna go get them, no matter how scary. I am going to try and just get them. And that’s what I was thinking of telling you.”

“What things?” Jason asked.


“I think I’m ready,” Percy whispered into Jason’s mouth.

And Jason finally knew what he was talking about, his heart skipped a beat. Percy moved until he was on top of Jason, kissing him like that first time, taking Jason’s breath away and filling his lungs and his whole being with something better than air.

Jason slowly sat up. Percy adjusted to his movements with no hesitation; and now he was sitting on his lap. Percy’s hands were all over him, rubbing his back under his shirt, touching his ass, squeezing his arms and messing with his hair. During a pause of the kissing he took off Jason’s shirt and threw it away. Percy stared at his chest and stomach.

“Gods, you’re really…” he said and his hand reached to touch Jason’s chest.

“Are you sure of this?” Jason asked, holding Percy’s hand over his chest and caressing it.

Percy nodded emphatically.

“Yeah, just… you… you know what to do, right?” he said.

“Y-Yeah, kinda,” Jason said, blinking rapidly.

“Okay. You… you guide, then,” Percy said, turning red and then laughing nervously. “Man, I… okay, what now?”
“We… we just keep going,” Jason said. “Just… do what feels right?”

“Dude, you suck at this,” Percy said, still with that nervous laugh.

“I can do that,” Jason said, trying to sound confident and in control and failing miserably. He shook his head and leaned to kiss Percy before he could say anything.

Jason pulled apart from Percy and took off his shirt now, throwing it in the same general direction his own shirt had gone. He took a moment to take in Percy’s naked upper body; this time actually paying attention to every plane and angle of every muscle, to every spot and freckle, and to every patch of hair. Percy was much hairier than he was, his chest was adorned by thick-ish black fuzz and a wild trail of hair came down from his belly button until getting lost inside Percy’s boxers. His instinct mirrored Percy and his hand was now caressing the other’s chest. His erection was already on full swing and by what he could see, Percy’s was too.

Open mouthed kisses and hands everywhere, eventually they were both completely naked, neither of them sure how it had happened. Jason was between Percy’s thighs and began to rub Percy’s hairy legs. Percy kept on kissing his neck and then his shoulder blades and chest, making Jason breathing more and more superficial.

Jason’s hands went up and up all through Percy’s legs, passing his thighs, until his hand was firmly holding Percy’s erection. Percy gasped and stopped kissing him. He now was simply staring down, at his own erection in Jason’s hand. When he looked up, Jason began to stroke him. Percy didn’t look away, his eyes locked on his, sending all of his arousal through the air directly into Jason’s brain. Jason saw every gasp, every moan, and every single gesture on Percy’s face, and it drove him completely crazy, making him work faster on Percy’s erection.

After a while, Percy’s hand adventured to Jason’s dick and began stroking him as well, making Jason head tilt backwards in pure pleasure. Then they both leaned in, making their sweaty foreheads touch. Jason retired his hand from Percy and pushed him gently, making him lay down on the bed. He couldn’t quite believe his eyes; he had Percy underneath him, completely naked.

“You said you wanted me to suck it, right?” Jason said, scratching the back of his head in fake confusion.

Percy laughed, and Jason went right down, his tongue then licking Percy’s dick from the base to the tip. Percy’s whole body shook at once.

“Dammit, Jason,” he said.

Jason smirked at him.

“You’ve felt nothing,” Jason said.

He kept licking and kissing Percy’s shaft, with the latter gasping and swearing between writhing and touching Jason’s hair. It was when the whole length of Percy was finally inside of Jason’s mouth that Percy moaned louder than ever and his body jerked harder than ever. The bed shook and Jason heard Percy swear and complain. Jason stopped sucking and looked up.

“What?” he asked.

“I hit my head with the headboard, man,” Percy said, rubbing the top of his head with an apologetic smile that disarmed Jason completely.

“Idiot,” Jason said.
“Your idiot,” Percy replied, tilting his head to the side and then biting his bottom lip.

“Right,” Jason said, and then looked down again, at Percy’s erection. “Mine…” he kissed Percy’s thigh. “Mine…” he kept saying while going up again to Percy’s dick. “Mine…” he said before he started to suck deep and fast.

Percy screamed in pleasure, his hands firmly on Jason’s head, guiding the rhythm somehow. Jason’s right hand holding and playing with Percy’s ball-sack while jerking off his own dick with the other. He then separated from Percy, who groaned in protest. He looked down at Percy, who was all sweaty and so very naked with his dick still rock hard, while he kept jerking off marveled and aroused by the sight. Percy’s arms were up his head completely limp, letting him see Percy’s hairy armpits; and then Jason’s gaze went to his hairy chest that heaved rather dramatically. What was with him and body hair? Jason wondered briefly, and laughed.

“What?” Percy said, barely able to speak.

“Nothing. Just… figured something out about myself.”

Percy tried to frown but couldn’t quite manage to.

“What now?” he asked, still without breath.

“Now…” Jason said and leaned back a bit.

He took Percy’s legs and moved them out of the way, his hand then went directly to Percy’s ass.

“Oh, man…” Percy said. “It’s happening, isn’t it?”

“Yup.”

“Oh, man.”

Jason licked one finger rather generously, and then put it on the entrance of Percy’s anus. The other gasped.

“Now, take it easy, man,” Jason said, rather nervous himself.

He was no expert but knew more or less what to do. He began tracing circles around the hole, and rubbing Percy’s stomach with his free hand, trying to be reassuring.

He put the finger in, slowly but firmly. He saw Percy’s hands grabbing the sheet to the sides of him. It was all in now and he could feel the natural suction and pressure of Percy’s body. He began to slowly move his finger in and out, all with Percy’s quiet whimpering on the background.

“You okay there?” Jason asked. He saw Percy nodded, his eyes firmly shut.

He had to keep putting saliva on the whole procedures, it dried way too quickly. It made things slow and awkward. An eternity later, feeling that it was quite enough, Jason’s second finger went in. Percy swore and his back arced upwards, making Jason’s fingers go even deeper.

“It hurts,” Percy said, once his back was again on the bed.

“Too much?” Jason asked, knitting his brow and biting his lower lip. He pulled his fingers out of Percy, who let out a small sigh of relief. “I’ll be right back.”

Jason ran to the kitchen, completely naked and chastising himself. He returned later with coconut oil,
part of it was already melting on his hand. He spread some of it all over his fingers, and began the process all over again, feeling awkward. He stroked Percy’s dick all the while. Two fingers were in once more, it had gone much more smoothly this time. Percy’s breathing was deep and even, with small moans here and there.

“Does it hurt?” Jason asked him.

“No,” Percy said immediately, his hands near his face. “Keep going, I… yeah, keep going…”

And so Jason did.

He kept fondling Percy’s asshole while going up with his mouth, kissing Percy’s stomach and chest, whispering sweet nothings in Latin all the way. He couldn’t control himself.

“What… What are you even saying?” Percy asked, his voice barely audible.

“Viridis oculos tuos, Persei,” Jason said after a kiss to his navel.
“Si quis me sinat usque basiare,” he continued after another kiss.
“Usque ad milia basiem trecenta,” a kiss on his abdomen.
“Nec nunquam videar satur futurus,” another.
“Non si densior aridis aristis,” two more kisses, near Percy’s heart.
“Sit nostrae seges osculationis,” he finished, now sucking Percy’s nipple.

Jason felt rather silly, having recited that whole thing to Percy. He gave one last kiss, this time all the way down on Percy’s belly button.

“Dunno… what you said… but…” Percy moaned, “but so hot… Jason…”

Jason smiled, and then his fingers and mouth left Percy’s body. Jason stroke himself some more, hardening his dick and spreading oil all over it.

“Here I come,” he said, “be ready…”

Percy just nodded, lost in ecstasy. He approached Percy, and guided his dick slowly towards the now dilated entrance. Percy’s whole body shook once more while he yelled a torrent of curses. His arms stretched towards Jason. Once Jason was finally all in, leaned in and let himself be touched.

They were hugging tightly, chest against chest, with only Percy’s hard dick squeezed between them. Jason moved his hips back losing some territory into Percy’s body while he breathed in Percy’s scent—all sea breeze, sweat and earthy scents—then, breathing out, he gave a hard thrust and went all inside him. Percy screamed a moan, and his fingers curled over Jason’s back, scratching him a bit.

He felt the hotness of Percy all around his dick. He felt the pressure trying to make him go even deeper than humanly possible. He felt Percy’s tightness embracing him while he went in and out, each time a bit harder and faster than the last.

“O Deus,” he said against Percy’s mouth.

Percy’s hands were everywhere, on Jason’s arms and shoulders, on his back and ass, on his face and on his hair; as if he couldn’t get enough of him. Jason had never felt so wanted, so needed, so goddamn good. He wanted to give Percy everything he wanted and more, his own touch became almost as desperate and needy, his thrusting faster and faster and his kissing much more intense. They explored every single corner of each other’s bodies, as if trying to memorize them all by touch, as if it was the last time they were going to be able to do this.
“Harder!” Percy said, grabbing and pushing Jason’s ass towards him, as if trying to get Jason’s whole being inside of him.

Jason’s thrusting and moaning were now out of control. He grunted, trying to go even harder and faster. The imminent orgasm was building up and taking complete hold of his actions, which were more desperate than ever, much more raw and wild. Then, he felt it coming like a wave of indescribable pleasure all the way from behind his balls. And then, with his mouth open but without producing a sound, he came inside Percy, his whole body arcing backwards.

He leaned back, his dick still throbbing but getting softer inside of Percy. He took Percy’s legs and put them over his shoulders, kissing them both tenderly. Some of his cum came out of Percy’s hole. Then, after putting himself out of Percy with almost reverence, he laid down next to the still moaning man. He kissed him, while his hand went to Percy’s still erect dick and jerked him off until he finished all over his stomach, with a whimper spoken onto Jason’s mouth.

Their mouths separated and they stared into each other’s eyes. The sight of Percy in that very moment was the most beautiful thing Jason had ever seen. He didn’t need it to be destined or written on the stars or anything else, that very moment was enough for him; and them, just them were more than enough. Percy kissed him one more time and whispered “I love you, dude” into his ear. Jason’s heart skipped a beat, and he embraced Percy with all the strength he had left. They were all naked and sticky and sweaty, saying sleepy nonsense to each other; and just like that, they fell asleep after a little while.

An hour later, Percy woke up screaming and thrashing around again. It tore Jason apart.

Chapter End Notes

Jason's poem to Percy is an altered version of this one.
Percy lost his virginity a couple more times in different ways before they reached their destination. His butthole was definitely sore but he didn’t mind that; what he did mind was Jason’s mental state. When he was doing the old in-and-out like a possessed beast, on top of all the arousal and sweatiness—Jason was so damn gorgeous all sweaty and messy—he looked happy and with a look that Percy could only classify as hopeful. But once they were done, lying next to each other, Percy would fall asleep and the nightmares would begin. They weren’t as bad now, with Jason there, but it was clear to Percy that they were not going to go away. Percy suspected, and he hoped he was wrong, that somehow Jason was trying to sex them away. The looks of despair he caught Jason sporting after he calmed him down a couple of times crushed Percy completely and made him long for the next time they would do it, just to see Jason happy again.

All of it was also doing a number on Percy. The intermittent sleeping and constant physical activity—which also included not much fighting monsters but evading them at this point—wrecked Percy up. He felt tired and stupid, and he began to think that the sex had been a mistake. It had seemed like such a good idea in the middle of the night while slightly sleep deprived.

He woke up the day of their arrival on Buto after a particularly tough night. They hadn’t had sex, but they still slept next to each other, their bodies completely unclothed and entangled. He admired Jason’s sleeping form for a few minutes, his peaceful but tired expression, his hair glowing almost white due to the morning sun, his body completely exposed, with his broad chest going up and down, the movement soothing Percy. He kissed Jason’s forehead and shook him a bit, before he himself fell asleep again.

“We’re here,” he said.

Jason protested with unintelligible mumbling sounds.

“Dude, come on…” he said, shaking him harder. “You have to fly us right into the city…”

Jason protested some more, while scrunching his face in discomfort, the sun now showering it directly. Percy got up the bed, walked to the end of it and grabbed Jason’s feet.

“Jason, man,” he said, while he tried to pull him out of bed. “Come on! I thought you were a morning person.”

Jason’s legs were now hanging from the end of the bed, but his eyes remained stubbornly closed. It was then that Percy had to take desperate measures. Focusing on the sea outside, he brought a stream of water and showered Jason with it.

That did the trick.

“What?! How?! When?!” Jason said, finally up on his feet, soaking wet. “Why did you do that?!” he asked once he spotted Percy, who was trying hard not to laugh at him.

Percy walked towards him and kissed him.

“Come on, then,” he said and began to walk away from him, ready to go hit the shower. “Fly us to our destination.”

It was then that he felt an electric shock right on his butt.
“Ow!” Percy exclaimed, rubbing his butt-cheek and turning around to see a smirking Jason. “Man, I’m all for you abusing my butt but this ain’t cool.”

Jason just laughed with his whole being, and Percy felt all the physical pain and confusion start to wash away.

The city below them, Desouk, was the nearest city to Buto back in the day according to Greekepedia. They could see the Nile in the distance, glittering with the sun, and radiating ancient power. Percy felt a bit dizzy trying to take it all in. This was the most ancient place he had ever been in, Percy thought. The sight, pretty much a regular city, didn’t quite match the feeling of reverence he was experiencing in that moment. The most remarkable things were the Nile and the big mosque in the center of the city.

“So, where do we land?” Jason asked, over the roar of the wind, once they got past the city traveling east. “Where’s that temple? Where is that city even?”

“I think it’s gone, but lemme…” Percy consulted the tablet. “Yep, gone.”

“So, what now?”

“Right, so there must be some sort of an excavation site around here where it used to stand,” Percy said, looking down and narrowing his eyes. After a little while, he pointed at the ground at a spot far north. “There, I think!” Jason veered the vessel and followed Percy’s lead.

They landed and disembarked on a deserted spot, with only mounds of ruins of mud-brick buildings in the distance to the north. Percy saw an old, rusty sign reading DAI, in that direction but not much else. They walked west to where Percy said the temple area had stood once. The more they walked, the clearer everything around them got. Soon, they were in front of a real, solid, brand new and ancient Egyptian temple. Its green columns stood all along the front of the building, holding up the roof, with hieroglyphics decorating the upmost part of it. Percy and Jason nodded at each other and, with their weapons at the ready, entered the temple. Darkness enveloped them immediately, but Jason illuminated their way somewhat.

“So,” Jason said in a low voice once they were inside, “we do the old Good Cop/Sassy Cop?”

“The what?”

“You know, when you sass the goddess up until she’s on the verge of blasting you into smithereens and then I step in and apologize profusely. So I appear to be super-polite and respectful in comparison, and she gives us the information we want.”


He heard Jason laugh that warmed Percy’s insides, but soon, it went on until it became a sound that chilled Percy’s bones. He shuddered.

“Dude, what the—” Percy started to say but Jason put an arm on his chest, stopping him.

