Fates' Intervention

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/4777232.

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning: Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category: Multi
Fandom: Percy Jackson and the Olympians - Rick Riordan, Percy Jackson and the Olympians & Related Fandoms - All Media Types
Relationship: Annabeth Chase/Percy Jackson, Onesided Nico DiAngelo/Percy Jackson, Luke Castellan/Thalia Grace
Character: Percy Jackson, Annabeth Chase, Thalia Grace, Nico di Angelo, Luke Castellan, Hermes (Percy Jackson), Apollo (Percy Jackson), Artemis (Percy Jackson), Hera (Percy Jackson), Zeus (Percy Jackson), Poseidon (Percy Jackson), Hades (Percy Jackson), Persephone (Percy Jackson), Hestia (Percy Jackson), Demeter (Percy Jackson), Dionysus (Percy Jackson), Ares (Percy Jackson), Aphrodite (Percy Jackson), Hephaestus (Percy Jackson), Athena (Percy Jackson), Chiron (Percy Jackson), Grover Underwood, Clarisse La Rue, Travis Stoll, Connor Stoll, Katie Gardner, Michael Yew, Lee Fletcher, Will Solace, Silena Beauregard, Charles Beckendorf, Chris Rodriguez, Malcolm (Percy Jackson), Sally Jackson, Rachel Elizabeth Dare, Amphitrite (Percy Jackson)
Additional Tags: Characters Reading, Reading the Books, Time Travel, Overused Cliche
I know, But Give Me A Chance, I'm Hoping To Actually Finish This One, ship all the things
Series: Part 2 of Fates Intervention
Stats: Published: 2015-09-11 Completed: 2018-01-23 Chapters: 30/30 Words: 147194

Fates' Intervention

by TitansRule

Summary

Following the fulfillment of the Great Prophecy and the delivery of yet another one, the Fates decide that the Olympians' stubbornness and resistance to change is going to be the end of everything, and there won't always be a demigod around or willing to help. So they force some quality family bonding time in the hopes that things might change. Percy just wants to know why it's always him.

Notes
I am aware this is a concept that has been done many times before. I am hoping that mine will be unique in that I actually finish it, but anyone who's read my stories knows how sporadic my updates can get.

There will be three timelines in play:

2006 - the day before the Capture the Flag game in TLT in which Percy is claimed.
2009 - about a month after the Battle of Manhattan, but before the Staff of Hermes - readers from this time will be marked in italics.
2010 - the day Nico leaves the infirmary after his mandatory 3 days following Blood of Olympus - any readers from this time will be marked as underlined.

This settled in my head over the summer and wouldn't go away until I started writing it, so I figured I'd post it and see what happens.

I will NOT be including the full book text, because there are copyright issues. So extracts will be written like this:

If you're ... come for you.

Feel free to have a copy of the book nearby to follow along. The reading will start around Chapter 3, I am planning on actually changing things.

Story will be Percabeth, I don't know what other pairings will actually come into it, but it's safe to say that various pairings will be acknowledged throughout the stories.

I think that's everything you need to know, I'll include a list of everyone reading at the end of this chapter. In the meantime, enjoy and please review and let me know what you think.
After the summer of the Battle of Manhattan, weekends at Camp Half-Blood were more crowded than they had any right to be. The construction of the new cabins had not been finished before the summer season ended, even if it had been extended, and any campers with the means made their way to New York to pitch in.

In the midst of the hustle and bustle, Annabeth Chase sat in the Athena cabin with her boyfriend, carefully amending a tiny detail on the 3D plan in front of her. “What do you think?”

Percy Jackson stared at the small replica buildings, tilting his head this way and that way, examining them closely. He stood up and walked around the table, carefully inspecting it from all sides, before turning to her and saying, “What exactly am I looking at?”

Annabeth narrowed her eyes at him. “It’s the plans for New Olympus.”

“Ah.” Percy said, nodding a few times. “It’s nice.”

Annabeth rolled her eyes and walked out of the cabin, into the mild September evening.

Percy chased after her. “What did I say?”

“Nice?” Annabeth repeated, spinning round to face him. “Nice?! I’ve been working for three days, and all you can come up with is nice?!”

Percy winced, about to apologise to the furious girl, when he was interrupted by a familiar chuckle. “Oh, bad move, kid.”

The two demigods whirled around, argument forgotten, and sank into immediate bows. “Lord Hermes.”

The messenger god waved them off almost impatiently. “No time for all of that. Have a message for you, straight from the Fates.”

Annabeth, for all her courage, paled and swayed a little on the spot. Percy’s hand curled around her elbow, steadying her.

“Since when do they send mail?” He asked.

“Well, it’s a special situation.” Hermes said, his eyes weary. The loss of his son, Luke, was an almost visible burden, weighing him down. “They want you to go back.”

“Back?” Percy asked blankly. “Back where?”

“In time.” Hermes elaborated. “To the past. To the beginning of the summer season of 2006.”

“That was my first summer.” Percy said.

Annabeth was about to argue the logistics (and wisdom) of time travel, but thought better of it. After all, if the Fates themselves were behind it …

Hermes gave her a smile, as though he had seen what she was thinking (and he probably had).
“Exactly. I’m going to send you to Olympus 2006. They’ll contact you there if they need to. We’re just waiting for … Ah, Nico. Excellent timing.”

Nico DiAngelo arrived breathless, half-bowing, half-collapsing, sagging against Percy, who propped him up. Shadow-travel always exhausted him, and he had taken it upon himself to help some of the more distant campers – Annabeth included – visit for the weekend. “Got your message. I’m ready.”

“Good.” Hermes said, clapping his hands together with a smile. “I’ll send you on your way then. And … Try to save him. Please?”

“We will.” Percy said firmly. “We’ll do what we can.”

“I know you will.” Hermes said as he began to fade from view. “Good luck.”

A second later, they were standing outside the closed doors of the throne room. A quick glance around told them that it was early summer and that Olympus had yet to fall.

“Now what?” Annabeth whispered.

Percy shrugged. “We knock.” He raised a hand and knocked three times on the great wooden door.

The rumble of voices within stopped, before a booming voice said, “Enter.”

Percy pushed the door open and strode inside, his eyes darting along the line of seated gods. To his relief, it appeared that the Fates had already spoken here, as Lord Hades was present, as well as Queen Persephone, seated beside her husband, much to her mother’s obvious dismay.

Huddled in the corner, behind Chiron, were Grover and a group of young demigods, about fifteen of them. Percy spotted his younger self hiding among them, trying to be invisible, far too bewildered and scared to have been anything more than a very new camper, and attempted to give him a comforting smile, but did not halt his approach until he was right in front of Lord Zeus and Lady Hera, whereupon he knelt, bowing his head, sensing Annabeth and Nico doing the same thing either side of him.

It was Lady Hera who spoke, rather than her husband, her tone brisk. “Rise, heroes, and identify yourselves. The Fates have brought about this gathering. We will not act against you.”

That could change quickly, so Annabeth, with the least to fear, rose first, bowing towards her.

“Annabeth Chase, daughter of Athena, Architect of Olympus.” She bowed again to her mother, who favoured her with a smile, but looked troubled. She did not, however, speak, or ask why Olympus would need an architect.

Nico rose next, also bowing. “Nico DiAngelo, son of Hades.”

A murmur of voices came from the campers, but Chiron hastily quietened them.

Zeus began to rise from his throne, but Persephone cleared her throat. “My husband has done nothing wrong.”

Demeter stared at her daughter in outrage. “How can you sit there and say that?! He …”

“I am not happy, Mother.” Persephone bit out. “I do not like the fact that my husband sought comfort in the arms of other women. I can understand it, given that he is separated from me for half the year, but I do not like it. However, in this case, the reason Father is so angry is because of the pact. And Nico was born before the pact, as Zeus well knows. He is currently in the Lotus Casino with his
sister.” She gave her stepson a strained smile. “How is Bianca?”

Nico’s gaze dropped as he bowed to her and his father, and she stifled a small gasp, pressing her husband’s hand and stepping down from her throne, opening her arms to him. Whatever grudges she held towards Maria or her husband could not hold up against her natural compassion.

As Nico hesitantly accepted her embrace, all eyes turned to Percy, who rose and bowed towards Zeus. “Percy Jackson, son of Poseidon.”

“How is Bianca?” Zeus roared, over the sharp intake of breath that came from the campers. “How dare you break a sacred oath?!”

“You’re one to talk!” Poseidon retorted.

Zeus glared at him. “My daughter will never turn sixteen, thanks to him!”

“My children are locked away thanks to you!” Hades snarled.

“He saved Olympus.” Annabeth said loudly, causing all three to fall silent.

Percy sighed, took the opportunity to bow to his father, and turned to her in exasperation. “Must you?”

“Well, you did.” Nico pointed out, as his stepmother released him.

“Besides, best we say it now, before Lord Zeus blasts you because he thinks you stole the Master Bolt.” Annabeth added.

Annabeth frowned thoughtfully. “But then why would we need to be here? Unless … Mother, may I see those books please?”

Some of the campers sucked in a breath at her boldness to directly address her godly parent without invitation, but Athena merely smiled in acknowledgement of her daughter’s (correct) assumption, and handed her the small box. “Of course, my dear.”

“Thank you.” Annabeth sat down on the couch that appeared behind her and rifled through the
books, counting and muttering to herself. “That makes sense.”

“What does?” Percy asked.

“Well, the first five titles look familiar.” Annabeth explained. “I can guess what they refer to. The last five don’t.”

“Maybe they’re obscure references.” Percy suggested.


Percy looked thoughtful. “*Last Olympian* … That must mean this summer just gone, so … What’s the next one?”


“You’re right.” Percy concluded, taking the seat beside her. “Not that that surprises me – you’re always right – but this must mean …”

“The Fates aren’t just trying to change our past.” Nico said.

“They want to change our future.” Percy agreed, his face pale. “But that must mean …”

“More people are going to die.” Annabeth concluded grimly.

“People we care about.” Nico muttered, his hand clenching around the tiny figurine in his pocket, the figurine Bianca had died for.

Even the gods looked a little nervous at this, but before anyone could say anything more, a hunting horn sounded outside.

“You bring your sisters, sis?” Apollo asked.

Artemis frowned. “No. And they cannot enter Olympus without me.”

Percy and Annabeth looked at one another.

“You don’t think …”

What, exactly, Annabeth thought was never discovered, because they were interrupted at that moment by another knock at the door.

“Enter.” Zeus called.

The doors swung open and a young woman strode in, a bow slung across her back, her black hair tied back in a long braid, a silver circlet resting atop her head.

Chiron held out an arm to keep Annabeth and Luke back, but neither of them could move, rooted to the floor in shock.

In any case, the girl had eyes only for the gods as she approached and knelt before them.

“Rise and identify yourself.” Hera said, her voice a little faint. She knew who this was, but … that was impossible, wasn’t it?
The girl stood and bowed. “Thalia Grace, daughter of Zeus, lieutenant of Artemis.”

The moon goddess smiled when the girl bowed to her as well, but was troubled. What had happened to Zoe?

“Thalia?” Zeus asked. “How are you alive? Not even I could bring you back.”

Thalia smiled at him. “I know, Father. It’s part of a long story. The Fates filled me in when they collected me, so I’m sure it will appear – when do you think, Annabeth?”

“Second book.” Annabeth said, setting the box aside to stand up. “Maybe the third.”

The two sisters embraced for a second, then Thalia released Annabeth and turned to Percy. He offered her a smile and she sighed, ruffling Nico’s hair.

“Get over here, Kelp Head, you don’t count.”

Percy rolled his eyes, hugging her. “Thanks.”

Percy and Thalia didn’t see each other very often, but despite that – and despite their sometimes volatile interactions – they understood each other in ways that no one else could. They were both children of the Big Three, both had the prophecy hanging over their heads for a short while, both were not supposed to exist and yet did.

As a result, however much they fought, there was an underlying bond that would never truly break.

Thalia pressed a chaste kiss to Percy’s cheek and released him, taking the seat on Annabeth’s other side. “Now are we going to get started? I’m sure our parents have a lot to do.”