“ Heard that?”

“Yeah.”
“It sounds just like—“

“Snakes,” Percy said, turning around trying to see through the darkness.

The sound seemed to be coming from a spot to their right. They pointed their weapons at it, facing the darkness. Jason had stopped doing his electricity trick, not wanting to give their position away too easily.

“It might be her,” Percy said, whispering. “She’s basically a snake-headed woman.”

The hissing sound increased in volume. Whatever was doing it was very close. Percy and Jason stood shoulder to shoulder, facing its apparent point of origin. Soon, from the darkness emerged a figure dressed in heavy black robes. Its head was completely obscured by the hood of the robes. The hissing continued.

“Greetings, seekers of the truth,” the figure said in female voice with a heavy Middle Eastern accent, which accompanied by the constant hissing coming from below her hood made it a bit hard to understand clearly. Percy and Jason walked closer to her, lowering their weapons. She kept on talking. “I am the Eye of Horus, the Lady of the Flames. I am the protector of pharaohs and patron of Egypt. I am the goddess Wadjet. What is it you want?”

She seemed to turn her head slightly towards Percy, who got the feeling she was looking at him directly. The hissing increased dramatically, sounding as if they were all right in the middle of a nest of vipers.

“Son of the sea god,” she said, her voice vibrant and almost excited. ”It’s been so long.”

“Uh… we’ve met?”

More hissing.

“Oh, no, no…” she said, coming closer. She outstretched one arm until her hand—thankfully a human-looking one, nonetheless, he gave a step back—was millimeters away from Percy’s face. “Do not fear,” she said sweetly. “I am merely reminiscing about your brushes with fate. So many prophecies involving you, my dear.”

Percy’s hands began to tremble; goosebumps ran through his whole body. Wadjet’s incessant hissing was right next to his ear now.

“So is it true, lady Wadjet?” Jason asked and the woman walked slowly towards him. Percy didn’t see him flinch when she began to circle him, as if she was inspecting him for future purchase. Jason merely kept talking. “Can you help us? We are on this quest and—“

“Oh, I know of your quest, quite an interesting one,” Wadjet said, now her hands on Jason’s shoulders. “I have seen it unfold, my dears, with some frankly interesting developments.”

Percy’s face felt hot for some reason.

“So you know what we have to do?” he asked firmly but politely, once she was away from him, he felt more confident and secure, but not enough to try and ‘sass her up.’ Jason needed to give him a little more credit. “Do you have a prophecy for us?” he asked the goddess.

“Of course, my dears, of course,” she said, once again all over Percy’s face. “We shall step outside. I believe my home is making you quite nervous,” she added.
Thankful for that, they followed the goddess outside the temple, where the sun shone at its highest point. The hot and arid climate was a welcome change from the coldness from inside the temple, which had vanished right behind them in a shimmer. They were surrounded a plain with nothing in it but those mounds of ruins in the distance. Percy stared at the point where the temple had been. Something bothered him about its disappearance. The hissing behind him, although greatly diminished on the outside, made him turn around.

Wadjet stood in front of them, rubbing his hands and looking from one to the other. Her black robes breezed around her with the arid wind.

“Now, who shall be the one to receive the ancient wisdom? Who will be witness to a glimpse of things to come?” she asked them.

Jason gave a step forward once he saw Percy not willing to move. In truth, Percy wasn’t scared, he was thinking. Something was definitely off about this whole thing.

“Good, child of Jupiter, you will be the one to defog the future…” she said, now in front of Jason.

Percy was still thinking of the recently vanished temple when the word ‘defog’ caught his attention. Fog, mist… Mist. Oh, Gods, again? He was about to wipe out Greekepedia when he heard the woman who claimed to be Wadjet say:

“You shall look into my eyes…”

It chilled Percy’s spine. Snakes, eyes…

“Uh-huh” Jason said, as if on a spell. Most likely, he was actually on a spell, Percy thought.

Definitely-not-Wadjet was now holding Jason’s face by the chin with one hand. And then, with the other, she was about to pull down her hood when Percy yelled.

“Jason, don’t! Close your eyes!”

Jason’s eyes turned towards Percy and his face changed expression from dazed to alert, all in less than a second. He closed his eyes and pushed the woman away. Angry hissing filled the air. Jason’s sword was in his hand, and joined Percy’s side.

“Sorry,” Jason said. “Spell.”

“I know.”

“Who—?”

“Medusa,” Percy said.

The hoodless, snake-haired woman lunged at them.

Fighting a monster with one’s eyes closed was not easy. Percy guided himself by hearing alone. He also had to take care to not swing or stab Jason, so they decided to fight back to back. The angry hissing made things a bit easier for them. Percy swung his sword in front of him at the height he calculated Medusa’s head to be.

“Waited for so long in Tartarus…” he heard Medusa say to his left, so he moved in that direction, with Jason never leaving his back. He stabbed but didn’t hit anything. “Slowly reforming… All that
thinking, plotting, planning, all of that for you to come to me on a silver platter… My time has come, and you’ll die, son of Poseidon,” she said.

Out in the open there was no place to hide, no place to rest a second and rethink their strategy. The ground was terribly uneven in places, making them stumble. He heard his foot step on something and the sound of it breaking.

They kept on blindly defending themselves and she kept on taunting them and asking them to open their eyes. Percy heard the approaching hissing to his right and faced that way, before he could try to strike, he felt her claws cutting his arm and then the sound of Medusa retreating as soon as he began to defend himself.

The hissing got closer again, only this time Percy felt something weird. His sword arm pulled him forward with violence, and then made him stab whatever was in front of him. He heard Medusa scream. His arm hurt, as if a string was inside his flesh and had suddenly tensed. Before he could think more of it, his whole body jumped to the right, taking Jason with him to the ground, who yelped in surprise. The same painful sensation as the one on his arm went running through his entire body. He heard Medusa’s cry of frustration.

Whatever his body was doing, it was saving their lives; so he just let it happen, no matter how painful it was. Percy’s body dodged, sidestepped and slashed all on his own. He even was helping Jason out, keeping him away from incoming attacks. Percy’s muscles were permanently tense and sore, with every movement shooting more pain through them than the last. Medusa sounded increasingly furious. He managed to stab her a couple more times, making her shriek.

He heard something on the ground, a snarling, as if some animal had joined them and was currently running around them. He felt a bite on his ankle, a sharp pain shot through his leg, making him almost buckle and fall to the ground. A second scurrying thing joined the first. He heard Jason scream, probably bitten by it. Their rushing about told him there were a fair number of them.

His hand moved on his own and tried to hit something down to his left that managed to avoid his blade. Instead, he received a bite on his arm.

“Agh!” he yelled.

“You like them?” she asked. “See, that’s what happens when my blood hits this arid portion of land.”

Percy looked down and dared to open his eyes the tiniest of fractions. He saw the shape of an animal, almost reaching the height of his knees, running around them. The beast had reptilian twin heads; one of them attached to what should have been its tail. It ran on two, chicken-like legs. He heard Medusa’s hissing approaching and closed his eyes immediately. His body jump to the left.

“Go ahead,” she said, and Percy could almost hear her smile. “Keep slashing and cutting, nothing would please me more than see you devoured alive by the amphisbaenae.”

His body heeded her words and lunged at her. Poor Jason, Percy thought, he was being dragged around with no clue of what’s happening. Although it wasn’t like Percy had much of an idea either. He managed to stab Medusa a couple more times and it seemed to him that he also succeeded on cutting a pair of those beasts in two.

He sensed her walking on circles around them, probably thinking, planning, and calculating her next move. The amphisbaenae had retreated as well, maybe wary of Percy’s blade.
“Jason, darling, why don’t you open your eyes?” Medusa said behind him, her voice sweet and, if Percy didn’t know it was her, almost innocent.

“N-no…” he heard Jason reply. It almost sounded like a question.

“Aw, come on, you know you want to, Jason,” she said, each syllable increasing in sweetness and persuasiveness, even Percy felt the urge to open his eyes.

He felt Jason’s hand looking for something behind him. Understanding, Percy fumbled around a bit before taking hold of his hand.

“Open your eyes,” Medusa said in almost a whisper.

Even her snakes seemed to be hissing almost rhythmically, as if trying to sing. Percy felt Jason squeeze his hand hard, he squeezed back.

“Look into my eyes, Jason,” she said. “You can’t resist it. It is almost painful, isn’t it? Let go. Let go…”

Jason squeezed Percy’s hand again, harder than ever.

Jason’s lack of compliance seemed to anger her. Percy heard her closer than ever. He wanted to protect Jason, to vanquish Medusa once and for all, but his body didn’t seem to want to move on his own. Numbness took hold of him instead, making him unable to move even voluntarily. It lasted only a couple of seconds, and after that he felt himself free of whatever had been controlling his body.

“Open… your… eyes…” she said.

There was no longer any sweetness in her voice; instead, it sounded filled with rage. It was persuasive all the same. Percy opened his eyes completely for just a second, before closing them again. Luckily for him, Medusa wasn’t in front of him.

He heard a hiss, this time coming from Medusa herself.

“If you don’t look at me you won’t look at anything ever again!” he heard her scream, her snakes hissing louder and wilder than ever.

And then he heard Jason scream in pain. He opened his eyes instinctively and turned around at the same time Jason’s hand had stopped holding his. He saw Jason with his back at him, with his hands raised in the air. Something flew through the air, away from them. Percy realized Jason had conjured the winds and sent Medusa away. She fell to the ground, yards away, with a hard thud.

Then Jason fell to his knees, still screaming in pain. He had his hands over his face, covering one eye. Percy kneeled next to him. Blood was dripping from his hands, a pool of it already forming on the ground.

“Jason! Jason, what happened?” Percy asked. “Jason!”

But Jason kept grunting and rocking back and forth. In desperation, Percy pulled Jason’s hands away from his face. He wished he hadn’t done it. Medusa had gouged Jason’s left eye out, leaving a bloody and empty eye-socket behind.

“Oh my Gods,” Percy said, his heart almost stopping at the sight. “Oh, Gods…”
Jason wheezed and moaned in pain, clutching his hands over his missing eye. Percy had no idea what to do, his hands were shaking and his vision went blurry.

It was then that he heard Medusa approaching fast at them. He closed his eyes and focused on her hissing and shrieking. He couldn’t control his breathing, a tugging on his stomach told him what was about to happen. He let himself go.

He didn’t need to see Medusa. He could feel her, he could feel the blood running through her veins, he could feel the venom of the snakes on her hair; in short, he could feel every disgusting monster fluid she was composed of. He stopped her on her tracks. He filled her lungs with fluid; he made her close her eyes so he could open his.

He saw her wanting to writhe in pain but his hold on her was too strong. With a scream, he twisted her neck and took her head off. The rest of her body disintegrated into shiny dust, swept away by the wind. He fell to the ground, exhausted almost to the point of passing out. He fought the urge, and crawled until he was next to Jason, crouching on the ground.

“Jason…” Percy said, extending his arm to touch him.

Jason’s wheezing was beginning to fade when another sound began to come from him. Percy’s eyes widened as he heard yet more hissing. He was more than sick of the sound, and hearing it come from Jason had paralyzed him. Jason got up, his body limp, his neck twisting at almost impossible angles.

“Jason!” Percy called, nearly wrecking his vocal cords.

Jason’s mouth opened and more hissing came out. His remaining eye was closed. Percy noticed parts of the skin of Jason’s face changing color and texture, becoming greener and scaly. Jason’s mouth opened even wider, revealing sharp and unbelievable large fangs. Percy was in shock.

“I have chosen this body as my host,” Jason said, only it wasn’t his voice, not completely. It was a terrible, ancient, hissing and powerful female voice, a voice that made Percy want to run and hide; but he could also hear Jason’s voice mixed with hers. And that gave Percy strength.

“Who are you? What do you want?” Percy asked, getting up from the ground with difficulty.

“I am Wadjet, the green one,” Jason said, his head twisting and turning into dangerous angles again with each word spoken. “I am the goddess of this land. I am patron. I am fire and prophecy. I am Uto, Buto, Uatchet, Edjo. I am justice and balance. I am the just slayer of Geb’s retinue. I am the protector of Horus.”

“Let Jason go, please,” Percy begged.

“This is what you came here for,” Wadjet-Jason said, his/her head now facing upwards. “This is what your loved one lost his eye to the impostor for,” the goddess said. “This is what you wanted.”

“Right, yes,” Percy said, trying to calm himself down. “Are you going to help us? Are you going to tell us what to do? Where do we need to go?”

“What you need and what you want are different things,” Wadjet-Jason said, now looking directly at Percy. His eye was still blue but its pupil was shaped as more of a slit than a circle. “The Eye of Horus sees all."

And then, a ray of golden light burst from Jason’s bloody and empty eye-socket. Percy closed his eyes to protect himself from it. Jason’s head faced upwards again, making the ray shot to the sky, getting lost among the highest clouds. Percy blinked a couple of times, trying to regain his vision.
“The all-seeing Eye sees the strings being pulled from all directions,” Wadjet-Jason said. “It sees the pettiness and love; it sees the stirring and the uprising. It all tries to hide, it all tries to stop me but those forces are no match for me.”

“Okay, okay, but could you just tell me what to do… where do we go? Can you be, you know, clear?” Percy said. “Please, your, uh… your all-seeing Highness…” he tried to amend.

The light kept on shining. Everything around them seemed to dim, the colors seemed to fade. Only what the light from Jason’s orbit touched seemed to be truly there. Percy waited, deciding not to speak anymore, in case he screwed everything up.

“What you want lies on the titaness turned island, the watcher of the stars,” the goddess said, “the birthplace of the twin gods, the Sun and the Moon. Delos is what you seek.”

“Ok, thank you,” Percy said. “Thank you very much, I—”

Wadjet started to talk again.

“The truth lies not far from the path you want but it couldn’t be more far from it. What you need to truly seek, what you need to see past the lies and veils of deceit lies on Delos as well,” Wadjet-Jason said, now floating higher and higher. “A goddess of prophecy and dreams, you will get the truth but at a price. Seek Brizo and simply ask, son of the sea god.”

The light went off and Jason’s body started to plummet to the ground. Percy raced and managed to catch him. His skin was no longer like that of a snake, and the fangs began to shrink.

“The Duat awaits me once more,” he said, the goddess’ voice nearly inaudible now.

Jason blinked, and his eye went back to normal. His face was clean of any blood and he didn’t seem to be in pain anymore. His left eye was still missing, but the eyelids were sewn shut.

“Jason?” Percy asked, and brushed strands of blond hair away from Jason’s sweaty and dirty forehead.

“What happened?” Jason asked on a weak voice.

“I’ll tell you later, we need to get to the ship first,” Percy said, and then kissed him tenderly on his forehead and caressing the side of his face.

Being possessed by an ancient snake goddess apparently took one hell of a toll on people. Jason could barely stand and had to be carried by Percy all the way to the ship. Once there, he fell promptly asleep. Percy took him to his bed to let him rest. He sat on the bed next to him for a while, watching him sleep and caressing his forehead, before he went to the helm of the ship.