“Nothing that cannot wait.” Hestia said, giving her youngest brother a stern look. “The Fates have brought this about; we will give it the time and attention that deserves. Besides, I am certain they mentioned five demigods from the future, not four.”

The four present exchanged mystified looks and huddled closer together.

“What do you think?” Percy asked. “Grover?”

“Not a demigod.” Thalia said immediately. “Maybe Clarisse … Or the Stolls?”

“No, they wouldn’t bring one without the other.” Annabeth disagreed. “And it doesn’t feel like it should be Clarisse … Nico?”

Nico was staring at a piece of paper in his hands. At Annabeth’s query, he sighed, closing his eyes in resignation. “Alright, he’s on his way.”

As if on cue, there was a third knock on the door.

“Enter.” Hera called, since her husband was still staring at Thalia.

The figure that walked in was shrouded in shadows and, as they gradually cleared, was revealed to be a young man, but he was knelt at the foot of the thrones before anyone could clearly see his face.

“Rise.” Hera said tiredly. “Identify yourself.”

The young man rose, bowing to her and her husband. “Luke Castellan, son of Hermes.”
There are several things I'm here for. The Children of the Big Three forming a little sibling trio is one of them.

Also I am Thaluke scum. You should probably know that.

Right, reading list:

Zeus
Hera
Hestia
Demeter
Poseidon
Hades
Artemis
Apollo
Athena
Aphrodite
Ares
Hephaestus
Hermes
Dionysus
Persephone
Annabeth (Athena) - 2009 (in italics)
Luke (Hermes) - 2009 (in italics)
Percy (Poseidon) - 2009 (in italics)
Nico (Hades) - 2009 (in italics)
Thalia (Zeus) - 2009 (in italics)
Luke (Hermes)
Annabeth (Athena)
Clarisse (Ares)
Travis Stoll (Hermes)
Connor Stoll (Hermes)
Malcolm Knight (Athena)
Charles Beckendorf (Hephaestus)
Silena Beauregard (Aphrodite)
Chris Rodriguez (Hermes)
Katie Gardner (Demeter)
Michael Yew (Apollo)
Will Solace (Apollo)
Lee Fletcher (Apollo)
Percy Jackson (Poseidon)
Chiron
Grover
A Reunion

Chapter Notes

AN: Wow, thank you so much for the response to that last chapter! Just a few questions to answer:

Why include Persephone and not Amphitrite?

I enjoy the Hades/Persephone/Demeter dynamic and I like exploring the relationship between Nico and his stepmother. I do like the idea of Percy and Amphitrite getting along, but I don't want to take away from Percy and Sally.

Why not start from Chapter One?

I worded that badly. When they start reading, they will start with Chapter One of the first book. That won't happen until the next chapter (Chapter Three).

Enjoy.

To say that the future demigods were shocked to see Luke was an understatement.

Nico, the only one not personally betrayed, remained stoic, anger blazing in his eyes. Percy pulled Riptide from his pocket, leaving it capped for the time being, his other hand gripping Annabeth’s supportively, as the girl paled, her constant nightmares of Luke’s death replaying through her mind.

Thalia went similarly white, but her anger was palpable. “Nico!” She hissed, while Luke bowed to his father. “How the Hades …?”

“Fates resurrected him.” Nico muttered tersely, out of the corner of his mouth. “Told me to help his passage here. Couldn’t argue.”

Luke turned towards them and the two girls moved in tandem. Annabeth got there first, her grief giving way like a landslide.

SMACK!

The sound echoed around the hall, leaving behind a stunned silence, and Percy offered the gods a nervous smile and a half-bow. “Erm … please excuse us. We have some … issues to work out.”

“I deserved that.” Luke called to the younger campers, most of whom were staring between their Luke and Annabeth in confusion.

Annabeth’s face softened at his immediate efforts to reassure the children, so like the Luke she grew up with, rather than the monster he became, but Thalia stepped up beside her. “Yes, you did.”


SMACK!

Maybe Thalia was stronger, maybe she was angrier, but this blow forced Luke to stagger with the
impact to avoid losing his balance.

“Annabeth already hit me for it!” He protested. “What was that for?!”

“You know full well what that was for!” Thalia hissed, her voice breaking on the last word.

Luke took another step back, sorrow bleeding into his eyes at the reminder of how much he had hurt her, and turned nervously to Percy. “Hey.”

Percy was watching the reunion with narrowed eyes, the pen spinning through his fingers in a clear threat. “Luke.” He greeted. “I think the ladies covered it all.”

Nico nodded coolly.

For a second, no one spoke, then one of the Stolls whispered loudly, “Bro, what did you do?”

Luke winced. “Um, it’ll come up?”

“Yes, it will.” Thalia said darkly.

“Shall we begin then?” Hera asked.

From her spot by the fire, Hestia looked closely at the future half-bloods. “No.” She said firmly. “They’re exhausted and it’s late. We will let them rest and begin tomorrow.”

“But …” Zeus began.

“Will anything drastic happen,” Hestia asked over her brother’s protests, “if we delay the reading until tomorrow morning?”

The five looked at each other.

Thalia shrugged. “I was a tree.”

“I was in Vegas.” Nico added.

Annabeth and Percy leaned closer to one another to discuss it in hushed voices, the latter snagging Luke’s arm and dragging him into the huddle too.

“Will it?” Annabeth whispered.

“I don’t know.” Luke said. “He didn’t set the deadline.”

“If nothing happens, will he start changing the game?” Percy asked seriously.

“Probably,” Luke said honestly. “But for the moment, all he can do is whisper.”

“We need to talk about how we can fix this.” Percy muttered, before pulling away to face Hestia. “No, Lady Hestia. The only deadline was that of the summer solstice, and that was enforced by Olympus.”

“Then we will begin tomorrow.” Hestia concluded.

“Lady Hestia, would it be alright if the campers introduced themselves again first?” Annabeth asked politely. “Just so we know who’s here? And can I ask what the date is?”
“The date is June 8th 2006.” Hera answered, eyeing the younger campers. “And they never actually
got around to that before you arrived, so go ahead.”

There was an interesting mix of campers, no doubt specifically summoned by the Fates and rather
confused about it at that.


Annabeth and Malcolm Pace represented the Athena cabin.

Ares, Hephaestus, Aphrodite and Demeter had one camper each – Clarisse LaRue, Charles
Beckendorf, Silena Beauregard and Katie Gardner respectively.

Apollo had three sons present as well – Michael Yew, Will Solace and Lee Fletcher.

Each name of one of the dead sent a shot of grief through Percy and Annabeth, the wounds still
fresh.

Finally, Chiron nudged forwards the two undetermined campers from Cabin Eleven – Percy and
Chris Rodriguez.

Before Poseidon could claim his son, Hermes let out a muttered curse. “Sorry, Chris.” He said,
waving his hand and causing a caduceus to appear above the boy’s head. “I normally try and catch
my kids on the way into Camp, but my feet have barely touched the ground recently.”

No one could doubt the sincere regret in his voice and Chris bowed to his father, a delighted smile
lighting up his face.

Poseidon smiled as well, a trident appearing above young Percy’s head, effectively claiming him.

“No,” Hestia said, clapping her hands, “Hermes, show Chiron where he can take the young
campers; I’ll take our future heroes with me …”

“Thalia can stay in my Hunters’ quarters.” Artemis said firmly, eyeing Luke, Percy and Nico with
mistrust.

Hestia merely sighed and beckoned for them to follow her, even as Athena began protesting as well,
not happy with the idea of her daughter and one of Poseidon’s spawn in the same room.

The two goddesses followed Hestia all the way to a small sitting room, arguing until their aunt
pitched them a fiery stare.

“That room,” Hestia announced, “is the girls’ bedroom and males cannot cross the threshold. That
room,” she pointed to the opposite door, “is the boys’ bedroom, and females cannot cross the
threshold. Is that acceptable? I am not separating them when they are reliving potentially horrific
memories.”

The two goddesses looked unusually sheepish and nodded.

“Good.” Hestia said, the fire disappearing as she smiled at the demigods. “Do try to get some sleep. I
will make sure you cannot be eavesdropped on, since I am sure you’ll need to discuss things. Feel
free to come and find us if you need to.”

“We will, Lady Hestia, thank you.” Percy said.
As soon as the door was closed, Thalia rounded on Luke. “What the …?!”
“I don’t know!” Luke insisted. “I was dead! I don’t think I even reached judgement yet.”

“You didn’t.” Nico said.

“Clearly the Fates want to change his decision.” Annabeth said logically. “Is that possible? I mean, he already has the you-know-what.”

Luke grimaced. “Technically, Clarisse’s dad has it now.”

“Which is another problem.” Percy added. “You know he’ll throw Luke under the bus to save his own ass.”

Annabeth rubbed her temples, feeling the beginnings of a headache. “Alright, let’s figure out what we need to do. First of all, Thalia, I know you’re mad at Luke – so am I – but our past selves saw you die five years ago, so you need to talk to them. Secondly, young Percy thinks his mother’s dead and is about to relive it. Thirdly, sooner or later, the gods are going to find out who took the you-know-what and Luke is going to get vaporised, and his younger self hasn’t really done anything yet.”

“Aside from take the you-know-what.” Thalia added, glaring at him.

“Let’s face it, that’s the least of it.” Nico said, glaring at Luke. If Bianca hadn’t been on that quest, she would still be alive.

“Hey!” Percy said firmly. “Let’s all take a nice deep breath and calm down.”

Thalia cracked a reluctant smile. “Alright, since when are you the rational one?”

“Well, it’s not the role I usually flourish in.” Percy said. “But you two have taken angry and emotional, so someone has to do it.”

Thalia shook her head, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. “Alright. First things first, Nico, what are the chances of you convincing your father to let Sally go?”

“Slim to none.” Nico said immediately. “We’ll have a better chance of blindsiding him during the reading. My stepmother would have a better chance.”

“Would you be able to convince her though?” Percy asked. “I thought you two didn’t get along.”

Nico shrugged. “We get along okay.”

Percy raised an eyebrow. “It didn’t seem like it last winter. Didn’t you say she turned you into a dandelion?”

“Yes.” Nico said, frowning slightly. “Have you never been grounded?”

Percy opened his mouth, then stopped. “Fair enough. Will you be able to convince her?”

Nico sighed. “Possibly, but there’s no way I’ll get her alone tonight.”

“Okay,” Thalia said. “I know I’ve got no chance of convincing my father to show leniency right now. We might need to let the reading start and … ease them into it. Let them get used to having us around and …”

“Talking to them?” Percy suggested.
“She’s right.” Annabeth agreed.

“Okay then.” Percy said. “In the meantime, I suggest we do as Lady Hestia suggested and get some sleep.”

Thalia nodded jerkily. “Fine.”

Annabeth sighed, gave Percy a quick kiss, bid the others goodnight, and hurried after her, just in time to see Thalia collapse on one of the beds with a groan.

“It’ll be okay.” She said gently, once the door was closed.

Thalia snorted. “Right, of course. Because reliving our brother turning into that is going to be such a bundle of laughs.”

“My brother.” Annabeth corrected, sitting beside her. “He was more than that to you. That’s why you turned the Hunters down the first time.”

“He was family.” Thalia said quietly. “Nothing more. And maybe he could have been, but … Oh, what does it matter now, Annabeth? Zoe warned me that he would break my heart. And she was right.”

Annabeth sighed. “Thals … you will go and talk to our past selves, won’t you?”

“If I start talking to Luke, I’m going to snap.” Thalia warned. “I won’t be able to keep it quiet.”

“Fine.” Annabeth said. “You’re probably the only person he’d listen to anyway …”

“I am not his conscience!” Thalia interrupted. “Nor should I need to be. It is not my job to change him. He needs to change for himself.”

Annabeth bit her lip. “Well, can you at least try? Please? We watched you die. And … Maybe you could talk to Lady Artemis about Sally?”

Thalia nodded. “Alright, I’ll do that first. Why don’t you go and talk to Percy? I bet he’s still up.”

“Alright.” Annabeth pressed Thalia’s hand and slipped out of the room.

Thalia took a deep breath, her hand brushing over the hunting horn in her pocket. “Lady Artemis, please grant me an audience.”

“No need to be so formal, Thalia. You are one of my Hunters, after all.”

Thalia smiled at the goddess who had just appeared. “Force of habit, my Lady. And I am not your lieutenant yet.”

“About that,” Artemis said with a frown, “what happened to Zoe?”

“I’m afraid she is no longer with us.” Thalia said, dropping her gaze. “The story should come up over the next few days.”

Artemis sighed sadly and took a seat beside Thalia. “What did you want to speak to me about?”

“Sally Jackson.” Thalia answered. “Percy’s mother. She’s being held in the Underworld, but Percy – young Percy, that is – he thinks she’s dead, but your uncle thinks that Percy stole something, so he’s keeping her as leverage. And I know he’s a boy, but he’s only twelve. Nico doesn’t think he can talk
his father round at the moment, but that his stepmother might listen. He won’t be able to talk to her alone though.”

Artemis pursed her lips in thought. “I’m not sure I can do anything.” She warned. “I can try to speak with Persephone, see if she can reason with her husband … Is Sally …?”

“She’s wonderful.” Thalia said, with such genuine warmth that Artemis was taken aback.

“I will do my best.” She promised. “Anything else?”

“Do you know where the younger campers are?” Thalia asked. “I need to speak with some of them.”

“They are two doors down.” Artemis answered, putting a hand on Thalia’s shoulder. “But be careful, my dear. I can see how much he hurt you.”

“Past Luke hasn’t done anything yet.” Thalia said, not even pretending not to know who she meant. It was rather obvious, after all. “And he watched me die. They both did. I will exercise caution, my Lady.”

Artemis smiled. “Good girl.” She dissolved into mist, and Thalia stood, shrugging on a jacket as she stepped out into their sitting area.

Nico had disappeared, probably to bed, but Percy and Annabeth were curled up in one of the armchairs, keeping a subtle eye on Luke, who was staring into the fire.

Thalia ignored him and addressed them. “Don’t fall asleep there.” She warned. “You know what’ll happen if it’s one of your parents that comes to get us tomorrow morning.”

She got a vague noise and gesture in return, and took that to mean ‘we won’t’, before stepping out into the corridor.

The door Artemis had indicated was opened by Chiron, who welcomed her inside with a smile and a handshake. The layout wasn’t all that different from their quarters, except there was another, larger door for Chiron.

Only he and Grover were in the common area though, the satyr jumping to his feet nervously at her entrance.

“T-Thalia … I am …”

“You stop that.” Thalia said sternly. “I made my choice, it’s not your fault.”

“I must say, Thalia,” Chiron said, “it is wonderful to finally meet you.”

“When I’m not sprouting leaves, you mean?” Thalia said with an easy grin. She had not truly recovered from her ordeal, but had fallen into the habit of joking about it to put other people at ease. “Although … do pine trees have leaves?”

“They have needles.” Grover offered.

“Ugh, that’s even worse.” Thalia sighed. “I need to talk to Annabeth and Luke, Chiron, if that’s alright.”

“Of course.” Chiron said.

“I’ll get Luke.” Grover added, just as the door to the girls’ room opened and Annabeth came out, a
determined expression on her face.

“Chiron, I know what you said, but I need to see her …” She trailed off, her eyes landing on Thalia, who opened her arms.

“Come here.”

Annabeth let out a strangled sob and fell into Thalia’s embrace, clinging to her just as tightly as she had when she was seven.

Thalia absently acknowledged Chiron retreating to his quarters to give them some privacy, and the door to the boys’ room opening and closing, but her attention remained on the girl in her arms, no longer the young child she and Luke had all but adopted all those years before. She stroked Annabeth’s hair soothingly, humming under her breath, waiting for the girl’s violent shivering to calm.

Finally, she stilled, and Thalia felt confident enough to loosen her grip, allowing her enough room to see Annabeth’s tear-stained face. “Feel better?”

Annabeth nodded, swiping at her eyes. “Sorry.”

“Oh, don’t apologise.” Thalia chided gently, wiping Annabeth’s face with her sleeve. “I was dead and now I’m back. Trust me, I wept buckets when I woke up.”

“How did you wake up?” Annabeth asked.

“Oh, honey, that’s a long story.” Thalia said with a sigh. “And one best left to the books to tell – I can never do it justice. Now, it’s late, and you need some sleep. Think you can manage it?”

Annabeth nodded.

“You want me to come and tuck you in?”

“Thalia …” Annabeth said with a reluctant laugh. “I’m twelve.”

Thalia grinned. “Got you smiling though, didn’t it?” She pressed a kiss to Annabeth’s forehead. “I’ll be back, Annie. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.” Annabeth said, practically skipping back to the door, much happier now.

Thalia smiled fondly, turning to the person loitering behind her. “Are you going to stand there or am I getting a hug any time soon?”

Luke gave her a weak smile that immediately put her on alert. “Are you sure? I mean, you’re mad at me and you’re a hunter now and …”

“Stop.” Thalia said, holding up a hand. “First of all, I’m mad at him, not you. You haven’t done anything yet. Second of all, the Hunter’s Oath is one of eternal maidenhood. It says nothing about talking to boys – even if they are all grown up now. Now get over here.”

Luke’s smile grew to the cheeky grin she remembered and hadn’t seen in oh-so-long. Thankfully, she was enfolded in his arms before he could see the emotion bleed into her expression and she let herself pretend, just for a second, that everything was alright.

“We’ll get you back.” He whispered. “And they’ll pay.”
Thalia pulled away abruptly, panicked eyes finding his. “Luke, be careful.”

Luke’s smile was grim and determined. “They will pay for what they did to you.”

“No.” Thalia said firmly, placing a hand on his face. “No, Luke. This …” She swallowed hard, past the lump that formed in her throat. “This isn’t you. This is not my Luke. I want him back please.”

He faltered, a spark of uncertainty in his eyes. “What happened?”

Thalia shook her head, forcing herself to step out his arms, out of his reach. “No. Reliving it once is going to be bad enough. I am not your conscience, Luke.” She repeated. “But I will tell you two things. And I swear to you, if you never believe another word I say, I am not lying to you. It is the absolute truth and I do not just believe it, I know it, okay?”


“First of all,” Thalia said, “the person talking to you does not give a crap about me or you or any other demigods, and is using you more than the Olympians ever would.”

“But …” Luke faltered, staring at her. “You … He … I’m not …”

“You’re not stupid.” Thalia said gently. “You know that I’m right. You’re desperate enough to want to believe him. And he knows that.”


Thalia eyed him for a second, trying to decide whether he believed her, before concluding that she just had to trust that he did. “The second thing,” she said firmly, “is that your father loves you, more than you could ever dream possible.” She held up a hand, forestalling his protest. “No, telling the truth, remember? He may be the god of thieves, but when it comes to his kids, subtlety is not his strong point. Unfortunately,” she added thoughtfully, “neither is showing emotion.”


“No, we’re not doing this now.” Thalia said. “It’s late and, quite frankly, it’s been a long few weeks, so I am going to get some sleep in a bed that isn’t a sleeping bag.” She paused and gave him a long look. “Use your brain, Luke.”

Annabeth and Percy had gone to bed (hopefully not together, Thalia thought, until she remembered what Hestia said about the thresholds), but Luke was still up, watching the dancing flames as though mesmerised.

“How did it go?” He asked, startling her.

“Thought you were zoned out.” Thalia muttered, reluctantly wandering over to arm chair and dropping into it. “Annabeth cried. You … promised revenge.”

Luke looked up from the fire, startling her again with the fear in his eyes. “You talked him out of it, right?”

Thalia hesitated. “I told him that I wanted my Luke back and that your father loves you and that you-know-who is a manipulative bastard. Not that you should need me to tell you that.”

“I know.” Luke said softly. “Believe me, Thalia, I know. I got desperate and then …”

“We share a fatal flaw.” Thalia finished. “Power.”
“How did you resist it?” Luke asked, not angrily, just wearily curious. “If the roles were reversed …”

“I resisted it by remembering my promise.” Thalia said sharply. “You know, when Annabeth went missing, Percy was frantic and he got really angry because I didn’t seem worried. I wasn’t worried, because she was with you and I never believed you’d hurt her. Me, maybe; anyone else, why not? But Annie … Come on, Luke, she was a kid. We were practically her parents during those months on the run. We were supposed to protect her. I left her in your care.”


Thalia sighed, fatigue crashing over her. “I am not having this argument now.”

Luke managed a weak smile. “For it to be an argument, I’d have to disagree with you. And I don’t. I screwed up, Thalia, and there’s no apology in the world that can make up for how much I’ve let you down and hurt you. But I swear I will use every extra day the Fates see fit to give me trying to make it up to you.”

“Stop worrying about me.” Thalia said tiredly, getting to her feet. “Worry about making it up to everyone else. To the people whose brothers and sisters aren’t coming home because of a war you started.”

Luke sighed, burying his face in his hands. “Believe me, I am.”

Thalia hesitated, reaching out to touch his shoulder. When he looked up, surprised, she smiled sadly. “For what it’s worth, Luke … I missed you. Goodnight.”

Luke watched her slip into the girls’ room, careful not to wake Annabeth. “Goodnight, Thalia.”
Vapourising Math Teachers

Chapter Notes

From here on in, you might want to have a copy of the book along for the ride.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The following morning, the gods, the campers and the future half-bloods gathered once more in the throne room.

Hestia and Demeter had provided breakfast – proper breakfast since the demigods could not exist on ambrosia and nectar (although with a lot of cereal, unfortunately) – and seating had been provided, putting everyone on a more even keel.

Not completely even, of course – the gods' thrones, though smaller, were still the same (Zeus, for one, would not have stood for anything else).

Thalia had seen Artemis speaking with Persephone that morning, but the hunter goddess had not given any indication whether Hades was willing to release Sally or not.

Nico had also had a quiet word with his stepmother and had not divulged what they spoke of, but he seemed reasonably cheerful, so she could only hope it was good news.

Finally, everyone was settled, looking at the box of books in anticipation.

"Annabeth," Athena said, smiling at the future version of her daughter, "would you like to begin?"

Annabeth nodded and pulled out the first book, her hands shaking slightly. Even Athena's children, intelligent though they were, suffered from the same pitfalls as other demigods – reading aloud was not one of her favourite activities.

To her relief, it seemed that the Fates had intervened here as well – when she opened the book to the first page, the words stayed perfectly still, despite being in English.


"Easy." Percy said. "You don't know that's what's going to happen when you slash someone with a sword."

Annabeth shook her head. "Sometimes, Seaweed Brain, I wonder how you've lived this long."

Look, I didn't want to be a half-blood.

"Who does?" Percy muttered.

Annabeth gave him a stern look and he fell silent.

If you're reading this because you think you might be one, my advice is: close this book right now … Try it," she added to Nico, "and I'll break something. Believe whatever lie your mom or
dad told you about your birth, and try to lead a normal life.

"Easier said than done." Will Solace whispered.

Chiron cleared his throat and he dropped his gaze.

Hestia glanced at the other gods. "I suggest," she said softly, "that we do not refrain from discussing the book. After all, the Fates were very specific about the people who should be present, which implies that everyone here has insight they can share."

Dionysus looked like he disagreed with that, but he didn't argue.

"I agree." Athena said, glancing at the younger campers. "Please do not hesitate to speak up. Continue please, Annabeth."

**Being a half-blood is dangerous. It's scary. Most of the time, it gets you killed in painful, nasty ways.**

Nico raised a hand. "I vote we don't send Percy on recruitment."

Percy chuckled. "I didn't write this, I just thought it. Or will think it, I don't remember these books being made."

"They've probably been sent back from our future." Annabeth said. "Considering some of them are the future."

"Is being a half-blood that bad?" Apollo asked.

The campers looked at each other.

"Not so much once you get to camp." Malcolm answered bravely. "But before that … yeah, kind of. I mean, you can see all these things that no one else can, so you think you're insane."