Greekepedia was bust, Percy thought, holding up the completely destroyed device. He now realized what he had stepped on during his fight against Medusa. At least he didn’t need it to figure out their destination, Wadjet had been quite clear on that. Well, clearer than most gods, anyway. Percy struggled to get the ship on the air and then struggled some more to keep it there. Maneuvering it proved to be quite difficult as well, but he managed to do everything without falling from the sky. He had observed Jason do it so many times now that he could recall some of what to do. He lowered the ship on the Nile, not wanting to keep risking it on the air. The ship sailed towards the Mediterranean Sea via the river. Destination: the island of Delos.
The journey through the Nile went without a hitch, it was even relaxing. Percy saw a multitude of towns and cities all along the riverbank. He also spotted creatures and monsters he had never seen or heard about before. He reached instinctively for Greekepedia for time to time but then he remembered it was useless now. He contented himself with merely watching them pass by, not one of them trying to harm them.

No, it was when they arrived at the Mediterranean again, a couple of hours later, when trouble started. The ship was hit by huge waves and winds, the sky went dark and rain began to pour, all of it threatening to send it deep into the sea. Percy tried to calm the sea down, to stop the waves, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t do it. The tides, winds and currents were too strong. Perhaps his earlier stunt decapitating Medusa, whose head lay now in a bag next to him, had something to do with it.

“What’s happening?” he heard someone ask behind him.

Percy turned around and saw Jason struggling to reach him, holding onto the railings of the ship. He still looked the worse for wear, with his knees threatening to give in with every step and his face still pale and tired. He was wearing a makeshift eye-patch now, made of bandages and elastic bands. The ship tilted to the side, sending Jason all across the deck to the other side.

“Go back to sleep, Jason,” Percy said at the time another giant wave rose and then fell over him, showered him from head to toe.

Perhaps it’s karma for having given the son of Jupiter an unrequested morning shower, Percy thought. He couldn’t even keep himself dry.

“T’m fine,” Jason said, obviously lying.

Despite his deplorable condition, Jason managed to reach Percy. Percy gave him a quick kiss before he sent him to do less intensive work on the ship to maintain them afloat. Thunder rumbled constantly all through the sky; and lightning struck down again and again, too close for comfort.

“Can’t you tell you dad to cool it down?” Percy asked over the maelstrom. Jason didn’t seem to hear him.

Yet another surging wave made the ship tilt almost ninety degrees. Percy held onto anything he could reach, avoiding to fall into the sea. Jason on the other hand went down screaming and scrambling to do the same as Percy but with no success.

“Jason!”

Percy ran to the far side of the boat where Jason had been, and looked down. Jason was a dark blotch in the distance, being thrown around by the violent sea and being submerged again and again. Percy tried to will the sea to bring him back but to no avail. He was about to jump into the water himself, praying it would restore his strength and powers, when he saw a large, dark form below the water’s surface, right where Jason was.

The enormous form, almost as big as their ship, broke the water’s surface with a booming sound and a roar. The sea monster kept roaring, its jaws pointing at the sky, as if engaged in a loudness war against it. Percy’s ears hurt. Its scaly skin on his long neck shone bright with every bolt of lightning and the waves didn’t seem to bother the monster at all. Percy stopped gawking at it and looked for Jason’s form on the water. At least the monster’s entrance had brought him and the ship closer. Percy was one second away from jumping when the monster spotted Jason too. Its webbed claws rose from the sea and one of them went down to Jason, submerging him. The monster followed suit.
“NO!” Percy screamed; his eyes were wide.

He saw the monster’s back and head break the water a few more times, swimming away from him. Percy followed it with the ship at full speed, fighting the waves, winds and the pouring rain. He lost the monster’s trail several times amidst the chaos, but he persisted on his chase. After a while, he seemed to have gone past the storm: the sky got clearer and clearer and the sea much more calm. The ship gained significant speed and Percy was able to follow the sea monster, which was travelling east, with almost no problem.

They were near the coastline of a city Percy didn’t know. He knew the coordinates of it but not much else. The architecture suggested Middle Eastern country, so he guessed it was Israel or something like that; in the end it didn’t matter, they were definitely way off course yet again and Jason’s life was in danger. He looked around, looking for the Jason and the monster. He spotted them on an outcropping of rocks near the harbor. The sea monster was resting against it, with his enormous dragon-like body coiled around Jason’s unconscious form laying on a rock. The sea monster wasn’t asleep. It was looking directly at the ship, his eyes red and evil. It bared its fangs a couple of times, taunting Percy to come close. Percy sighed. Time to slay a dragon.

Dragon-slaying and Jason-rescuing proved to be much more difficult than Percy could’ve imagined. Every time he tried to get the ship closer, the monster would roar at him and use his tail to send tall waves that Percy couldn’t control on his direction. He tried to swim, and was glad he could control the sea somewhat again. But his own waves didn’t seem to faze the monster, who acted as if Percy was just playing or giving him a bath. Percy tried to get as angry as possible but he couldn’t feel the surge of power, making him more tired instead, rendering his attacks weaker and more ineffective.

He was on the ship again, looking at the monster and trying to come up with another plan. He doubted the effectiveness of a direct attack with his sword, or to be sneaky enough to snatch Jason away without the beast noticing. Sneakiness, he kept thinking, when a sound caught his attention, a hissing sound that made him shiver. He went to one of the built-in cabinets where they kept their most useful stuff near the helm. He opened it, and a bunch of stuff fell down, among them the rattling and hissing bag holding Medusa’s head. His face lit up, and the phrase “History repeats” in Clio’s voice ringed around his head.

He had everything he needed to overcome that exact same situation, more or less. How could he have forgotten? Among the many things he had read on the now bust tablet was the myth of Perseus and Andromeda. He had a sea monster—with his luck the very same from the myth—Medusa’s head, winged sneakers courtesy of Hermes cabin, and even a substitute for Hades’ Helmet of Darkness, the ring of Gyges; which solved the problem of being sneaky enough to get close to the monster and turn him into stone in an embarrassingly easy way. His name was even Perseus, for gods’ sake, if he couldn’t pull this off it would be a cosmic embarrassment or something like that.

He put on the winged sneakers, strapped his sword to his belt, took the bag with Medusa’s head and then put on the ring, making himself invisible. His Andromeda awaited.

“Maia!” Percy said, quite pumped up, but the sneakers didn’t respond.

He sighed, of course they had a different password or whatever. You got this, you got this, he thought.

“Right, yes, right…” he said, thinking hard. “Maia, Hermes’ mom. Uh… she was a… Pleiad! Uhm Alcyone!?” he tried. “Merope!? Sterope!? Electra!?”
The shoes sprouted wings and began to flutter them and fly. The sudden movement nearly made
Percy’s body go upside down but he steadied himself. He hoped that, by flying, he wouldn’t anger
Zeus or Jupiter, bringing a storm down on him once again. He flew towards the rocks, towards the
monster, which didn’t seem to notice him. Percy nearly shouted “Yes!” in relief.

He landed, as softly and quiet as he could, next to Jason. He kneeled and examined him. Jason’s
breathing was strong and steady, his face looked peaceful but still weary. He was about to try to
wake him up gently when he felt a sudden gust of hot and wet wind on his neck.

“I know you’re there, Sea Prince,” a deep voice sounded inside Percy’s head.

He turned around and nearly had a heart attack. It wasn’t due to the ridiculous nickname, but because
the monster’s ugly face was a meter away from him. Its eyes were searching around the spot where
Percy was. He felt the hot and wet breathing again, coming from the monster’s wide nostrils. He said
nothing, and prepared Medusa’s head.

“It would have been terribly embarrassing to fall for the same old trick again,” the booming voice
said, making Percy’s head vibrate from the inside out. “And I nearly would have, if you hadn’t been
a child of the sea like me. All those little thoughts in that messy head of yours…”

Percy didn’t even try to think how to escape, since that would only help the monster locate him more
precisely. He prayed his panic didn’t give his position away either.

The monster’s jaws snapped right at him without warning. Percy tried to run backwards on impulse,
out of their reach, but was met with the creature’s tail, blocking his path and knocking the air out of
Percy’s lungs. The monster’s head lunched at him again before Percy had time to recover and
successfully bit half of his left arm off. Percy screamed in pain, visible again. The voice laughed in
his head.

“What’s this cheap knock-off?” it said, while sniffing Percy’s bloody limb laying on one of the
rocks. “Couldn’t get the real thing, little prince? Too bad…” it said and then proceeded to eat Percy’s
arm. “Oh, I haven’t feasted on demigods in ages.”

The monster’s head reared up and its whole body began to shift and twist, disorienting Percy even
further. His whole body was throbbing in pain, his vision was reddish and blurry, and he fell down
with his back hitting the rocky ground.

“Good-bye, Perseus,” the monster roared inside his head.

“Hey! Over here!” Percy heard someone scream above the sounds of roaring, rocks crashing and sea
splashing.

The monster’s eyes moved to its right and widened in surprise at the same time its whole body turned
to stone.

“Oh, Gods, Percy…” he heard the same voice say, Jason’s voice.

“Are you alright?” Percy managed to ask.

“I’m fine, I’m fine, but… Percy, your… your arm…”

And that was the last thing he heard before passing out.
They were an hour away from Delos when Jason heard Percy wake up. There hadn’t been any screaming or any other sign of nightmares. It seemed like all it took to cure those was severe blood loss, unbelievable trauma and oh, yeah, lose half a limb. Jason should probably write a paper about it. The title would be something like “Trauma cures trauma. Love is useless.”

Percy sat next to him. Jason looked at him out of the corner of his eye, his one and only eye. Yeah, that had happened as well, because why the hell not?

“How long was I out?” Percy asked.

His voice was devoid of any inflection. He kept touching his elbow, where his left arm now ended.

“A couple of hours,” Jason replied. “Stop playing with the bandages.”

“Sorry,” Percy said, retiring his hand from Jason’s shoddy bandaging job. “How are you?”

“Fine,” Jason replied.

He saw Percy open his mouth, and close it almost immediately. Percy sighed.

“Is this all real?” Percy asked and then shook his head. “Sorry, I mean, of course it is. I…”

Yet another sigh.

“So, Delos, huh?” Percy said instead. “Guess you heard yourself say it.”

“Yeah,” Jason replied. “I remember most of it. I can cross out ‘being possessed by an ancient cobra goddess’ from my bucket list.”

“How’s the um… how’s the eye?”

“Not there,” he replied. Percy flinched. Jason wanted to go next to him but didn’t feel the energy to make it that far. “I guess it could’ve been worse. Wadjet did make the bleeding stop and all the tissue heal; and she shut my eyelids close.”

“Yeah, I noticed.”

“I mean, she could have just put my eye back but, you know, whatever,” he said, shrugging.

“Jason…”

“How are you?”

Percy didn’t reply.

“I did my best at making sure it didn’t, you know—”

“Get infected and stuff, yeah. Thanks…”

A couple of minutes passed. Jason felt Percy get up and walk towards him. Percy tried to kiss him and Jason flinched away from him. Percy’s expression hurt to watch.
“Sorry, I thought you wanted…”

“It’s fine.”

“So we’re not…?”

“I don’t know, Percy.”

“Why not?”

Jason couldn’t reply. It was as if his brain had shut down all processes, except those that made him experience pain and anger.

“You’re shaking,” Percy said.

It was true. Jason sweating cold and his hands were shaking. He took deep breath, trying to calm himself. His lack of success only made the shaking more intense. Percy’s hand took his. Jason tried to take it away but Percy strengthened his grip. Jason gave in.

Percy made him turn to face him, and then pulled him close and their foreheads touched. Percy let go of his hand and touched the back of his head. Jason closed his eye and kept taking deep breaths, focusing on the rhythm of Percy’s hand rubbing the back of his head. After a little while, he stopped shaking. Percy kissed him and, this time, Jason didn’t flinch away.

He opened his eye once they stopped kissing; and those big, sad and very green eyes greeted him.

“OK?” Percy asked.

Jason nodded.

“How come you can fix me but I can’t fix you?” he asked, his hands now on Percy’s waist.

“What?” Percy said, frowning in confusion. “What are you…?” Jason saw sudden comprehension dawn on Percy’s face, it was rapidly replaced by irritation. “Is this about you trying to make the nightmares go away by inserting your cock in me repeatedly?”

“I’m not—”

“Yes, you are,” Percy insisted. “I thought I was crazy, thinking that was what you were doing, because it is crazy. It doesn’t work like that, Jason.”

“Then what do I do?” Jason asked, feeling a lump in his throat. “What do you want me to do?”

“Just be here,” Percy said, his hand still on Jason’s head. “Be with me.”

“Okay…”

“You can’t fix me. No one can,” Percy said, raising his voice. “I’ve accepted that.”

“Don’t—” Jason started to say but Percy’s harsh look made him stop and just nod.

It felt really wrong. Everything felt wrong. Everything except… He kissed Percy.

Kissing Percy still made his heart skip a beat, still made him want to sing and dance, still was the greatest thing ever. He might have lost an eye but he wasn’t going to let Percy go as well.
“We are together,” he said fiercely, almost as a declaration, daring anyone and anything to try and separate them.

Percy smiled, and in that moment the whole world was all right.

Delos from above didn’t look like much. There weren’t any major settlements as far as Jason could see. He estimated the island to be less than five kilometers in length; he could walk that in less than an hour or so.

“I guess we can land anywhere,” Percy said, he had changed into a long-sleeved shirt. “It’s not like we are going to be seen.”

“Yeah, and…” Jason said, trying to take his eyes—eye—away from Percy’s left side. “And isn’t the goddess we’re supposed to see like the whole island?”


Jason sniggered.

“What?” Percy asked.

“Nothing, just… something people at Camp were reading. Don’t worry about it.”

They landed on what appeared to be the ruins of an ancient theatre, the remnants of the circular arrangement of stone seats spreading around them. The sky was getting darker. They needed to get it done before the inevitable monsters show up to try to kill them.

“What do you think we should d—what on Ceres’ green Earth are you doing?” Jason said, looking at Percy with sword in hand, pointing it at his own shoulder.

“Blood wakes deities up?” he said, lowering his sword and giving him a sheepish smile. “You know, dirt face? The Earth itself? And this island is a titan so… I don’t know. It made sense a second ago. You throw my game off with your knitted brows and your eye-patch. You look like a handsome pirate.”

“Pirates didn’t wear eye-patches. That’s a myth,” Jason replied.

“You’re a myth!” Percy said, in mocking offense. “…kind of literally…”

They both laughed. Jason’s body relaxed, releasing tension he didn’t know he had been carrying around.

“You are right, though,” he said after they stopped. ”The blood thing sounds like our best option.”

“Of course I’m right,” Percy said, pointing his sword back to his shoulder.

“Yeah, but hold on…”

Jason took Percy’s sword and then his hand. He made a small cut on the index finger.

“Dirt face took more than that,” Percy said, looking at his finger, “and that weird-ass ritual.”