"And we've all got dyslexia and ADHD so our teachers hate us," Katie added, "and you never stay more than a year in any one school because monsters are after you."

"And most of us have mortal parents that don't understand." Silena put in. "Or a step-parent that's afraid of us and the trouble we cause."

"And unless your parent's one of the twelve, you don't fit in anyway." Nico said, a little bitterly. "So you're an outcast among outcasts."

"Which is going to cause huge problems." Percy finished, clapping Nico's shoulder. "We couldn't have done it without you, you know."

Nico grinned at him. "Well, of course not. I'm awesome."

"Let's just say," Annabeth concluded, turning the page, "that Percy's description is pretty spot on."

**If you're … come for you.**

Many of the campers shivered and Hestia let the fire gently raise the heat in the room, warming them. She had long disagreed with her family about how they went about dealing with their children.

Maybe now they would understand.
Don't say I didn't warn you.

My name is Percy Jackson.

"I thought it was Annabeth." Nico said.

Annabeth swatted him lightly over the head without looking up.

I'm twelve years old. Until a few … upstate New York.

"Ugh, you poor thing." Michael said, pulling a face. "I nearly got sent there."

Am I a troubled kid?

Yeah, you could say that.

"Could say a whole lot more too." Thalia said with a teasing smile.

Percy did the mature thing and stuck his tongue out at her.

I could start … ancient Greek and Roman stuff.

"Well, that's convenient." Silena remarked.

"That sounds fascinating." Annabeth added.

Percy shrugged. "It was, actually."

Chiron looked at him. "Really?"

Percy nodded. "I actually enjoyed your classes. I just … wasn't very good."

I know – it sounds like torture.

"Torture?" Athena asked, sounding insulted.

Percy hastily straightened up. "My apologies, Lady Athena, I worded that badly – or will word it badly. If you don't have Chiron as a teacher – or Chiron pretending to be your teacher – it does tend to be a little boring, because it never gets taught right. Maybe it's because we subconsciously have a connection to it, but most teachers can't make museums exciting. Plus most kids my age would find it torture, because the history doesn't apply to them, or at least not as directly as it does us."

Poseidon, who had been about to dismiss Athena's protest, looked carefully at his son. He seemed desperate not to get on the wrong side of the goddess of wisdom … Maybe it had something to do with her daughter.

Annabeth certainly glowed when Percy spoke up and she gave him a blinding smile before she read on.

Most Yancy … had hopes.

What indignation that had remained after Percy's explanation bled out of Athena at that. He might have been Poseidon's son, but she had to admit that the boy had some brains in there.

Probably from his mother, although how Poseidon managed to catch an intelligent woman was beyond her.
Mr Brunner … put me to sleep.

No, Athena decided, the boy was just having a good day. Honestly, sleeping through class?

Her younger daughter clearly felt the same way. "Sleeping through class?"

Percy reddened. "Not intentionally. They just decided early on that I was kind of stupid, so they never bothered to help me."

"We had a couple like that." Connor said, gesturing to his brother. "They just leave you in the corner of the room and ignore you. Then your ADHD plays up and you get in trouble for not sitting quietly."

"And they think you're even more unteachable." Travis added. "So they ignore you all the more."

Athena frowned. If education was so difficult for demigods, no wonder so few achieved great intellectual heights. She had always felt smug about that – almost all were her children – but maybe that was just because her children happened to have the advantage of her wisdom.

She would have to look into that. They should all be educated properly – even if that did include Poseidon's spawn.

I hoped the trip … was I wrong.

"What did you do?" Clarisse asked grumpily. She was still angry about the toilet incident.

Percy shrugged. "I'm still not entirely sure."

See, bad things happen … you get the idea.

"No, we don't." Hermes said, grinning. Behind his smile, however, his mind was racing. He had not forgotten the violent reaction to his son's arrival the night before, nor had he missed how quiet and withdrawn they both were this morning.

He didn't want to hover though – after all, the Fates wanted them here, so it can't have been too bad. He would keep an eye on Luke – both of them – and have a quiet word later if they didn't perk up.

"Yeah, keep going." Apollo agreed, ducking his sister's swat.

This trip … sandwich.

"I'm sorry." Silena said, turning a delicate shade of green. "Did you just say …?"

"Peanut butter and ketchup." Annabeth said. "Yes, I did."

Beckendorf handed Silena a glass of water, which she took gratefully, taking small sips.

"Sorry you had to put up with that, Grover." Percy said.

Grover shrank down a little. "It was fine, really."

Thalia caught sight of the glare her father was bestowing the satyr and scowled. "Grover," she called, "I meant what I said. What happened was not your fault. There were three of us, one of you, and an army of monsters trying to kill us. I made my choice and you saved two lives."

Hera caught sight of her husband's glare as well, and patted his hand. "You heard her, dear. Stop it."
Grover was … in the cafeteria.

Chiron sighed. "Grover, we need to talk about your cover."

Grover blushed. "Yes sir."

Anyway, Nancy … on this trip.

"What if it wasn't your fault?" Poseidon asked.

"Oh, they'd have found a way to blame me." Percy said. "I don't know how, but they'd have managed it."

'I'm going to kill her,' I mumbled.

"Let it go." Apollo muttered to his sister.

Grover tried … right then and there.

"Percy!" Artemis protested. "Would you have hit her?"

Percy winced, and sent his past self a warning look. "Honestly, Lady Artemis, probably. I wouldn't now, but I had no other way of stopping her and, believe me, she was worse than half the boys in the school. She was there because she was a kleptomaniac, but also because her father was very rich so his little princess could get away with everything. The world owed her as far as she was concerned."

Artemis still did not look happy, but his honesty was refreshing, so she sat back. He hadn't actually hit her, after all.

In-school suspension … get myself into.

Annabeth sighed. "That's about the story of your life, isn't it?"

Percy gave her a sheepish smile. "It's not always my fault?"

"Are you asking me or telling me?"

"Alright," Thalia interrupted. "This could go on for a while. Annabeth, the book?"

Mr Brunner … three thousand years.

Hephaestus beamed. He enjoyed hearing about good workmanship. He was one of the gods who actually thought about his demigod children a lot, but he never visited them or even looked in on them, and not because of the rules. He always worried that they would inherit his looks; guilt filled him each time a child was born (not that there were many). Charles did not seem to have been cursed such – certainly, he was big and muscular, but he was not ugly.

Not like him.

He gathered us … give me the evil eye.

"Shouldn't she be telling the other children not to talk?" Hera asked disapprovingly.

"Probably." Percy said. "But she was only really interested in me."

Hera frowned, noticing that she did not get the same respect from the boy as Athena and Artemis.
Mrs Dodds was … nervous breakdown.

"The mist?" Hermes asked. "You said she was only interested in you; she's a monster, right?"

"She is a monster." Percy confirmed. "Might not be the mist though. Yancy went through teachers left, right and centre."

From her first day … absolutely right.'

Hermes sighed. "Grover, my boy, I need to teach you how to lie. Remind me."

Mr Brunner … stopped his story.

Athena sniffed. "I hate to say this, but I agree with you. Those children were being utterly disrespectful."

'Mr Jackson … represents?'

Percy winced. "Oh … sorry about this."

I looked … his kids, right?

Demeter wrinkled her nose. "It would be that one."

'Yes,' Mr Brunner said … king god, and –'

"I know!" Percy said hastily, when Zeus opened his mouth. "Titan, not a god. Very definitely not a god."

'God?' … I corrected myself.

Zeus relaxed a little, but still gave the boy a small glare. The nerve of him.

'And … and the gods won.'

"And the gods won." Thalia repeated with an amused smile. "A huge war and you summarise it to 'and the gods won.'"

Percy shrugged. "Got the gist of it across, didn't it?"

Some snickers from the group.

"It wasn't funny." Hera said huffily. "It was highly traumatic, actually."

"Yes." Hephaestus agreed mildly. "Almost as traumatic as being thrown off a mountain by your own mother because she's embarrassed that you're not perfect."

Hera opened her mouth to argue, then shut it again. Despite her son's revenge when he returned to Olympus and the few times he had brought it up since, she had never really considered the event from his point of view.

Behind me … real life?'

"Not at all, for most people." Nico said, before adding thoughtfully, "Unless you count the obvious moral of 'don't treat people like crap or they'll end up overthrowing you.'"
Thalia coughed. "Nico …"

"Not me, obviously." Nico said. "Dad and I have way too much to do downstairs – we don’t need any more dead people."

"Is it really that bad down there?" Athena asked.

"Yes." Hades, Persephone, Nico, Annabeth and Percy said together.

"Percy," Poseidon said slowly, "how do you know that?"

"I would also like to know the answer to that."

"His fault." Annabeth said, pointing at Percy.

"How is it my fault?" Percy asked.

"It was your quest." Annabeth reminded him.

Percy rolled his eyes. "Yeah, but it's not like I walked into Cabin Six, threw you over my shoulder and dragged you off with me. You told me in no uncertain terms that you were coming."

"He has a point there." Thalia said, hiding a smile.

Annabeth sighed. "Alright, so it wasn't Percy's fault. The point is, Nico's right – the waiting room's jam-packed and the queue to get in is like …"

"… like a cross between airport security and the Jersey Turnpike."

"I had no idea." Poseidon said. "I'm sorry, brother. I feel I may be responsible for some of that."

"No more than Zeus." Hades said, glaring at their youngest brother.

Athena coughed quietly. "Annabeth, dear, carry on, before this turns into a fight."

'Busted … radar ears."

Chiron smiled at Percy. "Not quite."

I thought … back outside?"

Persephone frowned. "There's something familiar about that woman. I just can't put my finger on it."

"It's probably nothing." Nico said. "Everyone knows a Mrs Dodds."

Persephone nodded absently, but the thoughtful frown remained on her face.

The class … like doofuses."

Artemis sniffed. "That sounds about right."

Grover and I … had seen everything.

"Because they have." Annabeth said, interrupting herself. "And he's older than that."

'You must … from you, Percy Jackson.'
Athena nodded approvingly. She might dislike this Jackson boy on principle, but it was no excuse for his education to be ignored.

I wanted … spell them correctly.

Chiron frowned. "I apologise, Percy. I merely wanted to make sure you were prepared."

"I know." Percy said. "I get it."

I mumbled … girl's funeral.

"As a matter of fact, I had." Chiron said sadly.

He told … a hurricane blowing in.

All the gods looked at Zeus and Poseidon, the latter of whom had the decency to look a little sheepish.

"You know what is missing." Zeus growled.

"And I have told you that I had nothing to do with it." Poseidon said tiredly. "And, as the title of this book suggests, we are going to find out who did. Please continue, Annabeth."

Nobody else … seeing a thing.

"She's not one of yours, is she?" Apollo asked Hermes, who looked disgusted.

"Absolutely not. My children may not be adverse to thievery, but she is definitely not one of them. And," he added thoughtfully, "they wouldn't have been 'trying'. They'd have already done it."

Grover and I … your apple?

The Stolls sniggered and Grover blushed.

"Sorry, Percy." He said. "I suppose that didn't help."

"Don't worry about it." Percy said.

I didn't … from where we sat.

Percy looked down at his lap, a lump forming in his throat.

I hadn't … look she'd give me.

"Mamma's boy." Clarisse muttered.

"That's enough, Clarisse." Annabeth said, not looking up from the book.

Clarisse snorted. "Since when do you …?"

"She said," Thalia interrupted, lightning flashing in her eyes. "That's enough."

Clarisse fell silent.

Mr Brunner … motorized café table.
Beckendorf looked thoughtful, mapping out a plan for such a creation in his head.

I was … liquid Cheetos.

"Oh dear." Aphrodite said, looking ill. "That girl needs a makeover, pronto."

"Never mind that." Ares grunted. "Cream her!"

Aphrodite huffed at his dismissal, but her husband, not looking up from the machine he was tinkering with, said, "Do not fret, my dear, even your makeovers are no match for an ugly soul."

Aphrodite smiled at her husband, although was a little taken aback by his interjection. "Thank you, darling. That makes me feel better."

I tried … roared in my ears.

"Here we go." Nico said cheerfully.