“We are not trying to wake Her Dirtiness,” Jason replied. “Just this one tiny island.”
The sky was completely black now. The stars were out, shining brighter than ever in that night without moon. Percy squeezed his index finger with his thumb and middle finger. A single drop of blood fell to the ground.

The effect was instantaneous, the whole theatre began to tremble and white light burst from the cracks on the ground around them. Just in case, Jason summoned Nimbus. The earth stopped shaking and the beams of light all moved to hit a single spot above them, as if they were on a circus and the main attraction was about to show up. Light stopped bursting from the ground, having apparently all been concentrated on that spot above them, since now there was a ball of light floating there.

The ball of light slowly decomposed into tiny sparkles that rained down to the theatre’s floor. From the pool of light they formed, a figure emerged, wearing imposing Greek white robes.

She opened her mouth and birdsong came out of it. She closed it almost immediately, looking thrown. She tried again and, when nothing happened, she smiled.

“Sorry, old habits, old forms,” she said, her voice still rather sing-song-y. “You spent most of your days as a quail and see if some things don’t stick with you.”

She then actually looked at them and her expression became puzzled.

“You’re not Hecate,” she said, almost accusingly.

“Er, no,” Jason said. “We’re not.”

“Of course you’re not, it’s not as if I expected her to come visit her mother once in a millennium,” she said, crossing her arms. “Who are you, then? Why did you wake me? I was finally falling asleep after that annoyance,” she asked them, now rubbing her temples.

“I’m Jason Grace, son of Jupiter,” he said and then pointed at Percy, “and this is Percy Jackson, son of Poseidon.”

Percy gave her a smile and a peace sign salute. Jason guessed that was his idea of respectfully greeting a deity. He suppressed a smile of his own and looked back at the woman, realizing he didn’t actually know her name. She was looking expectantly at them, her arms crossed again.

“We were sent here by um… the Eye of Horus,” he tried.

“I don’t know what that is,” she replied, looking bored.

“Well, uh, it doesn’t matter, really,” he went on. “We are on a quest to find the luck of Olympus, the Palladium. Does that ring any bells to you?”

“I don’t know what that is, either,” she said. “You are rather annoying, and I don’t like your face,” she commented, cocking her head. “You might want to let your handsome friend handle this because if you keep talking I’m probably going to blast you into dust. I’ve had enough of upsetting stuff going on lately.”

Jason blinked rapidly. He then had the intrusive thought that if the more correct term for him was going to be ‘wink’ rather than ‘blink.’ He looked at Percy, who looked as lost as him.

“Um, hi,” Percy said, waving her half-arm at her. “Well, have you seen anything out of the ordinary?” he asked. “What’s been upsetting you? Maybe we can help or maybe it has something to do with our quest somehow.”
She snapped her fingers and for a second Jason thought she was going to, indeed, turn them into dust right there and then. But she simply conjured a comfy-looking chair and sat on it dramatically.

“What hasn’t been upsetting me,” she said after a long sigh. “First, nothing happens for millennia, which is okay by me, to be honest. But then, there’s suddenly there’s this new constellation: some random hunter girl placed there by Artemis for having done something or other.”

“Wait,” Percy said, furrowing his brow. “Do you mean Zoë?”

“Zoë, Zonya, Zoolander. Whatever,” she said, waving her hand dismissively. “The thing is, they are supposed to ask me about these things. Fill a form or however they’re supposed to be handling it nowadays,” she went on and took a sip from a cup that Jason hadn’t even noticed appear. “Anyway, I let it pass. I am a magnanimous person. But then you know what happened next?”

“Oh, no… What?” Percy said, failing really hard at feigning interest, in Jason’s opinion.

It didn’t seem to matter, she was on a roll.

“They come and ask me if I could pretty please keep that new constellation out of the sight of mortals,” she gave them a look of ‘can you believe it?’ and took another sip. “Apparently mortals aren’t cool anymore with new stars appearing suddenly on the sky. Well, that wouldn’t have been a problem if you hadn’t put that girl up there, right? Isn’t it rather idiotic for those almighty gods to be trying to hide stuff from mortals’ sight while at the same time trying to stay relevant and wanting them to believe in them? I mean, come on, am I talking crazy here?”

Percy looked upset about something, but the woman didn’t seem to notice.

“So I have to keep the Mist up there so mortals don’t see it, which is a big pain to do every single night,” she went on. “I’ve called Hecate, my daughter, again and again to ask her if she could place some permanent Mist thing or whatever but she’s way too busy all the time to answer to her mother.

“So there’s that, and then, just a few days ago I look up and someone plucked Canis Minor out of the sky. Again, not a single notice,” she finished her drink and tossed the cup away, vanishing it into thin air. “Is it because I’m a Titan that I get left out like this? That’s really offensive if that’s the case. That’s… that’s titanism, that’s what it is. Not all Titans tried to destroy Zeus and the Olympians, you know?”

“Hold on,” Jason said, and the woman threw daggers with her eyes at him. Not actual daggers, thankfully, since that’s on the realm of possibilities with gods and the like. “Canis Minor got plucked out of the sky?”

He looked up, what all those nights ago he assumed was some cloud obscuring the constellation was clearly not the case. It was a clear night, and Canis Minor wasn’t on the sky.

“That’s what I just said, yes,” she told him.

She wasn’t on the chair anymore. She was standing in front of them.

“Who could have done that?” he asked.

“Obviously only gods can place constellations on the sky. Everybody knows that! So, obviously, a god took that one out,” she said. “You are rather dumb, boy.”

Jason looked at Percy, who was scratching the back of his head.
“But… but then what happened to it?” Percy asked. “Is it just gone?”

“Of course not,” she said. “Whoever took it must have the original on their hands now, although that would be quite the feat, given what it is.”

“What is it?” Jason asked. “Original? What—Percy, are you okay?”

Percy’s gaze was lost in the distance. After a couple of seconds, he turned to Jason.

“Zeus took the dog Laelaps and the Teumessian Fox and put them on the sky as Canis Major and Canis Minor,” he began to say slowly. “He put them there because they had been pitted against each other, causing a paradox; since one was a dog that was destined to catch everything it chased and the other was a fox—”

“That could never ever be caught,” Jason said, remembering the story.

“I think I know what we’ve been chasing,” Percy said.

“You mean…?”

He nodded.

“I’m still here, you know?” the woman said.

“Sorry,” Percy said, looking back at her.

Jason could almost see a hamster running on his wheel at full speed inside of Percy’s head.

“And that’s what’s been bothering me,” she finished. “So, you said you would help?”

“Yes, yes,” Percy said, grabbing that rope eagerly. “You want us to put it back up there?”

She laughed.

“Of course that would be best,” she said. “But you can’t do that on your own. You’re just a couple of squishy demigods. I mean, look at you, all sad and broken.”

“So how do we get help?” Jason jumped in, realizing too late that she didn’t seem to like him much.

It didn’t matter; she was too busy making fun of them.

“Well, do you know a particularly good hunter?” she asked.

“Several, actually,” Percy replied. “But we can’t contact them, and Artem—”

“I was kidding, boy,” she said. “Of course none of those middling hunters of Artemis would be any help to you. You would need the best of the best. Someone godlike, someone high above—”

“Like him?” Jason asked, looking up at the sky.

“Ah, yes,” she said with a smile, also looking up. “Orion. That might just do the trick.”

“So, uh, can you bring him down here?” Percy asked.

“What?” she said and then laughed. “Of course not, why would I do that?”

“To, uh, get Canis Minor back?”
She considered them both for a few seconds, skepticism growing in her face.

“Oh, why not? It should be amusing to watch,” she declared at last.

“So you will bring him down here?” Jason asked, hopeful.

“Oh, I can’t,” she said, shrugging. “They took that away from me. And all for cleaning up Centaurus!”

“Wait, but you just—“

“But you can,” she cut him off.

“You just said we were useless and squishy demigods, and that only gods could—” Percy began, but the woman clicked her tongue.

“There is a way for you to do just that, far away from here,” she said. “It is quite dangerous, but isn’t that what you heroes are used to?”

She smiled. They both sighed.

“Just tell us,” they said at the same time.

“Very well, you will need to travel far, to lands unknown to most gods you’ve met,” she told them. “I think they call it… Yah-Pan.”

“Japan?” Jason said.

“Yeah, that one,” she said.

“Do you happen to have the exact coordinates?” Percy asked, his tone indicating how done he was with basically everything.

“Fine,” she said, and smacked Percy in the back of the head. “You got them?”

“Ow,” he said, rubbing his head. “Yep, got ‘em.”

“Good. Once there, you’ll know what to do,” she said. “Anything else you want? Some necromancy? A small prophetic dream? I have quite the repertoire of tricks and helpers. Honestly, you two are most fun I’ve had in centuries, which is extremely sad.”

“Yeah, actually,” Percy said. “One of those…”

“Yes?”

“We were wondering,” he went on, “we were wondering why we hadn’t had any meaningful dreams. Normally we see things happening far away that help us with our quests, except on this one. So…”

“Oh, you want Brizo,” she said. “Excellent bridge partner and killer looks, but a dreadful conversationalist, that one. So, she must be… Hmmh… Oh, right, House of Dolphins, off you go.”

Without warning, she smacked their heads together and everything went black.

Jason was the first to wake up. It was already morning. Next to him, Percy was still sleeping on the mosaic floor of a now roofless building. They were in the middle of a rectangular set of destroyed
white columns, themselves surrounded by crumbling stone walls. The mosaic depicted a big circle with concentric circular patterns of waves inside, and representations of what Jason guessed were dolphins, on the outside. He had never seen such terrifying pictures of dolphins.

“Percy?” he said, shaking him. “Percy, wake up.”

Percy mumbled something, but didn’t move.

“Do you want me to zap your ass again?”

Percy’s eyes opened instantly.

“Thought so,” Jason said with a smile.

“I might begin to like that, though,” Percy said, still from the ground.

He was having some difficulty to get up from the floor. He had tried to support part of his weight on his inexistent left hand and, as a result, had fallen on top of what was left of the arm. He huffed in protest. Jason offered his help and Percy accepted it, his face turning crimson.

“What now?” Percy asked, once he was on his feet. He rubbed his left biceps.

“I don’t know. More blood?” Jason suggested.

Percy shook his head.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “We would wake Asteria up again.”

“Was that her name?”

“What? Oh, yeah, she sort of put it in here among with that other stuff we need,” he said, tapping the side of his head. “She seems actually kind of nice, doesn’t she?”

“I guess, you know, in comparison,” Jason conceded. “Anyway, then what do we do?”

“We could just… call her name?” Percy said with a shrug. “Uhm… Brizo? Are there any Brizos here? Do you have a moment to talk about Je-Zeus?”

“Percy!”

“Sorry!”

“Now she’ll never appear,” Jason said, shaking his head at Percy.

Jason was wrong. The sea breeze intensified, making him taste the sea on his mouth. A few moments later, Asteria was in front of them again.

“I am Brizo,” she said in a dreamy voice, but that was clearly the exact same as Asteria. “Goddess of prophetic dreams and protector of sailors, fishermen, and all mariners. Are you seeking counsel?”

The difference to the previous deity was that Brizo’s eyes seemed to be permanently closed, with a sleepy smile to match, all of which reminded Jason of Gaea. He saw Percy shudder a bit at his side.

“Yes, lady Brizo,” Jason said, advancing a step towards her. He wondered if this version of Asteria would dislike him as well. “We’re on a quest,” he then asked himself how many times he had said that in the past few days, “and we would like some advice, some help, if you’re willing to do so.”
“I help anyone who travels by sea,” she said, getting closer to Percy, “and to a son of the sea even more so.”

Was this whole island a fan club of Percy or something? Jason thought, with a slight pang of jealousy.

“We heard your specialty is dreams and stuff, so we came to you,” Percy said, and then explained their quest to her, focusing on their lack of dreams.

Brizo nodded all through Percy’s explanation, her face stuck in that sleepy expression of bliss. When he finished, she got even closer to them. She raised her hands over their faces. She seemed to be listening to something.

“Yes, much has been hidden from you,” she said, putting her hands down. “I can help you recover it,” she assured them, “but not without a price.”

“The low, low price of free?” Percy tried.

Complete lack of amusement was hard to convey with an eternally smiling face, but Brizo tried her very best.

“Do you accept my help, then?” she asked them.

“What’s the price exactly?” Jason asked in return, dragging one of his feet through the ground. “Not our lives or anything like that, right?”

“Now there’s an idea,” she said, her smile getting wider. Jason gave a step back. “Oh, don’t worry, it might not be. Depends on you, I guess.”

“Fine,” Percy said, raising his voice. “Enough of this, honestly. Yeah, we accept, it’s not like we have more body parts to lose or anything like that. I just want to be done with this quest.”

Before Jason could protest, Brizo’s hands went right to their heads. Jason felt lightheaded and suddenly everything around him was much clearer, like when one upgrades from a DVD to a Blu-Ray, and one realized how crap the picture looked before.

“It will take a while for your dreams to come back,” she told them. “Days, I expect. It was a very strong sort of block. And past dreams should return to you as well. Much will be revealed, I’m sure.”

And with that, she was gone.

Their new knowledge was a ray of sunlight shining through a really cloudy sky. At least for Jason, the feeling of actual direction and nearly having the end of their quest in sight was distracting enough to keep him away from his destructive thoughts from the day before. Percy’s constant presence, talking, kisses and touching helped as well. It kept his anger in check.

Jason had to take deep breaths once in a while, but overall he had it under control. He tried not to think about it too much, the more he thought about it the more old things came to the surface. Old neuroses, old worries, old grudges, they all kept coming back. He wasn’t one to blame other for his misfortune or unhappiness, however tempting it seemed in those moments.

He kept his temper in check all through their crossing of the Mediterranean, with Percy at the helm, and him just trying to relax seeing the sea go by, the breeze that smelled so much like Percy, and
Percy himself. He tried to not look at Percy’s missing left arm, lest the thoughts of wanting to blame everyone else, including himself, came back. Percy did this easier, by constantly wearing long-sleeved clothes. It was a whole new look for him, Jason thought. He then imagined Percy in an enormous, comfy wool sweater; that made him smile a bit, which made his non-eye hurt.

It pained him from time to time, making him go to the bathroom to check the state of it in the mirror. Nothing so far, Wadjet had done a pretty good job at patching him up. The feeling persisted nonetheless, so he took small bites of ambrosia here and there, and used up the last remnants of Siobhan’s ointment.

“You’re pretty hot,” Percy said.

He was hugging him from behind and Percy’s cheek was on his. They were flying now. Percy had wanted to go through the Black Sea, but those clashing rocks at its entrance made it impossible, so it was time for Jason to take charge of the ship.

“So are you,” Jason said, trying to steal a kiss.

“No, not like that,” Percy said, letting himself be kissed on the corner of the mouth. “Well, yeah, of course I am, duh. But I’m talking of literal heat.”

“It’s hot,” Jason said, shrugging. It made Percy pull away.

“No, I know that heat,” he said. “Are you eating ambrosia?”

“What if I am? We do it all the time.”