I don't … in trouble again.

"Didn't you notice it?" Lee asked curiously.

Percy shrugged, still morose from the sudden mention of his mother.

His future-self looked thoughtful. "You know, I don't remember. It happened too fast, I think."

As soon … all semester.

"Because you had." Persephone said softly. "You'd just demonstrated that you were a demigod, so she could act." She was sure she had met Mrs Dodds, and not just because of Nico's explanation.

'Now, honey –' … scared Grover to death.

Zeus scowled. No wonder the satyr had managed to get to his daughter killed.

She glared … at me to come on.

"Seriously?" Thalia asked. "How did you not realise there was something wrong?"

Percy shrugged. "I didn't know, did I? Besides, you know how ADHD works – I just figured I'd zoned out again."

How'd she … misinterpreting things.

Athena frowned. "Is that what it's like for all of you?"

"Yes ma'am." Will said quietly.

"How do you learn?" Athena asked, aghast.

"Well … most of us don't, really." Lee admitted. "We get better after camp, the year-rounders get tutors, but before that it's hard."

"Even for us." Malcolm added, unable to meet his mother's eyes.

I wasn't … absorbed in his novel.
"I doubt that." Thalia said, before Poseidon could explode at Chiron.

Chiron sighed. "I was … wrong. I believed I knew what she was, or at the very least, I believed I knew what level of monster she was. I … underestimated her."

Persephone's eyes narrowed.

I looked back up … the gift shop.

Hera raised an eyebrow. "Well, that would be a suitable punishment."

But apparently … like growling.

"And you didn't think that was weird?" Thalia asked.

Percy shrugged again.

Even without the noise … pulverise it …

"Most monsters would." Hermes said.

'You've been … she said.

"And she still calls you 'honey'." Nico said, smirking slightly.

Persephone looked sharply at her stepson. Something told her he wasn't talking about the book, but from personal experience, which meant that either Nico had encountered the same monster later or …

I did the … the building.

"Zeus …" Poseidon growled.

"I didn't send her." Zeus said. "Whatever she is. Although I would have done, had I known."

'We are not … suffer less pain.'

"Wait a minute." Percy said, finally looking up. "I'd forgotten about that. What did she want me to confess to?"

"You'll see." His future-self said kindly.

Persephone's eyes widened. She was almost certain that she knew who this was now.

I didn't … take away my grade.

"Hey!" Percy protested when Annabeth hit him over the head. "I'm dyslexic."

"So are the rest of us." Annabeth snapped.

Or worse, they were going to make me read the book.

"Why didn't you hit him for that one?" Apollo asked curiously.

"Because I know he's read it now." Annabeth answered. "I lent him the Ancient Greek copy."
"And quizzed me to make sure I'd read it." _Percy_ added.

'Well?' … _to slice me to ribbons_.

Persephone's mouth fell open and she rounded on her husband. "You sent _HER_?! He was _TWELVE_!"

"I got her too." Thalia said helpfully. "All three of them.

Persephone's glare darkened and Hades cleared his throat. "Now, darling …"

"Don't you 'now darling' me!" Persephone growled. "I do not argue with your way of dealing with things, I never do, but _that_ is crossing the line!"

"But …" Hades began.

"Percy," Persephone said, her voice suddenly as sweet as sunshine, "my husband's helm of darkness is missing, do you happen to know where it is?"

The younger just looked confused, but the elder gave her a small bow. "My Lady, I do not have it. I can tell you that it is safe, with the master bolt. I'm sure the books will reveal everything."

"Someone stole the helm?" Athena asked, aghast. "Why did you not say anything?"

Hades merely glowered, but Persephone sighed. "Because he didn't think you'd care. Not that I can blame him. He's never done a thing to any of you and yet you still exile him." She turned back to her husband, her glare returning. "He did _not_ do what you assumed he did. It is _not_ his, or Thalia's, fault that their fathers could not keep a sacred pact between you. It is not their fault that Maria was killed. It is not their fault that you had to shut your children away to keep them safe. And it is _certainly_ not a reason to send _her_ after a _twelve year old who knows nothing_. Return her. Now."

"Alecto?" Hades asked.

Persephone's eyes narrowed and her husband hastily waved his hand.

_In the next room, behind the closed door, there was a flash of light._

Persephone's glare disappeared and she turned to _Percy_. "Would you mind explaining things to our new arrival?"

_Percy_ beamed as he leapt to his feet, bowing to her. He was still upset that she'd had a sword forged for her husband, but all had ended well. "Certainly, my Lady, thank you." He paused and bowed to Artemis as well. "Thalia said she asked for your help, so … thank you as well."

Artemis looked surprised, but acknowledged him with a nod.

"What's going on?" The younger _Percy_ asked, looking utterly confused.

Thalia beckoned him over. "Just wait and I'll explain the basics."

Leaving Thalia to handle his younger self, _Percy_ slipped into the next room, his eyes settling on his mother, staring around her in amazement.

Her eyes landed on him and she took a few steps forward. "Percy? How … How long has it been?"

"Only a few days, Mom." _Percy_ said gently. "It's a long story, but … the Fates decided they wanted
to change the future, so they've brought me back in time from 2009. We're on Olympus. In that room are the twelve Olympians, plus Hestia, Hades and Persephone, as well as a couple of people who came back with me, my younger self and some of the campers. You've been stuck in the Underworld, but Persephone just got Hades to release you, so … here you are."

Sally took a shaky breath. "Oh my …"

"The Fates have sent us some books that were created from my mind." Percy continued. "So they're learning about the last four years of my life, as well as the near future. At least, I assume it's the near future. It'd be nice to have some time off though."

"So you're sixteen?" Sally asked.

Percy nodded, enfolding her in his arms.

"Goodness, you grew up tall." She murmured into his collar. "So your father … your father's out there?"

Percy nodded with a grin. "Yeah, he is. The others are too, though, and a lot of them aren't overly happy about me. Dad swore he would have any more kids after World War II."

"He never mentioned that." Sally remarked.

"Not the best thing to lead with, I shouldn't think." Percy said with a grin. He stuck head out the door and gestured to his younger self. "Come on in."

Percy leapt to his feet and raced through the door, straight into his mother's arms. She held him tightly, stroking his hair, murmuring words of reassurance.

Percy waited by the door, beginning to fidget slightly. "I'm sure someone could send you home if you like."

"Hmm, spend more time with Gabe or get to know my son's new friends." Sally said thoughtfully. "I think I'll stay, unless the gods choose to send me home, which they might. Last time I checked, mortals weren't welcome on Olympus."

Percy frowned. "But we're here."

"We're not mortal." Percy reminded him. "We're demigods. Come on then." He led them back into the throne room. "My mother, ladies and gentlemen. Oh, and Clarisse, yes, I am a mamma's boy, and proud of it."

"Sally!" Nico, Thalia and Annabeth greeted cheerfully.

"Hello." Sally said, smiling bemusedly.

"Won't bother trying to introduce you to everyone." Percy said. "Way too many people."

"A mortal in the throne room." Hera murmured. "Will wonders never cease?"

Sally dipped her a curtsey. "I realise this is an unusual situation, Lady Hera, but I would like to ask if I could remain for the telling of these stories, to find out what it is my son has done to warrant this attention from the Fates."

Hera was completely wrong-footed at that. She had always assumed that the mortals the other gods ran around with were silly, mindless creatures (okay, maybe not Athena's, but they were affairs of
the mind) that were merely overwhelmed by the greatness of their company.

Sally Jackson was clear-sighted. That much was obvious. And despite the trembling in her fingers, she willingly addressed the gods to request to learn more about her son.

Something the other demigods had implied their mortal parents never did.

Suddenly Hera smiled. "Of course you may stay."

She was the goddess of mothers, after all.

Sally beamed at her, taking the seat Hera created next to her younger son, and Annabeth picked up the book to find her place once more.

**Then things got even stranger.**

Sally raised her hand. "Sorry, could you just quickly summarise what's just happened?"

"Oh, my math teacher's a monster." Percy explained. "I accidentally dumped Nancy in the fountain, Mrs Dodds dragged me inside, told me to confess something and then shed her disguise."

"It was about that point that Persephone figured out that Dad had sent one of the Furies after him," Nico added, "and got really upset so she … uh, convinced him to bring you back."

Sally smiled shyly at her. "Thank you."

**Mr Brunner … the pen through the air.**

"What's a pen going to do?" Luke asked. He had been silent all morning, having barely slept the previous night.

Seeing Thalia alive and well once more was wonderful, being able to hold her again was even better … but he wasn't stupid.

Her warnings echoed in his head, putting words to the haunted sadness in her eyes. He had done that – he was going to do that.

He had always thought Thalia would agree with him about the gods, would listen to the dreams just as he had.

Now he saw how wrong he was. Not only was she not going to listen, she saw the truth he refused to – he was a pawn, a scapegoat.

Not for the first time, he wished he had ignored the dreams that had begun to haunt him since his return from his failed quest.

Once he had let them in, he couldn't get rid of them, and he just couldn't talk to anyone about it.

Maybe he could pull his future self to one side and talk to him, see what he thought.

**Mrs Dodds lunged … on tournament day.**

Artemis stiffened, recognising the blade, but said nothing.

**Mrs Dodds spun … swung the sword.**
"That came naturally?" Connor asked frowning. "But you're hopeless at sword-fighting."

"With just about every other blade I am." Percy conceded, reaching over to squeeze his mother's hand. "This one's special; comes from the sea."

**The metal … still watching me.**

The campers cheered and Sally let out a shaky breath. "You were a little less descriptive when you told me about school."

Percy looked sheepish. "Sorry Mom. I didn't want to worry you. Plus, I thought I was going mad."

**I … imagined the whole thing?**

Sally frowned. "Why is the mist still working on him?"

"I may have pushed it to." Chiron admitted. "As long as Percy remained unaware of his heritage, he could be reasonably safe."

"Well that worked." Grover muttered.

**I went back … your butt.**

"Who?" Several people asked.

**I said … and turned away.**

"It's the mist." Demeter said thoughtfully. "It's made everyone forget that Mrs Dodds ever existed. Maybe if they ate more cereal …"

Persephone sighed. "Enough with the cereal, Mother, please."

**I asked … messing with me.**

"Really need to teach you how to lie." Hermes muttered.

'Not funny … Who?'

"Now that's how it's done!" Hermes said, grinning. "Ow! What was that for?!"

Artemis scowled at him, lowering her hand. "Stop encouraging the children to lie."

'The other … feeling alright?'

Annabeth looked up. "That's the end of the chapter."

"And while it was rather amusing, we haven't actually learned anything new." Athena said.

"We learnt that the punk can handle a sword." Ares grunted.

"And that the mist really is amazing." Aphrodite added.

"And that our children have incredibly difficult lives." Apollo finished, looking at the campers, his eyes lingering on his sons. "I'm sure it would be easier if we could …"

"No." Zeus interrupted. "You know the rules. We cannot interfere in the lives of demigods."
"Being allowed to talk to our kids once in a while is not interfering." Hermes told him, scowling darkly. "We all bend the rules as much as we can … at least most of us do … but would it really be so bad if we could just talk to them every so often?"

"Yes, I could …" Aphrodite began.

"Not so you can give them makeovers." Athena said tiredly.

Aphrodite glared at her. "As lovely as it would be to give my children makeovers, they can do that for themselves. It would be nice to tell them that I love them."
Silena's face lit up in a smile, a smile Hestia by the hearth noticed.

"That would be lovely." She said.

Despite the softness of her voice, it cut across the bickering and the other gods fell silent.

"I don't think the children ever really appreciate just how much you all love them." Hestia continued, poking the coals. "Or how proud you are of them. How difficult it is for immortal parents when they know their children will grow old and die. And I think it would be much nicer if you could all speak to your children freely."

"Or, at the very least," Percy said, looking at the ceiling, "leave some kind of message at camp explaining why you can't so the children don't just think they're unwanted mistakes."

"I think." Thalia said, before anyone could respond to Percy's comments, "that I'll read the next chapter."