“Yeah, when we’re hurt,” he said, “and in small amounts. Not like you, I’ve seen you sneak off to your room.”

“I’m not sneaking off. My eye hurts,” Jason said. “Don’t make such a big deal of this, please. I don’t want to fight,” he said. I don’t want to get angry and hurt you, he thought.

“Fine,” Percy said, in a ‘no, it’s not fine’ tone. “Just… stop, all right? I’m sure it would go away. Eventually…”

“Yeah, all right,” Jason said, his voice tense. “You should go rest. See if any useful dreams come up now.”

“I don’t want to,” Percy said.


“You know why.”

“Sorry,” Jason said in automatic, his body relaxing a little. “Want me to go with you? I can set the automatic pilot and put the radar at maximum sensibility. We could, uh… pick up where we left off,” he said, trying a smile.

They were on Percy’s room now. Jason was lying on the bed, fully clothed. He had a shirtless Percy sitting on top of him with his hand on Jason’s chest. Jason was admiring the view, with his hands behind his head.

“It sucks that I can touch you 50% less now,” Percy commented, looking at his stump with distaste.
Jason’s gaze was pointedly avoiding following Percy’s. Thankfully, Percy looked at him again.
“There’s way too much of you now,” he said. “Well, there’s always been, you’re built like a Dorito.”

Jason laughed.

“How come you don’t lose your good humor? Even after…” he said.

Percy shrugged and began tracing lazy circles on Jason’s chest. Slowly, he worked down to his stomach.

“Were you born with rock-hard abs or what?” Percy asked in a low voice, applying pressure to Jason’s stomach, childish amusement on his face. “How are you real?”

“I actually don’t have a lot going on besides training the other demigods at Camp, so yeah…”

“You gym rat,” Percy said, finally taking Jason’s shirt off, with some difficulty. “Not a complaint, by the way. Although you do need to find other stuff to do.”

“Like you?” Jason asked.

Percy smirked and then his gaze ran all over Jason’s upper body. The intensity of his eyes made Jason’s dick began to harden. He shifted.

“I did that,” Percy said, grinding his ass against Jason’s crotch. Jason exhaled noisily through his nose. “And that,” Percy added with a smile.

He kept grinding against Jason. The friction of their clothes was making quite a number on Jason.

“Percy,” Jason protested at last.

“I know, I know. Let me take care of it,” Percy said and pulled away from Jason.

With a look from Percy, Jason took off his pants and underwear, freeing his member at last. Percy eyed it hungrily, while struggling to take his own pants off. Once he succeeded, his mouth went straight at it.

Jason let out a gasp the first time he felt Percy’s tongue on him, exploring the whole length of it. He felt his member pulsate with every contact with Percy’s mouth. He then felt Percy’s hand on it, stroking it slowly. A shiver went up his spine when Percy’s tongue played with the tip of his dick.

Percy began to suck him off, his hand firmly grasping it.

“Why are you so good at this?” Jason said, his voice rather desperate. One of his hands was on his own chest and the other on Percy’s head.

“Learned from the best,” Percy said, looking up at him. His big, green eyes and half-open mouth were a gorgeous sight.

After a little while, Jason heard a frustrated grunt coming from Percy.

“What’s wrong?” Jason asked.

“Nothing,” Percy hurried to reply. “Nothing, it’s fine. It’s just…”

“What?”
“It’s hard to do this with only one hand,” Percy said. “I’m kind of neglecting myself here.”

Jason sat up and looked at Percy’s dick, hard and, yes, horribly neglected.

“Let me take care of it,” he said.

“What? No, I’m the one…”

Jason shushed him and pulled him closer to kiss him.

“Lay on the bed,” he told him.

Percy obeyed.

Jason took Percy’s dick and began to stroke and suck it. He then tried to lubricate it as best as he could with the oil—now a permanent fixture on the bedroom. He had never done that himself, but he was willing to give it a try. He then positioned himself, with his entrance right on top of Percy’s dick.

“Jason…”

“Here it goes,” he said, and taking hold of Percy’s length, he began his descent.

Percy’s eyes widened, which would’ve been comical if not for the pain Jason was feeling in that very moment. Jason’s determination didn’t buckle, though, and went on with his descent. He began to sweat profusely and, after whole excruciating minute, his butt-cheeks finally indicated him that Percy was all in. He breathed in and out, trying to get used to the sensation, but soon discovered it to be a fruitless endeavor. He had a penis right up his ass, and it felt all wrong in a good way. Percy just stared at him.

“Are you okay, dude?” Percy said. “That looked intense.”

Jason just nodded. He moved a bit side to side, experimentally. Yep, something was there, all right. He suppressed a laugh, and Percy seemingly suppressed a moan.

“Then get on with it,” Percy demanded.

Percy’s tone made Jason’s dick twitch. Breathing slow and evenly, and sweating a whole lot, he began the slow ascent, and then the slow descent. He started making sounds he didn’t know existed, all of his insides felt invaded, and his mind was spiraling out of control. Percy, he had Percy inside of him, his brain repeated over and over.

He gained some speed and Percy’s body began to writhe underneath him, making the whole thing messier, and so much better. Every time Percy was fully in, Jason felt a jolt of pleasure ran all through his body. His hands were on Percy’s sweaty, hairy chest, pinning him against the mattress. Percy’s head was tilted back, his eyes closed hard and the veins of his neck all visible and delicious.

“Jason, I’m gonna… I’m gonna..” he heard him say.

And then Percy moaned and grunted while Jason felt him coming deep inside him. Percy’s head rested to the side now, him breathing hard.

Jason got up slowly, his ass throbbing. Percy’s erection subsided bit by bit, all sticky and messy. Jason’s own was still on full swing, having forgotten completely to tend to himself. He took care of it, coming all over Percy’s perfect chest. He lay down, embracing him tightly, with Percy’s head still resting to the side, away from him.
“Hey,” Jason said, breathless.

Percy turned to look at him.

“Yeah?”

“I love you,” Jason said.

“I know,” Percy said.

Hours later, they were still on bed, it was dark outside.

“I really do think you should follow your own advice, though,” Percy said, his voice coming from above Jason’s resting head on his chest.

“What do you mean?” Jason asked, lifting his head and shifting his body to be at Percy’s level.

“Maybe I don’t need your help,” Percy said. “Not in the way you’re giving it to me.”

“I’m not—”

“Yes, you are. I can tell,” he said. “It won’t work, no matter how hard you try or how hard you love me. It will never be enough.”

“I’ll find another way, then,” Jason said, supporting himself with his elbow on the mattress now, staring down at Percy. “I swear I will.”

“Maybe you will,” Percy said. “I know what you’re capable of, so it wouldn’t really surprise me. The thing is, though, what about you?”

“What about me?”

“Don’t agonize over this,” he replied. “It will only hurt you. And if you fail, it will destroy you.”

“How can I not agonize over it? And I won’t fail,” Jason said. “It hurts me because I love you.”

“Will you keep loving me when we’re back at Camp? Back with everybody?” Percy asked.

“What? You think I care what anyone thinks?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I don’t.”

“What about the other campers? Don’t you have an image to uphold? What about Jupiter?” Percy asked.

“You’re just projecting now,” Jason said, not knowing what else to say.

It pained him that Percy’s words ringed true somewhat, that he had thought about those things. He hadn’t let them actually worry him, so he didn’t feel much shame over them, but they had been there, however fleetingly. With that, he managed to keep the facade up.

“How…. How did—?”

It all came crumbling down. Jason’s shocked face was apparently all that Percy needed to really get going.

“I’ve been inside your head. I’ve picked up some stuff, bits and pieces at least. It really does worry you what he thinks,” Percy said. “Honestly, I was kind of preparing myself for getting dumped once we finished the quest, getting most of what I wanted before it was too late.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Jason protested, finally sitting up. “Is that what you think of me? Is that why you agreed to…?”

Percy sat up as well.

“Well, I think it’s a bit more complicated than that,” he said. “I’m not sure you’ll agree.”

“I don’t regret it, though. Not one bit. Not even if it began your obsession with healing me or whatever.”

Jason let that last part go, not wanting to go to that old well again.

“You know what? Maybe I do care; maybe I take other people’s feelings into consideration—”

“What, unlike me?”

“No,” Jason said, bewildered. “Don’t put words in my mouth. It’s just that… me and Nico, and you and him…”

“He had a crush on me, I know that,” Percy said. “He told me himself. He got over it.”

“Whatever he might have said to you…” Jason began, his thoughts going in all directions. “It was really hard for him, you weren’t there.”

“True,” Percy said. “But I was only part of it. I wasn’t the cause, and I’m sure he knows it. I didn’t even know about it. What was I supposed to do? I did support him, you know, once I knew.”

“Then why does he avoid you? Why does he change the subject every time your name comes up?” Jason said, beginning to shake.

“We have a complicated history, beyond some unrequited teenage crush,” Percy said. “And—”

That’s when Jason lost it. He punched Percy in the face, right on the nose, sending him to the floor.

Jason got up from the bed, his fist throbbing in pain, and his breathing heavy. Percy was sitting on the floor, holding his bloody nose with his hand. He looked up at him, eyes full of hurt.

“Don’t say that again,” he said, his voice low and threatening. “Don’t you dare undermine what he went through. You know nothing. That whole complicated history? It’s all tied in with that ‘silly teenage crush.’”

Percy kept staring at him, and then he nodded. Jason helped him to get up.

“I’m sorry, I… I lost it… I…” he said. Percy just nodded again. “Let’s go fix you up,” he said, and Percy followed him.

Jason was back above deck, many, many hours, some giant ants in India, and a sharknado later.
They were going at full speed now, and as high as the ship was able to go. No more delays, no more detours, was Jason’s new policy. It had paid off, since they were almost flying over China now.

Percy appeared then, his face fine as ever, and stood a meter away from Jason. He cleared his throat.

“Yeah?” Jason said. They hadn’t talked since the incident.

“I couldn’t finish earlier,” Percy began as if it all had happened a few minutes ago, “because you’re rude, and you punched me… So, what I was sa—what? What’s that face?”

“You truly are incredible,” Jason said, shaking his head and looking at him.

“Well, thank you,” Percy said, almost grinning. “Anyway, what I was saying, before I was rudely interrupted, is that yes, Nico had a crush on me that I couldn’t reciprocate. And I’m not going to undermine any of the things he went through, but he’s fine now. Perhaps you don’t know this, but I’ve talked to him, I’ve seen him. The two of us, alone. All that’s left is a messy, complicated history of broken promises, misunderstandings and bad memories. I can assure you that, because he told me so, and he has changed. He wouldn’t keep stuff to himself that would keep on hurting him. You know that, you know him better than anyone besides Hazel.”

Percy kept his distance, but Jason didn’t feel the urge to punch him. Maybe what he was saying made some sort of sense or maybe Jason was just tired. Whatever the case, keeping some distance between them seemed like a good strategy. Percy waited, and then went on:

“You two dated. If it was either a quick fling or something much more, I don’t know. But am I right to assume that it ended because ‘you just didn’t see him that way?’ That’s what I gathered from being inside your mind.”

“Yeah,” Jason said.

“I think Nico is mature enough, and knowledgeable enough to understand these kinds of things, this whole sexuality, confusion and attraction thing, in a way that I’m barely beginning to learn myself, admittedly way too late in my life. So, it’s my guess that he’s going to be cool with this, with us. It’s my guess that he may feel a little bit hurt but that, much more sooner than later, he’s going to get it maybe even better than us. I want to give him that credit, because he totally deserves it. So, will you?”

Jason stared at him.

“When did you get so eloquent?” he asked.

Percy gave him a look.


“No need to,” Percy told him, getting closer. “It was kinda hot, to be honest.”

“You—“

“I’m incredible. I know,” he said, with a grin. “You do have some anger issues, though. You should work on that,” he continued, almost teasing, but with a rather serious face now.

Jason nodded. They hugged and kissed all the rest of the way. Jason felt the ending coming; hopefully his feeling was just about the quest. Percy hugged, kissed, licked, and bottomed part of
Jason’s worries away.
The worst part of having lost half an arm wasn’t the shock and trauma. It wasn’t being constantly surprised in a nasty way that a huge part of him just wasn’t there. It wasn’t failing to do simple things as easily as before, making him think about how much stuff he had been taking for granted. No, perhaps the worst thing was catching Jason’s looks, both the pitying ones and the ones that tried not to be. Or the ones when he didn’t actually looked at it. Percy could barely look at it, so he really couldn’t blame Jason, but it stung all the same.

He also needed to set an example, so he avoided ambrosia even though his nonexistent arm was hurting. When had he become the responsible one? This quest had made him a truly appalling being, he thought. He couldn’t wait for it to be over, so he could go to his criminally small house in New Rome with Jason, his boyfriend, and lock themselves away for days. They would watch terrible movies, and eat unhealthy amounts of snacks and junk food, and they would stay up all night talking, making out, and more. They would walk through the forum hand in hand, shocking the elderly with their sheer combined awesomeness. Hey, was Jason into videogames? No problem, he would get him into them. He wanted them to be a big, fat, walking cliché. They would be the best big, fat, walking cliché of all.

They could see part of Japan below them in the distance now. Percy was getting everything ready, while Jason prepared their descent on the water. It had gotten dark around them six or so hours ago, the sky still missing Canis Minor, but they would take care of that soon enough. The brightest thing weren’t the stars, but the thriving civilization below.

“Is here okay?” Jason asked.

“I won’t be sure until we’re on the water,” Percy replied, still admiring the island, but repeating the numbers in his head. “But yeah, it’s supposed to be a sea close to the island.”

They descended, landing with no problems on the water. Percy’s perfect bearing kicked in immediately. He took control of the ship and went full speed towards Japan, a straight line. Once they got past an islet, Percy veered to the north. Their destination lied straight ahead, just twenty more kilometers or so.

Thirty-two degrees, forty nine minutes and four seconds north; one-hundred and thirty degrees, twenty four minutes and fifty seconds east. Percy’s brain kept repeating that, with another part of it keeping track of the increasing number representing their current latitude. He stopped the ship, they were there.

He could see a thin strip of distant lights to the west. They were city lights, not the ones he was looking for. Jason was next to him.

“What now?” he asked him.

“We wait,” Percy said, looking around.

The feeling of accomplishment disappeared completely, and Percy’s hand began to sweat cold. He checked the coordinates again, and again. He began to shiver slightly, even with Jason close to him. He could see his breath in front of him now. Something was on the back of his mind, a constant whispering.

“Dude, are you okay?” Jason asked him, putting one arm around his shoulders. “You’re paler than a
“ghost.”

“I don’t know. There’s…” Percy said, and shook his head. The whispering had gotten louder. “Do you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

Percy felt dizzy now, his legs were weak, and his hand had gone numb. He covered his mouth with it, ran to the side of the ship, and puked into the dark sea. His malaise only increased with that.

“Dude, I think you’re sea sick,” Jason said, now next to him, rubbing his back.

“I’m not… I can’t…” and Percy puked again.