Chapter End Notes

Also I'm stunned by the number of faves/follows this fic already has, but I would really appreciate it if you could leave a comment letting me know what you think.
At several people's request, I have tried to increase the amount of book text I use. Hopefully, it's easier to follow along. I'm not using the entirety of the text, but it should help. Please let me know what you think.

Thalia's words put an end to the discussion, which had been going nowhere. For the time being, Zeus would not budge on the subject and continuing the argument would be, to use a common phrase, flogging a dead horse.

She took the book from Annabeth and turned to the next page.

Chapter Two

Three Old Ladies Knit Socks of Death

Sally and Grover paled at the reminder, but everyone else – even Annabeth – looked confused.

I was used to the occasional weird experience, but … the entire campus seemed to be playing some kind of trick on me.

“No wonder your grades slipped.” Chiron murmured, looking rather guilty.

The students acted as if they were completely and totally convinced that Mrs Kerr … had been our maths teacher since Christmas … they would stare at me like I was psycho.

Thalia paused, looked at Percy and shook her head. “No, too easy.”

It got so I almost believed them … But Grover couldn’t fool me … I knew he was lying.

Grover sighed. No satyr was an amazing liar, but it was even harder lying to someone they genuinely liked and cared about.

Something was going on … visions of Mrs Dodds with talons and leathery wings would wake me up in a cold sweat.

Sally bit her lip. She hated the idea of her baby suffering like that, but she didn’t want to say anything in front of his new friends; that would just be embarrassing.

Beside her, Percy shifted so his hand brushed hers and she smiled.

The freak weather continued, which didn’t help my mood … One of the current events … was the unusual number of small planes that had gone down in sudden squalls in the Atlantic that year.

Hades scowled. “And my domain gets even more crowded. I’m going to have to expand.”
“Maybe we just need to do some reorganising.” Persephone suggested. “If we could reroute one or two of the rivers, it might create a bit more space.”

Hades looked thoughtful. “That might work, my dear. I’ll look into it.”

**I started feeling cranky … I was sent out into the hallway in almost every class.**

Athena pursed her lips, but said nothing. She didn’t approve of the boy neglecting his education, but at the same time, she couldn’t blame him for having trouble under the circumstances.

**Finally, when our English teacher, Mr Nicoll, asked me for the millionth time … I snapped. I called him an old sot. I wasn’t even sure what it meant, but it sounded good.**

“It means an old drunk.” *Annabeth* told *Percy*, an amused smile on her face.

Dionysus snorted, startling everyone. They hadn’t thought he was paying attention. “You make that sound like a bad thing.”

**The headmaster sent my mom a letter the following week … I was homesick.**

A lot of the campers looked a little surprised at that. They didn’t have a particularly close relationship with their mortal parent – they didn’t like school, but that didn’t make them homesick.

**I wanted to be home with my mom … even if I had to … put up with my obnoxious stepfather and his stupid poker parties.**

Sally sighed sadly, but *Nico* frowned. “That doesn’t sound like …”

“Before him.” *Percy* interrupted.

His younger self perked up. “Did something happen to Gabe?”

“Um …” *Percy* glanced at his mother. “I can honestly say that I did nothing.”

Sally didn’t question him, but no one missed the small smile on her face.

**And yet … there were things I’d miss at Yancy … I’d miss Grover … I worried how he’d survive next year without me.**

Grover shook his head. “And I was supposed to be there to protect you.”

**I’d miss Latin class, too … I hadn’t forgotten what Mr Brunner had told me about this subject being life-and-death for me … I’d started to believe him.**

“You need to tell him now.” Athena said frowning. “He’s beginning to realise what he is, he’s going to be in more danger.”

“He was only twelve.” Chiron said with a sigh. “And if he was indeed … Well, I wanted him to have a little more time.”

**The evening before my final, I got so frustrated I threw the Cambridge Guide to Greek Mythology across my dorm room.**

“Percy!” Both Annabeths protested.

“Sorry.” Percy muttered.
Words had started swimming … as if they were riding skateboards.


There was no way I was going to remember the difference between Chiron and Charon …

Percy and Annabeth made a determined effort not to look at one another.

… or Polydictes and Polydeuces. And conjugating those Latin verbs? Forget it.

Malcolm grimaced. “Especially when you’re wired to Ancient Greek – Latin’s almost harder than English.”

I paced the room, feeling like ants were crawling around inside my shirt.

Percy frowned, fidgeting beside Annabeth. She gave him a querying look, but he shrugged it off. It was just the reminder of how restless he had felt, that was all.

I remembered Mr Brunner’s serious expression … Maybe if I talked to Mr Brunner, he could give me some pointers … I didn’t want to leave Yancy Academy with him thinking I hadn’t tried.

Athena allowed herself a small smile. At least the sea spawn was trying to better himself, even if it was only in one class.

I walked downstairs … A voice that was definitely Grover’s said, ‘… worried about Percy, sir.’

“Oh.” Chiron said, grimacing. “You heard that?”

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop.” Percy said. “It’s just … you were talking about me.”

I froze … I dare you to try not listening if you hear your best friend talking about you to an adult.

“I would.” Katie admitted.

“So would I.” Michael agreed.

I inched closer … ‘Let him enjoy his ignorance while he still can.’

“I wasn’t enjoying it.” Percy muttered.

‘Sir, he saw her …’ … ‘… I can’t fail in my duties again.’ … ‘You know what that would mean.’

Thalia sighed, but if she reassured Grover it wasn’t his fault every time the subject came up, they would never finish.

“It wasn’t your fault.” Luke said quietly. “It was mine.”

Thalia looked up, meeting his eyes. The pain and grief and guilt present hit her like a punch to the stomach. “That’s a new one. How’d you get there?”

“I was the oldest.” Luke pointed out. “I should have held them off, let you and Annabeth get to safety.”
“Except the monsters were after me primarily.” Thalia said. “So … Wait a minute, did you blame yourself all that time?”


“So when … when he said that it was …” Thalia flicked her eyes towards the gods. “You know … you believed him because …”

“I couldn’t stand the guilt anymore.” Luke admitted, his gaze dropping to the ground. “I wanted to believe it.”

“Does anyone know what they’re talking about?” Hermes whispered, looking worried.

“I did.” Apollo said, frowning. “I don’t now.”

Thalia gaped at Luke for a few seconds before saying, “It was not your fault, Luke. I don’t blame you for that, I never did. I don’t blame anyone in this room for what happened.”

“No one?” Zeus asked. “What about Hades? He sent the monsters.”

“You broke the oath.” Thalia said. “He was the only one that kept to the oath and yet you still distrust him. It would be easy for me to just blame all of you for using your children as weapons against each other, only acknowledging us when we’re useful or when you want something. But that would cause me to turn bitter and cold and I don’t want to.”

Artemis smiled at her. “Excellently said, my dear.” But she didn’t miss the way that Thalia’s eyes flickered to Luke.

Neither did Hermes. But he didn’t say anything either.

‘You haven’t … let’s just worry about keeping Percy alive until next autumn.’

Sally closed her eyes. “Was it that bad?”

“Well … Hades thought I stole the Helm of Darkness and Zeus thought I stole the Master Bolt, so they were both trying to kill me.” Percy said calmly. “So, yes, it was.”

“And that was before they knew for sure who your dad was.” Annabeth added.

Sally gave the aforementioned gods a vicious glare and, to everyone’s surprise, the two shrank back a little.

Hera smiled approvingly. She may not have liked the fact that Percy was born of an affair, but here was a proper mother, who knew the importance of protecting her child.

Of course, she tried to ignore the little voice in her head that whispered how badly she had failed at that herself.

The mythology book … hit the floor with a thud.

“Bad move.” The Stolls chorused.

Mr Brunner went silent. A shadow slid across the lighted glass … holding something that looked suspiciously like an archer’s bow.

“That’s because it was.” Lee said, grinning. The memory of Percy’s first archery lesson was still
vivid in his mind.

I opened the nearest door and slipped inside … A large dark shape paused in front of the glass, then moved on.

“We were really close.” Grover commented.

“What would you have done if you’d found me?” Percy asked curiously.

“Told you the truth, I suppose.” Chiron said. “There wasn’t much else we could have done.”

A bead of sweat trickled down my neck. … ‘My nerves haven’t been right since the winter solstice.’

“What’s been?” Aphrodite grumbled. The constant lightning storms and hurricanes were playing havoc on her hair.

‘Mine neither,’ Grover said. ‘But I could have sworn …’ … I waited in the dark … Finally I … made my way back up to the dorm. Grover was lying on his bed … like he’d been there all night.

“I would have believed it too.” Percy said. “If I hadn’t just heard you downstairs.”

‘Hey, … ready for this test?’

“Latin.” Beckendorf muttered, shaking his head. “Who would be?”

I didn’t answer … I turned so he couldn’t read my expression, and started getting ready for bed.

“That wouldn’t have worked.” Hermes told Percy kindly. “Satyrs can smell emotion.”

I didn’t understand what I’d heard downstairs … They thought I was in some kind of danger.

“Because you were.” Apollo said.

The next afternoon, as I was leaving the three hour Latin exam …

“THREE HOURS?!” The demigods chorused in disbelief.

“How did you cope?” Annabeth asked.

“Annabeth!” Athena protested.

Annabeth blushed. “I’m sorry, Mother, but we do still have the ADHD to contend with.”

Athena considered this and nodded. She hadn’t thought about how difficult it would be for the demigods to sit still for three hours.

Chiron looked worried. “Ah … Percy, did my words that day help or make things worse?”

“In general, they made things worse.” Percy admitted, when his younger self looked uncomfortable. “But I know what you were trying to say.”

… my eyes swimming with the Greek and Roman names I’d misspelled, Mr Brunner called
me back inside … ‘Don’t be discouraged about leaving Yancy. It’s … it’s for the best.’

“Ouch.” Chris muttered.

His tone was kind, but his words still embarrassed me. … Nancy Bobofit smirked at me and made sarcastic little kissing motions with her lips.

“Ah.” Chiron said again. “Maybe I should have had that conversation with you in private.”

I mumbled, ‘Okay, sir.’ … My eyes stung.

Percy frowned, blinking rapidly.

Annabeth leaned a little closer, whispering, “He didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know.” Percy whispered. “My eyes feel funny.”

Here was my favourite teacher … telling me I was destined to get kicked out.

“That really wasn’t what I meant.” Chiron said sadly.

Percy grinned at him, despite the stinging in his eyes. “I know.” He repeated. “I get it.”

‘Right,’ I said, trembling.

Percy grimaced again, shifting uncomfortably.

‘No, no,’ Mr Brunner said. … But I was already gone.

Sally sighed. “It’s not your fault.” She said quietly. “I should have told him.”

On the last day of term, I shoved my clothes in my suitcase. … The other guys … their daddies were executives, or ambassadors, or celebrities. I was a nobody, from a family of nobodies.

“Sometimes,” Annabeth said, “it’s good to be Nobody.”

Percy laughed and she soon joined in.

Everyone else just watched them in confusion.

“Don’t look at us.” Nico said, when several people glanced at him in askance. “Must be an inside joke.”

Athena frowned. She didn’t like the idea of the two of them being close enough to have ‘inside jokes’.

They asked me what I’d be doing this summer … I’d have to get a summer job … and spend my free time worrying about where to school in the autumn.

“I’ll figure it out.” Sally said. “And you don’t have to get a summer job, sweetheart; we’d get by. You’re only twelve.”

Neither had the heart to tell their mother that they would have had to, just to give the money to Gabe.

‘Oh,’ one of the guys said. … The only person I dreaded saying goodbye to was Grover, but
… there we were, together again, heading into the city.

“Still trying to protect him?” Katie asked.

Grover nodded. “It was my job.” He said firmly. “And I just had this feeling that the Kindly One wasn’t the only thing looking for him.”

During the whole bus right, Grover kept glancing nervously down the aisle … I said, ‘Looking for Kindly Ones?’

Travis snickered. “I bet you scared him.”

Grover chuckled, still a little nervous. “You can say that again.”

“I bet you scared him.” Connor repeated.