The whispers were completely clear now, and were no longer in his head. They couldn’t be. The water below was the source. He saw it form ripples and small waves. The whole world was moving around him. He fell to his knees and put his forehead in the cold railing of the ship.

“There’s something… there’s something in the water…” he said.

“What is it?” Jason asked him urgently, his sword already on his hand.

“I don’t know,” Percy said, trying to get on his feet again. The water was screaming at him now.

“It’s screaming… They’re screaming…”

It was a huge crowd of voices, all of them screaming, moaning, and crying.

Something hit the ship, making it tilt, which didn’t help Percy’s condition at all. He took his hand to his ear, trying to shut the louder and louder sound of those thousands of voices. Even if he had had both hands, he couldn’t have escaped that sound. He cursed his missing arm anyway. His head was about to explode.

“Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!”

“Percy, come on! We need to get you—“

Jason fell to the floor. The ship had tilted, its bow raised by the water. Percy was dragged across the deck by gravity. He didn’t even try to take hold of anything.

“Percy!”

He opened his eyes, confused. There was a ringing on his ears but at least the screaming had ceased.

“I’m fine!” he called, shaking while trying to get up.

He was on his feet now, his hand holding tight to the side of the ship. He saw Jason at the bow of the ship, his sword still out, facing away from him. Jason was looking at a figure in front of the ship, an enormous one, that kept on rising from the sea.

It was a dark shape, darkest than the night and the sea around it. It was bigger than their ship and it kept on growing. Its black shape blocking the stars behind it, it looked like the shadow of a man with a round, enormous head, perfect for such a gigantic body. It froze Percy’s blood. The night went completely still and quiet.

“Who are you?” Percy heard Jason’s voice ask.
Against all odds, the creature replied in a loud, booming voice. It wasn’t something they could understand, but it had the cadence of speech, not the roar or call of a beast.

“Sorry?” Jason asked. “I don’t—”

A humongous black limb rose from the sea, and then came down on them, breaking their fragile ship in two. Percy held tighter to it. Another powerful hit from the creature, now going on circles around them, and the back half of the ship was completely destroyed. A sound like a loud, gigantic horn being played tore the night, and the creature used both its limbs to hit Percy and Jason’s part of the ship.

Percy fell to the water and, for the first time in his life, felt the total impact of it. He tried to swim towards a floating piece of debris from the shipwreck, but the water didn’t seem to want to let him move. He felt dozens of hands around him beneath the water, all of them trying to grab him, all of them trying to pull him down. The screaming and moaning and crying began again, hurting his ears. He swallowed liters and liters of water, making him cough uncontrollably. After a short and fruitless fight, Percy was dragged down, deep into the sea.

Percy was drowning. Darkness oppressed him on all sides. He felt the pressure of everything around him increasing, he felt water getting into his lungs and, worst of it all, he could still hear all those voices.


It was as if the whole sea, the whole ocean was a made up of those voices. He went down and down. More darkness, more water in his lungs, more voices, more laments, more despair. Cold and rage, cold and misery, cold and hopelessness. He longed for an unconsciousness that didn’t seem to come. He just went deeper.

The pressure was unbearable now. The sound of laments, angry screams and endless, endless despair kept increasing. His head should’ve exploded long ago, his organs should’ve collapsed long ago, and his heart and brain should’ve given up long ago.

How deep down could they drag him? How much longer until they decided it was enough? How much longer until the sweet release of death?

He went deeper still.

His last thought was of his mom, his step-dad, his little brother… His last thought was of Jason. The oppressive darkness crushed his heart, and the last bit of hope melted away. He felt the coldness, despair, and utter misery get inside him completely. Lost forever. Fear forever.

It was the Cocytus all over again, only this time he had lost. It was every single one of his nightmares coming true at once. Tartarus was paradise.

He stopped thinking.

He stopped.
Jason looked around him, trying to spot Percy among the rests of the ship. He was shivering and still spitting dirty sea water. He swam towards the biggest piece of the ship was near him. It climbed over it and laid on it. He coughed some more water out. The creature that attacked them had disappeared completely and apparently, so did Percy.

He called his name, again and again, until his throat hurt. He received no response. His whole body was shaking, both because of the cold and because of the unbridled fear and desperation. He turned his head to the left, and he saw, a glimpse of Percy that vanished as soon as he put his eye on him.

He saw how a human hand, as black as the night, had emerged from the water and pushed Percy completely down. Percy didn’t come back up.

“PERCY!”

Nothing happened. Percy was gone.

“PERCY!”

Jason kept screaming and swimming towards where he had seen Percy vanish. He used the floating debris to stay afloat. Percy couldn’t drown, he kept repeating to himself in his head. Percy couldn’t drown…

Percy couldn’t get sea sick either.

“PERCY!”

Jason saw the lights appear: the dancing, flaming lights connecting to the stars. The Shirauni, Percy had told him.

Percy…

Jason had let the lights come and go. He had known more or less what to do. He could have completed the quest. But nothing mattered anymore. He was underwater looking for a sign of Percy but there were none.

His head broke the water, and something broke inside of him. Everything he had ever felt bubbled up to the surface. He felt the surge of power, and he let go.

Jason was the center of a tornado. The wind swirled around him, faster and more furious than ever. He felt as if he had exploded, as if his being had expanded. He could feel winds and storms on the other side of the world. He could stop them if he wanted; he was sure of it. But all that mattered was below him, deep into the water.

The tornado twisted even faster, roaring with untamed fury. It bore into the water. It bore and bore. Jason went deeper and deeper, the winds and water all twisting around him. The whole sea was oppressing from all sides, wanting to crush him, wanting to stop him. It stood no chance at all.

He went deeper still, the winds around him getting faster with every few feet. How many miles deep was he? He wondered for less than a second, before dismissing that thought and going much deeper.

At last, he saw him.
Jason felt he could have slept for a thousand years if he dared close his eyes. He couldn’t move. He was laying down on a piece of timber, with Percy at his side. Percy, who was breathing. Percy, who was pale and blue and still shivering. Percy, who was alive.

It was then that something else climbed to their piece of timber in the middle of a Japanese sea. Jason mustered every bit of his strength to move his head to the side. It was a fox. A fox was on Percy’s chest, sniffing his face.

The pure shock and absurdity of it made him sat up. The fox flinched and stared at him, but didn’t run. An equally absurd thought occurred to him.

“Hey,” he said, surprised his voice was still working. “Come here. I don’t... I don’t want to catch you. I want that thing on your neck.”

The fox had a string around his neck, and from it hang something golden and round. The fox jumped off Percy’s unconscious body and approached Jason, ready to sprint away from him at a moment’s notice. Jason reached slowly and carefully towards the fox and then he touched the golden thing with his hand. The string around the fox’s neck vanished, and Jason caught the round object. It was a golden apple.

Before anything else, he addressed the fox:

“If you wait around here until it gets dark, there will be some pretty lights. Just... go towards them and you could go home.”

The fox cocked its head, sniffed the air one more time, and sprinted away, running over water at an impossible speed.

“We did it, then,” he heard a weak voice say.

Jason turned to the side. Percy was awake.

“Yeah,” Jason said.

And then Percy began to sob. His whole face crunched up, and a torrent of tears came out of his eyes. His face, all pale and blue and basically dead, was nothing compared to the expression he bore now. He wheezed, and screamed and shook. Pure despair coming with every sob, unadulterated misery after every tear.

“I want it to stop,” Jason could hear Percy say over and over again between sobs and screams.

He put the apple aside. And hugged Percy with every last bit of strength he had left. They hugged and hugged, and Percy’s sobs began to fade away. Jason was crying as well. Slowly, and after many minutes, they fell asleep on a piece of timber of a no longer self-repairing magical ship in the middle of a Japanese sea, many miles from home. And yet, they were home.

Jason’s last sight before his eye closed completely was the golden apple to their side, and its inscription:

*To the mightiest.*
Brizo’s magic finally kicked in. The dreams came all at once.

They were in the middle of an enormous hall. Golden columns and vaulted ceilings rose high above them. There was music and laughter all around them. People, enormous powerful people, dancing and enjoying themselves were all around them. They were in Olympus, and there was a party on full swing, and in the middle of it all was Apollo on a golden seat, being fed delicacies by girls who looked a lot like Clio.

The scene around them changed somewhat. They could see the light coming through the high windows of the hall changing, as if time had been sped up, days and nights happening in the span of seconds. The dancing and partying figures around them had vanished. There were people strewn about the whole place’s floor, giggling came from dark corners, and drunken chatter came from the far end of the room.

“So bored!” they heard a hiccupping voice say, Apollo’s voice.

“Yeeaaah,” they heard a couple of others reply. Percy recognized Hermes, Jason recognized Mercury.

“They don’t care ‘bout us no more,” Mars said. “Where ‘r our sacrifices, the games held on your honor? Where’s the spectacle? Those mortals and demigods, scum all of ‘em, disrespectful lot.”

“Hear, hear,” Bacchus said, laying face-down on the floor.

“Where in Hades is Zeus?” Apollo asked. “Did he go off again to hook up with another mortal?”

“Or some mare, or a goose, or Elysium knows what,” they heard yet another voice.

“You idiot,” Mars said. “You’re Zeus!”

“Am not,” the voice said. “Am Yeeewww-pe-ter. Jupiter! Jupiter Optimus Prime Megatron… I don’t even know anymore…”

“So bored!” Apollo said again.

It was then, that something fell to the floor from a nearby table.

“Whatwasthat?” Apollo asked.


The thing rolled over to the group. The golden apple floated until it was on Apollo’s hand.

“Ha!” he said, trying to sit up straight and falling miserably. “Check this out!”

He tossed the apple and Mercury caught it.

“To the mightiest,” he read. “This was on the gift table?” he asked.

“I think so,” replied Apollo. “So it’s obviously for me. The mightiest!”

“But am the mightiest!” Jupiter whined like a toddler.
“In your dreams,” said Neptune, throwing a shoe at Jupiter. “I’m the mightiest. You’ve always been jealous and overcompensating.”

“But it’s my party! My gift table! My apple!” Apollo said.

“Oh, get out of ‘ere. I could crush you with my thumb,” Mars, no, Ares said.

“I’d like to see ya try it!”

“Boys, boys, boys,” Hermes said. “Can’t you all see where this is going?”

“No, you brute,” Bacchus interjected. “Athlete’s Foot here is saying that it came from Eris.”

The rest made sounds of comprehension.

“That old crone,” Dionysus said. “Always stirring trouble.”

“Yeeaah, throw that away, Mercury,” Apollo said.

Percy and Jason heard a whispering that none of the gods seemed to hear, but they couldn’t make out any words.

“Wait!” Ares said, getting up clumsily. “Don’t do it. Don’t do it. I got an idea.”

“Oh, here it comes,” Jupiter said.

“We need entertainment, yeah?” he said. They all agreed. “We need sacrifices, and games, right?”

“Oh, just get to it,” Mercury said. “Or I toss this rubbish to Tartarus.”

“I’m getting to it! Geez!” Ares said. “Let’s toss it at the mortals or demigods and see ‘em fight for it. Make a whole event out of it.”

“We’ve had those,” Bacchus said. “Besides, don’t you think they won’t know what it is? They would never fall for it. And the mortals don’t even believe in that stuff anymore.”

“Fine!” Mars bellowed. “Fine, toss it then. You bunch of spoilsports…”

“Wait,” came the raspy voice of Vulcan. “I got an idea.”

“Aren’t we quite the think tank today?” Neptune said, and then shuddered. “Eugh, tanks…”

“What if we don’t actually show it to ‘em?” Hephaestus said. “Make ‘em believe it’s something else.”

“Like what?” Poseidon asked, rubbing his eyes as if he had just woken up.

Hephaestus looked deep in thought, drunken thought.

“Oh, anything, you know how they are,” Apollo said. “Give ‘em a prophecy or somethin’ and they run around like headless chickens. I could make up one in the sssspot!”

“You know, I’m liking this idea…”

“Me too…”
“Wait, wait, wait,” Hephaestus said. “Let’s make it more interesting, let’s make a show out of it! For everyone to see! The event of the century!”

“Exclusively on Hephaestus TV?” asked Dionysus, mockingly. “That channel of yours has been going downhill since the 1880s. They don’t even show music videos anymore.”

“That’s a thing of the past!” Vulcan protested. “Wanna hear what’s the new thing? Reality shows! The mortals are goin’ crazy for those things! Worshipping the participants and all! Maybe even offerin’ sacrifices and stuff!”

“So what?” Apollo said, and took the golden apple from Mercury, turning it around, inspecting it. He hiccupped again. “We make the whole thing one of those reality shows?”

“Yes, yes!” Vulcan said animatedly. “Show it worldwide! 24/7! To gods and demigods and monsters and spirits! The more the merrier! Think of the advertising!”

“So, who do we pick?” Apollo asked. “Someone who can last longer than a minute, please.”

Percy and Jason heard them discuss it all at length; they heard them come up with tons of names, many of their friends included. In the end, it came down to two: Percy Jackson and Jason Grace, championed by Jupiter/Zeus and Poseidon/Neptune. Only one of them was expected to survive, at the most.

They heard them come up with the rules and the lies. They heard them plan the whole thing, talking about how a fake quest technically didn’t break their promise of no more quests for the Seven. They saw them plucking Canis Minor out of the night sky, tie the golden apple to its neck, and send it to Earth.

“Gonna give ‘em that prophecy myself,” Apollo said after fumbling with his phone. “Dammit, Mercury. I told you I just wanted Angry Stymphalian Birds!”

And then they saw him walking drunkenly towards his chariot, and plummeting as a ball of fire towards the Earth.

The whole scene shifted several times.

They saw themselves depart for their joke of a quest. Then after a while, at once, several floating screens appeared everywhere, at both Camps, at Olympus, even at Tartarus. A title card flashed on them: THE AMAZING QUEST. And then their every move and spoken word began to be recorded and broadcasted for everyone to see.

People being touched by the “scene” of them on Percy’s mom’s house, and then gasping at them fighting the venti; monsters cheering when Jason went down; gods confused when Percy healed Jason. Those same gods who have been hurrying to cut and block all Iris messages to them and from them, to block all dreams… Ares appearing in person to Dick, and threatening him while he talked to Percy before their connection was lost.

They saw themselves bonding with each other, saving each other again and again, and they saw people, monsters and gods watching that very same thing. They saw Leo, Nico, and Rachel running up and down all over Camp, yelling at people to turn that damn thing off. A lot did, but there was always someone watching them. They saw Leo desperately working on Bunker Nine, a small TV at his side, checking on them.

Leo held up a remote, and after a minute or two, they saw him smile when on the screen the ship he had built appeared to save his friends. The remote exploded on his hand shortly after, shut down by
the gods. Leo huffed, swore to himself, and worked some more, trying to find a way to alert his friends, to contact them.

Percy saw that girl Angie and that kid Todd from Camp Jupiter watching the TV together with apprehension, fearing for his and Jason’s lives. They saw Angie’s big eyes go even wider at Lamia’s mention of blood, and then the girl running out of the room, leaving a confused Todd behind. A confused Todd who didn’t stop dialing Percy’s number over and over.

They saw Ares ordering Phobos and Deimos to ‘spice things up,’ and berating them once they came back defeated. Hundreds of monsters and enemies also monitoring all of their movements, waiting for their moment to strike and get their claim to fame; some others, like Remus, merely wanting to use them as pawns in their own plans; and, a select few, bidding their time and planning their revenge on Tartarus.

“They will detect any form of magic or electronic communication,” they heard Leo say to his cabin mates. Lauren was next to him, holding a device that looked like a helicopter. “Lauren here gave me the idea. So, yeah, we’ll just send something to them in the old-fashioned way, kind of,” he explained while Lauren turned on the device.

It flew away, flew and flew until it crossed the Atlantic. It spotted Percy and Jason, in the woods near the Pyrenees, only to be shot down from one of Apollo’s arrows. Leo trashed his workshop in a rage.

Percy saw that Annabeth had been glued to the screen once she found out. He saw her crying her eyes out every time he had one of his episodes at night. Siobhan next to her, hugging her and letting her sob against her. And then the hint of a smile on Annabeth’s face once Jason began to try to calm Percy down.

Thalia and Piper stormed into Artemis’ tent, demanding her to put a stop to the whole thing, but she was way too busy attending to a crisis of her own. The place was packed with her hunters, some demanding an explanation, some excited, some terribly offended by the whole thing.

“You can’t possibly be serious,” said one of the hunters to another. “Let him join us?”

“I mean, he is lady Artemis’ so—“

“No,” Artemis cut in, her voice harsh and weary. “That won’t happen.”

The argument kept going and going. Piper walked out, determined to stop the madness. She went to see her mom.

“Are you insane?” Aphrodite asked, her eyes glued to the screen. “They just kissed! Oh, this multi-angle function is quite marvelous.”

She pressed a button on the remote, and two of the cameras got dangerously close to Percy and Jason, floating above the clouds, kissing.

“Mom!” Piper shouted at her, angrier than she had ever been.

“What? They do need a bit of love!” the goddess said. “All that trauma…”

“Which they wouldn’t be going through if this whole thing hadn’t existed in the first place,” Piper argued, looking as if she was entertaining the possibility of pulling out an arrow out of her quiver and just shoot Aphrodite. “Gods, you’re impossible! I’ve tried to understand you. I really have, but you just make it s—”
“Oh, was that why you decided to join that ridiculous club of Artemis? What a weird way to show it,” Aphrodite said. “Or was it just to spite me?”

“I’m just trying out new things!” Piper said. “Thalia invited me, and I thought it might be good to—”

The discussion had gone on. In the end, Piper gave up on her mom helping Jason and Percy.

They saw the gods taking bets on who of the two demigods would die first, on who would win once they inevitably turned on each other out of sheer desperation. Even some have been about whether they would actually end up together. Fights had broken here and there, chaos reigned, which is why they took so long to notice Percy’s floating pen, powered by none other than Todd.

“Hurry up!” Angie said, her fingers tapping the wooden table nervously. “Franks says Mars and Ares are still arguing and that by the sound of it, a whole other bunch of gods too. They’re giving him a mean headache.”

“I am hurrying!” Todd said while doing something to a piece of paper with Percy’s number on it. He seemed to be moving the ink on it around using sheer focus. It combusted before he could sign it. He crashed back on his chair. “I don’t know why we’re sending them vague clues you’ve dug up instead of actually telling them what is going on.”

“You know what happened to those Apollo kids from Camp Half-Blood who tried the thing with the lyre,” Angie reminded him. “They still haven’t woken up.”

“How’s your blood thingy going?” Todd asked, brushing the ashes of the paper aside.

“Slow,” she said, biting her lower lip. “But we’re getting close, I think.”

“I don’t know what else to do,” Todd said. “I’ve even been praying to dad.”

“Crepitus? But—”

“I know, I know,” Todd said, “like he would ever be able to do something,” he reclined on his chair, and sighed deeply.

Both their efforts had paid off, Percy thought, when he saw Todd cheering his dad for saving them both from Mefitis’ nasty hands. And then when, using an imperfect version of whatever blood thingy Angie had been doing, she had guided Percy’s body through the blind fight with Medusa. The creepy voodoo doll she was using went, predictably, up in flames. Their sense of victory was crushed, however, when Medusa had taken Jason’s eye.

Percy had never seen the gods as angry and confused as when, on the screen, the goddess Wadjet threatened to unravel all of their plans.

“No match for her?” Zeus had said on a rage. ”Well, we’ll see about that.”

He sent down the worst storms he could conjure up, with Neptune gladly joining the party. The fact was that she had been able to stop them, at least while Percy and Jason crossed the Nile. It was then that Neptune had sent one of the deadliest monsters he could think of. It was then that Percy had never felt so betrayed, even if his dad wasn’t being his dad. Different aspects be damned.

It all had been fake, the whole quest, and all that pain and loss had been for nothing. All of it while their souls had been laid bare in front of everyone. Percy had thought it wasn’t possible to feel worse than when he was drowning in all that despair. He had been wrong.
The last images were of the Teumessian fox. Percy and Jason saw it cross whole countries in no time at all, desperately looking for something familiar, something of the Ancient times. They saw it sniffing old, ruined temples, running through familiar forests and mountains, and walking through the new city streets longing for what was below, buried by time. They saw him when, sensing Jason’s explosion of power while saving Percy from the depths, it ran and ran until it reached them, desperate for any semblance of the old times and finding just some demigods in a fake quest. They saw it waiting in the spot Jason had indicated it, waiting for the flaming, dancing lights connecting to the stars.

And then, Percy woke up, with Jason a close second. None of them spoke. They looked around until they found the last image of their dream, the waiting fox, resting on a similar piece of debris to theirs. Percy’s head began to get filled again by the incessant murmur of the drowned. He needed to get the hell out of there.

He took the golden apple, raised it up to the heavens and said, “We did it, we won, and we know everything.”

He collapsed still exhausted next to Jason, who was breathing heavily. Before he could ask him what was wrong, a blinding, golden light surrounded them, taking them far from that place.
For a second, Jason thought he was dreaming again. The very same image of the enormous hall with
the huge golden columns was all around him once more. They very same place were this whole
absurd thing had started. It looked clean and proper now, though; unlike the state of decadence and
excess that had been shown in their dreams, its true state.

The truth. What did he think of the truth? What did he think of being manipulated and lied to at every
step? What did he think of having obediently followed without much question? What did he think of
having acted exactly as they expected him to? In that very moment, he wasn’t thinking much at all,
his brain had gone pretty much numb. He could only feel, and what he felt was rage.

He looked calmly around him, as gods began to appear, the whole Olympian pantheon minus Hades
and Pluto. His absence was filled in with the inclusion of other minor gods, curiosity clear o their
faces. Jason wasn’t shaking and he wasn’t sweating or having any difficulty breathing. It was a calm,
controlled, dangerous rage, the one he felt in that moment. Seeing the faces of the gods who, in a fit
of boredom, had played with their lives only made him calmer, more serene. Percy at his side, on the
other hand, was seething.

“Well,” Jupiter or Zeus said, Jason wasn’t sure. It wasn’t like he cared anymore. “You two have
given us quite the surprise.”

“Yeah, that you both live,” Mars snorted.

Jason saw a camera floating to the side, and then another appeared near his face. The show was still
going on. He looked at Percy, and saw the tears still fresh on his face. Had he been crying through
the dream? Or had it lasted nothing at all in real time? His attention went back to Apollo, who was
saying something or other.

“…in short, you have proven yourselves highly on the eyes of the whole immortal pantheon, one of
the greatest honors,” Apollo said, it sounded like a rehearsed speech. “We congratulate you,
demigods, sons of the sea and sky.”

The gods began to applaud, some of them uncomfortably so. Mars, Ares, Bacchus and a few other
were more of a mocking applause. To his side, Jason saw Percy began to truly shake, his teeth
grinding, his hand’s grip so strong around the golden apple that Jason thought he could break it if he
kept going. Percy closed his eyes.

“That’s it?” Percy asked when he finally opened his eyes. “That’all we get? You should be
apologizing, giving us every single thing we wanted, you should—” he couldn’t go on.

“Well, you get the golden apple, of course,” Mercury shrugged. “You could buy some candy with
that or something you kids like. Although I would argue it’s more of Jason’s prize since he was the
one to get it.”

Noises of agreement all around.

“Are we seriously going to discuss—” Percy’s rage didn’t look like it was going to let him finish any
of his sentences. Every word was filled with it, probably overwhelming him. He breathed hard
through his nose, reminding Jason of a pissed off bull about to charge. His green eyes were more
penetrating than ever, as if he was about to murder the next person he saw. “What the h—“

The gods didn’t seem to find him very threatening, or at all. At the sight of it, it looked like Percy had
given up. He simply looked down, bowing his head now. Defeated.

Zeus/Jupiter was babbling again, but Jason had only eyes for Percy. He only had eyes for the drying tears on his face, the hurt, rage and hopelessness radiating from him, and for his left arm, half of it lost now to a less than worthless cause. Something snapped on Jason’s brain, and he looked up. Some god was still talking.

“Oh, fuck off!” he said.

There was a total silence. Percy snapped up and looked at him, his eyes wide as plates.

“Fuck off! All of you!” Jason said. “Greatest fucking honor? Unlike the other times we’ve saved your sorry asses, you useless pieces of shit? Are you for fucking real? Are you just going to stand there like a bunch of fucking idiots after what the shit you’ve done? You’re the most pathetic, petty, just fucking evil sorry excuse for fucking life I’ve ever seen. I can’t even process how big of a bunch of douchebags you all are. It makes me sick. It makes me want to pluck my other fucking eye out if that meant I wouldn’t have to see any of you assholes ever again!

“You sit on your fat-asses all goddamned day wanking yourselves off thinking you rule the world, when no one actually gives a shit about you anymore. All that fucking influence is worth shit if everyone else thinks you are just fucking stories. Why the fuck do you even hide? Shouldn’t you be out there, imposing your fucking authority? Showing off your flaccid dicks around to see if anyone gives a crap? No, you’re content playing with your own children’s lives because you’re scared shitless!

“Because, holy shit! Because, you’re so set on your old fucking ways, you’re the most infuriatingly stubborn pieces of crap that had ever existed. Do you ever think ‘oh, I shouldn’t fuck that mortal behind my wife’s back’ or ‘maybe I shouldn’t punish the poor victims of my husband’s raging assholery’ or ‘maybe I should take care of this fucking business of the earth itself rising up against me to cut off my fucking balls,’ you unbelievable manchilds? You bring about your own doom due to your fucking stupidity every other goddamned week and it’s us the ones who have to put up with all of your crap, the ones who solve all of your problems while you pat each other on the back, while you jerk each other off while blasting another mortal to ashes.

“You disgust me! You bags of useless, fetid, putrid crap. So yes, FUCK YOU! FUCK ALL OF YOU! GO FUCK YOURSELVES! I DON’T GIVE A SHIT! LET THE FUCKING WORLD CRUMBLE! IT. DOESN’T. FUCKING. NEED. YOU.”

Jason’s breath was shallow and uneven. The quiet around him seemed to last forever, but then he heard it—the crackling above them, the Master Bolt charging. He could feel the wrath of all the gods in front of him, making him lose all resolve, making him get frozen on the spot. Somewhere on his brain the command for running was issued, but the rest of his body did not obey.

He felt a strong tugging on his arm, and then Percy’s terrified voice.

“RUN!”

Percy dragged him with all his strength for a couple of meters, and then Jason’s body finally reacted. They ran at their full speed, Jason’s heart hammering against his chest, the hairs on the back of his head standing up. The air in the room got unbearably hot and unbearably cold. They crossed the enormous hall in no time, but when they were about to get the hell out of there, the huge oak door closed right in front of their noses. They were trapped.

The marble floor began to shake and crack under their feet. Jason looked at Percy, but whatever last
words he was about to say to him died on his lips once he saw him chewing something desperately.

“Eat it!” Percy said once he had swallowed, offering Jason something.

“What?” Jason asked.

A nearby column fell to the floor. The crystal on the windows was long gone.

“EAT IT!” Percy repeated, pushing the now bitten golden apple on Jason’s hand.

Jason took a huge bite, half-expecting his teeth to break but that didn’t happen. The apple was soft and juicy. It was the most delicious thing he had ever tasted, his tired body recovered instantly, his shot nerves began to heal, all soreness and physical pain went away, and his taste buds had died and were on Elysium. Seconds later, in the moment he finally swallowed, everything exploded around them.

Jason felt the bolt of lightning crashing through his body, making him shake, twist and jerk violently. He felt the white heat of sun-fire boiling his insides and the pulsating hot pain of lava and molten rock punishing his skin. He felt his lungs fill with water, his veins coursing with dissolving poison and acid, and a thousand arrows piercing his body. And then, it ended.

His head was still buzzing, and his vision was still recovering from the blinding lights but, as far as he could tell, he was perfectly alright. Percy was perfectly alright, if a bit shaken.

“It worked!” Percy said, his face astonished.

“What—?”

A roar of fury behind them, and they kept running, passing through the now demolished door.

“Hey!” Jason heard to his right.

He stopped on his tracks, making Percy collide against him.

“Nico?” Jason asked.

Nico di Angelo stepped out of the shadows, his face whiter than ever.

“Come on, quick!” he said, beckoning them with his head and extending his hand. “We need to get the hell out of here.”

Without hesitation, Jason took Percy’s and then Nico’s hand. The three ran toward the shadows, and were swallowed by them.
The trip to Camp Half-Blood was perfunctory and confusing. It involved a lot of running to dark enough places and vanishing into the shadows of said places. It wasn’t too hard to find those, since it had started to rain heavily, and the black clouds overhead offered plenty of shadows. Constant lightning and thunder followed them all the way.

The shadow travel itself wasn’t much fun either. Percy’s memories of it were much milder than the actual thing. He didn’t remember it being quite so bumpy or taking quite so long. He did remember the cold of jumping into a shadow, along with the shivers down his spine and the weird noises.

They finally reached Half-Blood Hill. Thalia’s pine tree was but a few meters away. Nico collapsed on the muddy grass, panting and with a nauseous expression. He almost took Percy and Jason down with him.

“Hades began to close pathways… when he realized where I was going… Had to… Run and detour and…” Nico said, lying on the ground.

Percy and Jason helped him up and, together, they entered the camp.

The sunny, dry, and warm environment of Camp Half-Blood was a much welcome change from, well, basically everything before it. Once Percy stepped across the magical boundary, he was greeted by a dozen eager-to-hug-him arms and curious and concerned looks. Jason was in a tight embrace with Thalia, and Nico was being fussed over by that Alan guy, pretending to be annoyed by it. Hazel, still very much pregnant and despite Frank’s meek objections, showed up a minute later to further annoy her brother.

“Alright, everyone,” someone said over the hubbub. “Let them breathe.”

Annabeth went straight at him across the mass of demigods. Percy saw Siobhan standing not far behind, engaged on a deep conversation with David from Apollo’s cabin. Annabeth hugged him and then guided him through the crowd. She kept glancing to what was left of his arm.