“Don’t.” Luke said before Travis could join in. “We’ll never get finished.” He wasn’t paying a huge amount of attention at the moment, too busy mulling over Thalia’s words about blame and bitterness, but he knew better than to not keep at least half an eye on his brothers.

Grover nearly jumped out of his seat. … ‘What’s the summer-solstice deadline?’

“That’s what I want to know.” Annabeth said frowning, but no one answered her.

He winced … The card was in fancy script, which was murder on my dyslexic eyes …

“Why are the cards written in fancy script?” Hestia asked.

Dionysus shrugged. “It looks nice.”

“But the children can’t read it.” Hestia said.

Dionysus wanted to say he didn’t care, but no one argued with Hestia when she had that look on her face, so he sighed. “I’ll change it.”

… but I finally made out something like: … ‘That’s my, um … summer address.’

“That’s one way of putting it, I suppose.” Michael said.

“My heart sank. … ‘Why would I need you?’

“Percy.” Sally chided gently.

Percy winced. “Sorry, Grover, I didn’t mean it like that.”

Grover smiled at him. “It’s cool, Percy, I know.”

It came out harsher than I meant it to. … All year long, I’d gotten in fights keeping bullies away from him. … And here he was acting like he was the one who defended me.

“Big difference between monsters and bullies.” Hermes explained. “Satyrs can smell monsters so he could guide you away from them.”

Percy nodded, when a sudden thought struck him. “Why didn’t Mrs Dodds hurt any of the other students? I mean, she’s a monster, right?”
“Monsters tend to ignore humans.” Annabeth explained. “Good job too, since humans can’t see them as they really are anyway.”

‘Grover,’ I said, ‘what exactly are you protecting me from?’ ... the whole bus filled with a smell like rotten eggs.

Aphrodite and Silena pulled identical disgusted expressions.

Oddly enough, Percy did too.

“What’s with you?” Annabeth asked quietly, trying not to draw attention.

“I don’t know.” Percy admitted. “But I swear I can smell that smoke.”

“Probably just your memory.” Annabeth said, but wasn’t entirely convinced herself.

The driver cursed and limped the Greyhound over to the side of the highway. … There were no customers, just three old ladies sitting in rocking chairs in the shade of a maple tree, knitting the biggest pair of socks I’d ever seen.

Poseidon turned white.

I mean these socks were the size of sweaters … The lady in the middle held an enormous basket of electric-blue yarn.

Thalia looked up, her eyes wide. “You saw the Fates?”

Percy chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck. “Did I forget to mention that?”

All three women … seemed to be looking right at me.

“Erm, is that bad?” Percy asked, shrinking back at everyone’s gaze.

“Percy, the Fates only appear when you’re going to die.” Luke explained gently. “They didn’t cut the string or anything, did they?”

“Read please, Thalia.” Percy said sharply.

I looked over at Grover to say something about this … The lady in the middle took out a huge pair of scissors … like shears.

Poseidon began muttering something under his breath, his eyes moving to the future version of his son.

Percy caught his eye and smiled. “I’m fine, Dad.”

I heard Grover catch his breath … Across the road, the old ladies were still watching me.

Thalia’s voice caught, but she just managed to read the next line.

The middle one cut the yarn, and I swear I could hear that snip across four lanes of traffic.

“It wasn’t mine.” Percy said, before anyone could freak out.

“What do you mean it wasn’t yours?” Annabeth asked shrilly.

Percy winced, shifting out of immediate earshot. “It wasn’t my life-line they cut. They were giving
me a hint.” His eyes flickered towards Luke for a split second, and she relaxed.

Thalia didn’t look convinced. “But Percy, why would they show you someone else’s line?”

“I don’t know.” Percy said. “But don’t you think if it was my life-line, I’d be dead by now? It was years ago.”

“So when you said,” Percy said to Grover, “that seeing them cut the cord meant that someone was going to die, you did mean me.”

Grover blushed. “I didn’t want to worry you.”

“Percy …” Sally whispered.

Percy reached across to take her hand. “Mom, I swear to you. That life-line was not mine. Thalia?”

Thalia gave him a dark look. “If you die, Kelp-Head, I’ll kill you.”

Percy decided not to comment on the logic of that. He also decided not to mention that Luke’s lifeline was exactly the same colour as Thalia’s eyes.

Her two friends balled up the electric-blue socks, leaving me wondering who they could possibly be for - Sasquatch or Godzilla.

A few campers laughed nervously.

At the rear of the bus, the driver wrenched a big chunk of smoking metal out of the engine compartment. … Once we got going, I started feeling feverish, as if I’d caught the flu.

Percy let out a quiet groan, holding his stomach.

Annabeth frowned at him. “Percy, are you alright?”

Percy grimaced, when several eyes turned to him. “No, I feel really odd.”

Sally came over and pressed a hand to his forehead. “You’re burning up.”

“But he was fine a second ago.” Annabeth protested.

“I’ll be okay.” Percy protested, when Apollo stood from his throne.

“No, I’ve got a hunch.” Apollo said, touching Percy’s forehead. “And I’m right. There’s nothing wrong with you.”

“But he’s burning up!” Sally protested.

Apollo gave her a kind smile. “He’s fine, Mrs Jackson – it’s the book. Have you been experiencing any other sensations the book’s mentioned?”

“Pretty much all of them.” Percy answered. “I just assumed that I was remembering them, you know?”

Apollo nodded. “Thalia, would you read the next sentence please?”

Grover didn’t look much better.

Thalia glanced at Apollo, who waved at her to keep going.
He was shivering and his teeth were chattering.

Apollo nodded again.

‘Grover?’

‘Yeah?’

‘What are you not telling me?’

“And the fever’s gone.” Apollo announced, removing his hand from Percy’s forehead.

“And why is that happening?” Sally asked.

“Well, my guess is that we have three different time-streams at play.” Apollo said. “There’s ours, the time these five have come from, and the time the books have come from. Even the Fates have their limits, so I would say that there’s a price to pay. And the price happens to be Percy reliving the books. This Percy, obviously, unless you were feeling ill just now?” He added to the younger Percy.

“No sir.”

“What about the rest of us?” Annabeth asked. “Will we get the events of the books too?”

“No idea.” Apollo answered. “We’ll have to find out.”

Thalia grimaced and kept reading.

He dabbed his forehead with his shirt sleeve. … ‘… They’re not like … Mrs Dodds, are they?’

“No.” Nico answered. “They’ll even leave demigods alone unless it’s your time. Or someone else’s.” He added hastily, when Percy gave him a swift look.

His expression was hard to read, but I got the feeling that the fruit-stand ladies were something much, much worse than Mrs Dodds.

“It depends on the circumstances.” Annabeth said wisely. “It’s like Nico said, the Fates won’t attack demigods. So the Kindly Ones are more dangerous. But generally once you see the Fates cut a life line … you’re screwed. Usually.”

He said, ‘Just tell me what you saw.’ … He closed his eyes and made a gesture … that might’ve been crossing himself, but it was … something almost –older.

“Ancient, in fact.” Nico said.

He said, ‘You saw her snip the cord?’ … ‘Always sixth grade. They never get past sixth.’

Thalia sighed.

“And I did get past sixth grade.” Percy pointed out.

“How old are you?” Hera asked suddenly. “What date was it for you?”

“I’m sixteen, Lady Hera, it was September 4th 2009.” Percy said. “Thalia’s fifteen, Annabeth’s sixteen, Nico’s twelve and Luke’s twenty three.”
“Fifteen?” Zeus repeated. “You should be older than that, Thalia.”

“I didn’t age properly in the tree.” Thalia explained. “Plus, I’m a Hunter. We’re immortal. I’m physically fifteen; if I hadn’t become a Hunter, I’d be seventeen. If I hadn’t died, I’d be … twenty one.”

‘Grover,’ I said, because he was really starting to scare me. … ‘Let me walk you home from the bus station. … I promised he could.

Percy grimaced. “Sorry, Grover.”

“No, I understand.” Grover said. “I probably freaked you out.”

‘Is this like a superstition or something?’ … ‘Does that mean somebody is going to die?’

“I am not going to die.” Percy said firmly, seeing his friends casting worried looks at him. “Well, I will one day,” he amended, “but it wasn’t my life line.”

He looked at me mournfully, like he was already picking the kind of flowers I’d like best on my coffin.

Grover looked embarrassed. “I’d never heard of the Fates cutting someone else’s life line for you. And you should always be prepared for the worst.”

“I know.” Percy said with a grin.

“That’s the end of the chapter.” Thalia said. “Who would like to read next?”

“I’ll read.” Nico offered. “It might be a good idea if Percy doesn’t read, not if he’s going to react to the things in the book. And I’m not twelve, Percy,” he added, returning to their earlier discussion, “I was stuck in the Lotus Casino, I’m over seventy.”

“You went in when you were ten and you got out two years ago.” Percy said with a grin. “You’re twelve, kid.”
Chapter Three

Grover Unexpectedly Loses His Pants

Grover blushed as bright as he had all day and several of the campers laughed.

It was Chris, though, who asked, “Nico, do you go to Camp Half-Blood?”

This distracted everyone from Grover’s unfortunate predicament, everyone waiting for his response. After all, Hades didn’t have a cabin at Camp.

Nico looked thoughtful. “I did to start with until we found out who my father is. That wasn’t why I left – something else happened at the same time – it will be in the books. I came back briefly, helped out with a few things but … I didn’t belong there. That much was obvious.”

Percy patted his shoulder. “You’re welcome, Nico. Any time.” He knew that the Son of Hades still felt unwanted, despite the new cabin. “And our fire escape’s always open.”

Nico grinned and began reading.

Confession time: I ditched Grover as soon as we got to the bus terminal.

“Ow!” Percy said obligingly, when Annabeth punched him in the arm. “Sorry again. Should have stayed with you.”

I know, I know. … But Grover was freaking me out, looking at me like I was a dead man, muttering ‘Why does this always happen?’ and ‘Why does it always have to be sixth grade?’

“Okay, that would freak anyone out.” Annabeth conceded.

Whenever he got upset, Grover’s bladder acted up, so I wasn’t surprised when … he made me promise to wait for him, then made a beeline for the restroom. … A word about my mother before you meet her.

“Amazing.” Thalia said.


“Wonderful.” Annabeth added.

“Best mom in the world.” Percy finished.

Thalia pouted. “That’s not one word. Or I’d have used it.”

“Wait a minute.” Hera said. “How do you all know her?”

“Sally’s the closest mortal parent to Camp.” Annabeth explained. “She’s kind of become a half-way house when you’re on your way back from a quest or something.”

“I stopped by to visit Percy on his birthday.” Nico said, grinning. “Came through the fire escape
because I didn’t want to interrupt. Percy invited me in for some cake. Sally asked who I was, I introduced myself, and she insisted on cooking me a proper meal before I had dessert, because Percy mentioned I probably hadn’t eaten.”

“Lady Artemis had something she needed to handle alone.” Thalia said, when everyone turned to her. “So she asked me to find the Hunters somewhere to stay. We could have used her cabin, but the Hunters and the campers don’t really get along. I knew Sally already so I stopped by to ask if she knew anywhere we could stay. She said I could stay there. I told her there were twenty of us. She said we could stay there. Moved all the furniture in the living room so we could camp out in there and cooked us dinner.”

Artemis beamed at Sally, who was blushing under the praise.

**Her name is Sally Jackson and she’s the best person in the world … the best people have the rottenest luck.**

Hera frowned. From the sounds of it, this mortal deserved all the luck she could get.

**Her own parents died in a plane crash when she was five …**

Zeus shrank back under the glares of his family. Hera liked this woman, she was a good mother. Artemis was protective of all women, especially one who would take care of her Hunters, even if she wasn’t a maiden. The other gods were just grateful that Sally would apparently come to look after all of their children, even if just for a little while.

... and she was raised by an uncle who didn’t care much about her. ... The only good break she ever got was meeting my dad.

Aphrodite let out a little sigh. She loved hearing about love stories.

**I don’t have any memories of him, just this sort of warm glow, maybe the barest trace of his smile.**

“You visited him?” Zeus asked.