The next two days were a blur of people talking and explaining, and of Percy and Jason telling them that they knew pretty much everything and were not willing to relive the whole experience again. It was the morning of the third day, and Chiron had arrived a few minutes ago, and no doubt was going to want to speak to them. Percy did not look forward to it. He probably was going to be on their side, but still.

“He was recalled to Olympus once the whole thing started,” Leo told Percy. “We’ve been on our own pretty much the whole time.”

They were on Bunker Nine; Leo had brought Percy to show him something. Percy had followed him gladly, relishing on having an excuse to hide from everyone else.

“Thanks for saving our asses from Lamia,” Percy said, suddenly remembering.

“Yeah, no problem,” Leo said, looking morose.
“What’s wrong?” Percy asked. “Are you going to pull a Pretty Much Everyone At Camp and start blaming yourself for not being able to tell us as soon as possible? They’re gods, Leo, they handle everything.”

“It’s not that, well, sort of. It’s just… I think I finally found a way to reach Calypso,” he said. “Lauren figured it out. I should have asked for help much sooner.”

“That… that’s great!” Percy said. “Why do you look so bummed?”

“Because I won’t be able to stay here with the rest of you when everything goes down,” Leo said, tinkering with some sort of small motor. “So yeah, apart from not being able to actually help you on that fake quest now I’m bailing on you.”

“Bailing on what?” Percy asked. “What are you talking about?”

“Nothing,” Leo said, “I just… I know you. And Jason.”

Percy looked at him, mystified.

“But, hey, I didn’t brought you here for that,” Leo said, getting up his chair and walking towards the back of the workshop.

He brought back a black, long, wooden box.

“It’s not perfect,” he said, giving it to Percy. “It works just fine, but it could be much better.”

“What is it?” Percy asked.

“Open it.”

Percy put the box on the table next to him and opened the lid.

“Wow. Leo…” he said.

He took the mechanical arm out of the box, his hand shaking. It looked just like his lost limb, except made of shiny metal. Leo retired a panel from the middle and put the small thing he had been tinkering with inside, and the mess of wires inside immediately sprang to life, connecting themselves to the small device. The arm sprang to life immediately. Percy saw small pistons and mechanical gears working in complicated patterns before Leo sealed the panel shut.

“Go ahead, try it on,” Leo said, looking anxious. “I’ll help…”

It was like having his arm back again. It responded to his thoughts just as fast and precise as a real arm would. Percy examined it from all angles, making a fist, waving his hand around. Percy started to tear up.

“Made of an alloy of orichalcum and adamant so you can probably slay monsters with it,” Leo said. “The metals, which are a pain to find and work with, were courtesy of Nico, Alan and their quest from a few months ago. They brought a bunch of that stuff with them. And then random weapons started to appear on the sheds, apparently attracted by it. That’s how Ares’ cabin got that steel sword of yours…”

“Thanks…” was all Percy managed to say, looking at Leo and then back to his new, shiny arm. He could hear a low, pleasant hum coming from it. Leo smiled.

The talk about his sword made Percy remember something and, after saying good-bye to Leo, he
decided to pay a visit to Camp Jupiter. He found a lurking Hunter on the way.

“You made it!” Percy said, hugging him. “How are you? Are you staying, then?”

“Yeah,” Hunter said, looking terribly out of place in the sunny outskirts of the woods, but completely fine nonetheless. “I think I am. Everyone’s been terribly nice to me. I’m staying at the Apollo cabin, I was wary of them at first but they’re not too bad. Although, I rather hang out with Athena’s kids… There’s so much to learn about this new world… I… I heard about your quest…”

He trailed off.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Percy said.

“Yeah…” Hunter said and then his face lit up. “Hey, did everything work out between you and Jason?”

“I… I’m not sure…” Percy said, scratching the back of his neck with his new arm, the cold making him shiver. “It did, at first, but I don’t know where we are now. I haven’t seen him. It’s been hectic, lately…”

“He was talking to the centaur when I arrived,” Hunter said. “You should go find him.”

“Yeah, yeah, in a minute,” Percy said. “I got a couple of things to do first. I… I’ll see you around, then.”

“See ya,” Hunter said with a nod.

He then adjusted his quiver and walked into the woods. Percy lost sight of him pretty quickly. He went on his way.

“For me?” Todd asked, astonished, still not taking the pen.

They were outside the third cohort’s barracks. Angie had gone home with his dad, who called her about some new discovery. Todd said she had seemed pretty excited, and that she kept on babbling about stuff he didn’t understand.

“Yes,” Percy said. “For both of you. As a thank you, for all your help, and efforts, and… and everything. I don’t really have anything else of value so maybe you and your terribly smart friend will be able to fix it? She might want to take it apart, though. I don’t know how wise would that be…”

Todd took it, and Riptide transformed on his hand, taking the shape of a small lighter. Todd flicked it on, and it turned into its sword form.

“Whoa,” Todd said.

“Oh, now it works,” Percy said.

Todd was just delighted.

Marcus was at the door a few moments after Percy had knocked on it. Percy was still astonished at how tall the guy was.
“Hey,” Percy said. “How are you?”

“Pretty good,” he said, shaking Percy’s hand and eyeing Percy’s other arm. “And you? I heard Chiron’s back.”

“Yeah…”

“There’s going be a senior counsel, I think. Are you going to be there?”

“I suppose,” Percy said, not quite looking down. “Um, but… anyway, I came here to ask you something.”

“Oh?” Marcus crossed his arms over his chest.

“Yeah, um… that tablet you gave us?”

“Greekepedia.”

“Yes, that. Well…”

“It’s fine. I don’t mind that it broke. It was bound to happen, really,” Marcus said, uncrossing his arms and smiling. “I guess life-threatening quests are no place for gadgets.”

“I just wanted to ask you if you could program another one, or load or code or make from scratch or whatever it is you do,” Percy let out. “But a little different.”

“Sure I can. It’s quite easy. But another one? What for?”

“Well, it was actually really useful, and I learned lots from it. Lots of things that hadn’t stuck to me before, so I was wondering if you could do one with, uh… with the materials from the stuff I’m studying on New Rome University.”

“Oh,” Marcus said. “That’s… interesting.”

“I can give you all you need,” Percy said in a rush. “I would pay you, I would…”

“There’s no need for that,” Marcus said. “Yeah, yeah, I’ll do it. Just, give me all that stuff and yeah.”

He actually looked pretty excited. Percy couldn’t thank him enough.

“Percy?” Marcus called him when he was leaving.

“Yeah?” Percy said, walking back to him.

“You know, I’ve been thinking about what happened,” Marcus said.

Percy braced himself.

“And all those gods and creatures…” Marcus went on. “Things we have never actually seen until now and that I just added to the tablet just in case. They got me wondering about what else is out there, about what was before. I mean, so now we know for sure about Egyptian gods, and those predate Greece by a lot, so… and before that? Did we… just think them into existence?”

“I don’t really know, Marcus,” Percy said, relieved the questions hadn’t gone where he feared they would.
“I mean, if that’s the case, why isn’t there a Santa Claus? Or a tooth fairy?” “Or are there? And what about that whole creation thing? If all myths are true, then what does that mean? How does that work? We’re let on to this whole world behind the scenes, but we still know nothing. I’d like to know…”

Percy didn’t know what to say, but it did seem worth pondering over.

“I’m sorry, I just… I babble like that sometimes. Athena kid thing.”

“It’s fine,” Percy said, and then they said their good-byes.

Percy was going back to Bunker Nine, to be with Leo. He didn’t like staying on Poseidon’s cabin anymore, and he couldn’t stand being around the other campers for extended periods of time. One thing made him angry and the other made him feel anxious. The campers were all supportive, friendly and considerate, but he felt watched and scrutinized. He knew they were eager to talk about the whole thing, and the looks were bound to get more frequent with his brand new arm. So his old friends were his refuge, but they were on the other side of the scale; they seemed to walk on eggshells around him, especially Annabeth. Leo was the one less prone to talk about Actual Stuff That Mattered, and his workshop was far enough of the rest of the Camp.

He didn’t make it. He was stopped by a group of campers who told him he needed to go to the Rec Room for an Emergency Senior Counsel. He reluctantly changed course and went, with dread heavy on him, towards the Big House.

He hesitated at the door to the room, his hand on the knob. Sighing, he opened the door. The room was empty. Except for…

“Finally,” Jason said from the other side of it. “Close the door.”

He took his legs off the ping pong table and walked towards Percy. He hugged him and kissed him.

“Some time alone, at last,” Jason said, once they pulled apart from each other.

He eyed Percy’s new left hand on his shoulder.

“New toy,” he said.

“Yeah, Leo’s.”

“I know,” Jason said, still looking at it. “He said it was also working on an artificial eye but it was too complicated, so I needed to give him some more time.”

“That’s good,” Percy said, holding him closer. “How are you?”

“Been better,” Jason replied, tracing circles on Percy’s back. “You?”

“Same,” Percy replied, both their heads on each other’s shoulders.

They stood like that for a long time.

“Jason?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you think… do you think… will we ever be better?”
Jason separated from him slightly, and looked Percy in the eyes.

“What do you think?” he asked, a hand brushing away Percy’s strands of hair that had fallen in front of his eyes.

“I’m… not sure,” Percy said, now nuzzling the side of his face against Jason’s hand.

“I think we will be,” Jason said. He seemed to doubt for a moment, but then said: “Had any nightmares lately?”

“Lots,” Percy replied with all honesty. “But I’ve been thinking too. Maybe I do need help about it. Not to make them go away completely, but to deal… to heal… I don’t know… There must be something… My mom suggested therapy right off the bat years ago, but… I don’t know, I refused every time. Maybe it’s time to try again, or at all.”

“And I’ll be there,” Jason said, holding the back of Percy’s head now. “Not like before. I won’t expect to magically make you better with the power of my love. I’ll just… be there, if you want me.”


More kisses, petting and sweet words were exchanged. Percy was happy in that little world of theirs, pretending that nothing but them existed, knowing that this private moment was truly private and entirely theirs.

“I think you should really talk to Nico,” Jason said, both of them sitting on the floor with their backs against the wall. “About Tartarus, and all that stuff… You can talk to me too, but I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to fully understand…”

Percy remained quiet for a minute, mulling that last bit over.

“Okay… Okay, I will.”

“Good.”

“So,” Percy said when Jason leaned his head against his shoulder, “when does this emergency meeting start, you trickster?”

“It wasn’t a trick, this is it,” Jason said. “They wanted me to ask you alone.”

“Ask me what?”

“About what you wanted to do,” he said.

“Do about what?” Percy replied already knowing what Jason was referring to.

“About me, about the gods, about everything… Are you going to surrender me to the gods? Are you going to declare war against Olympus? I told them I would follow you whatever you chose.”

“Surrender you? Do you really think I—?”

“Relax,” Jason said, lowering his head until it was resting on Percy’s lap. “I mean, they are asking for my head and I think half the Camp sees me as the one who doomed us all, but you know, whatever,” he said with a shrug. “Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask you, how on earth did we escape?”

“Oh, um… we’re basically immortal now,” Percy said, suddenly remembering that small detail. “You know, Eris’ golden apple and the ones in the Garden of the Hesperides? Some versions of the
myths say that those are the same, so I just… hoped those were the right ones.”

Jason just looked at him for a few seconds, and then laughed.

“That was incredibly brave,” he said at last.

“And incredibly stupid,” Percy said, smiling brightly at Jason.

“So, immortality, huh?” Jason said. “That’s… That’s a big deal… I’m not even… We should talk about it. Later…”

“Yeah.”

“So?”

“So?”

“What are we going to do? Run away from camp? Spare them from the wrath of the gods?” Jason asked, while Percy explored his face with his new hand. There was almost no sensation, nowhere near to the real deal, and it made Jason shiver because of the cold metal. Percy switched hand.

“I’ve been thinking… about Luke…” Percy said. “And about Clio, about repeating history. I don’t… I actually did come up with something, but it’s just crazy, and probably will get us all killed.”

“What is it?”

“No more quests,” Percy said. “Let the gods handle their messes themselves. Ignore them completely. No more ‘go and fetch this useless item’ or ‘go and steal this from another god.’ None of that. No listening to any prophecies. We deal with whatever threat shows up on our doorstep, but no more. We need to change this whole thing, this whole system.”

“That’s so crazy it might just work,” Jason said.

“I don’t know if anyone else would think of it that way.”

“They will,” he assured him. “I mean they saw everything that happened. It might be a tougher sell for the Romans, but I know some of them would listen to us. Frank certainly will. And Reyna, we would need her as well.”

“I like how you say ‘we,’” Percy said.

They moved positions until they were lying on the floor, next to each other, kissing and embracing. Percy moved to be on top of him, and took Jason’s shirt.

The door opened.

“Shit, sorry!” they heard a girl’s voice. “We were looking for you two, and… shit…”

They got up immediately.

Rachel and Nico were at the door, looking at them. Jason struggled to put his shirt on again. Rachel was all red and trying to look embarrassed but doing a poor job of it. She seemed kind of delighted. Nico was furrowing his brow in that menacing child of Hades way. Percy heard Jason’s gulp.

“What’s the matter?” Percy said.
“You should really come and see,” Rachel said, and she disappeared to the hall.

They followed her.

“Nico, I…” Jason began to say, once they were next to him. “Man, I just…”

Nico looked about to murder them.

“Grace,” he said. “Wear a fucking condom, for god’s sake,” he told him, and punched him on the shoulder.

He walked away from them, following Rachel to the exit of the Big House. Jason was smiling.

“Everything all right, then?” Percy asked.

“Yeah,” Jason said, still smiling at Nico’s back.

“Wait, so they saw us…”?

“Nah, I heard they cut to black and commercials during those times,” Jason said. “I guess he just never saw us buy ones or something.”

Percy breathed out in relief, and began to laugh.

Their good mood lasted until they were at the front door of the Big House. It was raining outside. The magical barrier around camp had failed and, according to Rachel, the pine tree was gone.

Percy’s idea of “No more quests” spread like wildfire. They all needed some convincing but, at large, they all had accepted it, even Chiron. It didn’t mean that everyone wasn’t scared out of their wits though. Maybe the gods would accept it, and just let them be, was the possibility that Jason used to sell the idea. The most seasoned campers looked at him doubtfully, but agreed nonetheless.

“They’re coming,” Rachel said, right before dinner time, holding her head in pain. “Like, all of them. Some are willing to talk but… yeah.”

The whole camp was at the top of Half-Blood Hill looking at the dark horizon. The sky twisted in a boiling sea of blacks and greys, rain fell down incessantly, the wind was cold and unforgiving, and lightning struck closer and closer.

The storm was fast approaching. Percy felt Jason’s hand holding his, and felt all of his friends besides them, where they had always been.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

THE END.

Chapter End Notes

Since I’m a huge nerd I made not one but two playlists/fanmixes for this fic.

A-Side (songs with vocals)
B-Side (instrumental)
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