“Of course he did.” Hermes said with a frown. “Didn’t you visit Thalia when she was a child?”

While Zeus suddenly became very interested in one of the etchings on his throne, Hades added, “I certainly spent some time with Nico and Bianca when they were little.”

Hermes looked around at the others, who looked rather sheepish.

“We aren’t allowed to interfere.” Athena reminded him gently.

Hermes rolled his eyes. “Cripes, no wonder the kids think we don’t give a shit. I, for one, have visited every single one of my children when they were little. You can’t stick around for long, because you pretty much make them a monster magnet.”

“Is that why we don’t get claimed until we get to camp?” Michael asked curiously.

“Well, it’s why I don’t.” Hermes said. “I can’t watch every single one of my kids every minute of every day, so my only real indication that they know is when they get to camp, at which point I claim them. Unless of course someone has me flying here, there and everywhere,” he gave Zeus a pointed look, which he ignored, “at which point I miss an entrance, which sometimes happens. Sorry, Chris.” He repeated.
Chris jumped. “Um, it’s okay, Dad.”

“No, it’s not.” Hermes said with a sad smile. “I don’t like missing out any of my kids.” He sent a glare at the other gods. “None of us should.”

**My mom doesn’t like to talk about him because it makes her sad.**

Aphrodite cooed, conjuring a tissue to dab at her eyes.

**She has no pictures … Lost at sea, my mom told me. Not dead. Lost at sea.**

Athena raised an eyebrow. “You knew what he was … That’s why you’re so calm now.”

“I wouldn’t say calm, Lady Athena.” Sally said quietly. “It’s quite nerve-wracking, you know. But, yes, he did tell me.”

**She worked odd jobs … I knew I wasn’t an easy kid.**

“No, you certainly weren’t.” Sally said affectionately. “But you were worth every second.”

**Finally, she married Gabe Ugliano … the guy reeked like mouldy garlic pizza wrapped in gym shorts.**

Aphrodite turned green and Hephaestus placed a bucket in front of his wife. Silena wasn’t much better and Katie was holding a glass of water for her, helping her take small gulps. Will had a hand on the nape of her neck and was humming under his breath, gently soothing the nausea.

“Is that an exaggeration?” Annabeth asked, looking rather ill herself. “Please say that’s an exaggeration.”

**Percy** didn’t answer. He was too busy holding his breath, because Gabe’s overwhelming odour was coming back to him.

“Unfortunately, it isn’t.” Sally said, wrinkling her nose.

“But why?” Artemis asked, frowning. “You seem a very intelligent woman; why would you marry him?”

“I had my reasons.” Sally said.

Athena narrowed her eyes. “I think I know why. And if I’m right, I am very, very impressed.”

**Between the two of us, we made our mom’s life pretty hard … when I came home is a good example.**

Sally sighed. “Oh, what happened now?”

Percy grimaced. “Nothing much, Mom.”

**Percy** winced. He had never really told his mom how bad Gabe had been towards him.

**I walked into our little apartment. … Crisps and beer cans were strewn all over the carpet.**

“Oh dear.” Aphrodite said faintly. “Oh dear.”

Ares rolled his eyes. “It ain’t that bad.”
“It’s disgusting!” Aphrodite snapped.

Hephaestus smiled to himself. He had put up with his wife’s affair their entire marriage, but he had also grown to love her (and she him, he hoped) when they were alone. Maybe she was finally going to see that Ares wasn’t just the strapping soldier she was besotted with, but a rude, arrogant bully.

**Hardly looking up, he said around his cigar, ‘So you’re home.’ … ‘You got any cash?’**

Sally’s mouth dropped open.

“He’s asking you for cash?” Thalia asked. “Was that a common occurrence?”

“Constant.” Percy answered.

**That was it. … Gabe had … about three hairs on his head, all combed over his bald scalp, as if that made him handsome or something.**

Aphrodite stopped glaring at Ares and began looking ill again.

**He managed the Electronics Mega-Mart in Queens, but stayed home most of the time. … Whenever I was home, he expected me to provide his gambling funds.**

“He did what?!” Sally demanded.

Nico cleared his throat and reread the sentence.

**Whenever I was home, he expected me to provide his gambling funds.**

“Oh no.” Sally declared. “Absolutely not. The pig has a job, he can use it.”

“Mom?” Percy asked. “If you don’t like him, why don’t you leave him?”

“Oh, I’m planning on it.” Sally growled.

**He called that our ‘guy secret’. Meaning, if I told my mom, he would punch my lights out.**

There were a number of gasps and Percy closed his eyes, curling in on himself.

Annabeth narrowed her eyes. “Percy,” she said calmly, “did he ever actually hurt you?”

“Only once.” Percy answered, staring at something very interesting on the floor. “I cottoned on quick.”

Thalia put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it gently. Her mother had been self-absorbed, yes, and constantly neglected her in favour of booze and sex, but she had never hit her daughter.

“Oh Percy,” Sally whispered, “I am so, so sorry. I would have walked immediately, if I’d known.”

“I thought you loved him.” Percy muttered into his knees.

“Even if I did love him, he hurt you!” Sally protested. “There is no excuse for that!”

Hera was nodding with a scowl. Like Athena, she had guessed why Sally may have stayed; she just needed a little more proof.

‘I don’t have any cash,’ I told him. … Gabe could sniff out money like a bloodhound, which was surprising, considering his own smell should’ve covered up everything else.
Athena shook her head. “Incredible.”

“What is?” Poseidon asked, counting backwards from ten in his head so he didn’t take off and murder the despicable mortal who had dared harm his son.

“His smell covered up everything else.” Athena repeated. “Including, I’m guessing, the scent of a demigod. Even one of the Big Three.”

Percy looked at his mother, who nodded sadly.

“Your father had warned me that monsters could smell half-bloods. I figured that being around him would make you safer … they’d never smell you, only him.”

“You didn’t have to do that, Mom.” Percy said softly. “You could have been happy.”

“But you would have been in danger.” Sally said. “And that is not acceptable.”

‘You took a taxi from the bus station … Got six, seven bucks in change.

“I’m astounded he could work that out.” Annabeth said.

Somebody expects to live under this roof, he ought to carry his own weight.

“His own …” Sally was beginning to turn red with anger. “He’s twelve!”

“Sally,” Poseidon said calmly, addressing the mother of his child for the first time since her arrival, “would you mind terribly if I wiped him from existence?”

“Only if I don’t get there first.” Sally growled, glaring at the book. Her glare softened when Nico squirmed slightly, hiding behind the book.

Am I right, Eddie?’ … ‘Come on, Gabe … The kid just got here.’ … The other two guys passed gas in harmony.

Silena was a pale shade of green now and Katie was rubbing her back rhythmically, careful not to disrupt Will – and now Michael as well – while they tried to help her.

“At least Eddie tried to help you.” Sally muttered.

‘Fine,’ I said. … ‘I wouldn’t act so snooty!’

Thalia scowled. She had no idea what had happened to this – she couldn’t even call him a man – but she was already planning a hunting trip with her sisters when she got back.

Percy was her family. And nobody messed with family.

I slammed the door to my room, which really wasn’t my room … he loved … going his best to make the place smell like his nasty cologne and cigars and stale beer.

“If I’ve told him once, I’ve told him a thousand times …” Sally said, but she didn’t sound angry anymore. Just tired and resigned.

I dropped my suitcase on the bed. Home sweet home.

Sally looked sad. Apparently by keeping Percy close to her, she hadn’t only put him in danger.
She’d kept him miserable as well.

Gabe’s smell was almost worse than the nightmares … as soon as I thought that, my legs felt weak.

Percy grimaced, when everyone looked at him. “Yes, I can feel it. Yes, it’s weird.”

I remembered Grover’s look of panic … A sudden chill rolled through me.

Percy shivered violently. “That wasn’t a literal statement!” He protested. “Why am I feeling it?”

“Because you described it, I should think.” Apollo said. He wanted to laugh at this demigod’s argument, but he couldn’t help wondering what would happen if the boy got into potentially life-threatening scenarios in the book.

Surely the Fates wouldn’t go to all this trouble to let the boy die here.

I felt like someone – something – was looking for me right now, maybe pounding its way up the stairs, growing long, horrible talons.

Clarisse opened her mouth to say something, but caught Annabeth’s eye and fell silent with a grumble. She had no idea why Wise Girl was still sticking up for Prissy now his father had been revealed – Athena hated Poseidon, everyone knew that.

Then I heard my mom’s voice … and my fears melted.

Sally smiled, glad she could still do something for her son.

My mother can make me feel good just by walking into a room. … I’ve never heard her raise her voice or say an unkind word to anyone, not even me or Gabe.

“You’ve had the most flattering description in the book so far.” Thalia told her with a smile.

“And it’ll stay that way.” Annabeth added. “You’re his favourite.”

Percy didn’t bother to argue, but he did say, “You’ll get a good one too, I bet.”

Annabeth raised an eyebrow, but let him have it.

“Do you know,” Sally said, looking at her future son, “I still don’t know your friends’ names.”

“Oh, sorry.” Percy said. “I should have done that when they started complimenting you. This is Annabeth, Thalia and Nico. And this is Luke, but future-you hasn’t met him.”

“Thank you.” She said, running a quick eye over the future half-bloods, matching names to faces in her memory.

‘Oh, Percy.’ … Her red-white-and-blue Sweet on America uniform smelled like the best things in the world … She’d brought me a huge bag of ‘free samples’, the way she always did when I came home.

“Lucky!” The Stolls chorused.

“Wait a minute …” Annabeth said slowly. “Luke, didn’t we …?”

“Yes, we did.” Luke said, looking thoughtfully at Sally. “And I think it was her.”
Annabeth gasped. “I knew I recognised her from somewhere!”
“What?” Sally asked.

“Before we got to camp, we were kind of … street kids, I suppose.” Luke explained. “Runaways, with nowhere to go. One day, we were walking past that shop and this lady was just closing up. She asked us if we’d lost our parents and Annabeth told her that we’d run away and …”

“I asked you if you had anywhere to go and you said you didn’t.” Sally finished, realisation dawning. “I could see that you were armed, but no one else seemed to be worried, so I guessed you were demigods and it was celestial bronze. I knew I couldn’t help you, not without putting Percy in more danger, and I didn’t have any proper food, but you looked half-starved, so I let you in and told you to help yourselves to candy.”

“That was the best day on the run.” Thalia said with a grin. “I didn’t even realise it was you.”

“I called Half-Blood Hill after you left.” Sally admitted. “I had the number from … before.”

“You were the anonymous caller.” Chiron said. “I’d had some forewarning that there was a daughter of Zeus, but we couldn’t find her. The only time we got a clue was when there was an attack, but the monster scent confused the satyrs and they couldn’t find her.”

Hermes and Athena both looked grateful and silently swore to help Sally in the future.

We sat together on the edge of the bed. … Was her little boy doing all right?

Clarisse rolled her eyes (as did her father) but the other campers just looked wistful. It must have been nice to have a mortal parent that understood.

I told her she was smothering me … but secretly, I was really, really glad to see her.

Sally smiled. She knew what her son meant when he said things like that. He was not a very good liar.

From the other room, Gabe yelled … She should have been married to a millionaire, not some jerk like Gabe.

Aphrodite tilted her head in consideration and Percy groaned, silently praying that the goddess of love wouldn’t start interfering with his mother’s love life.

For her sake, I tried to sound upbeat about my last days at Yancy Academy.

“Aww, you’re such a sweetheart.” Thalia cooed.

Percy rolled his eyes. “Shut up.”

I told her I wasn’t too down … I’d done pretty well in Latin.

“That’s true.” Chiron said.

And honestly … I liked Yancy Academy … Until that trip to the museum …

Sally shook her head. “I knew there was something you weren’t telling me.”

‘What?’ my mom asked … I felt bad lying. I wanted to tell her … but I thought it would sound stupid.
“You should have told your mother.” Athena said.

“Well, he does have a point.” Poseidon said. “After all, he knows nothing of us and he thinks he’s going mad.”

She pursed her lips. … ‘We’re going to the beach.’

My eyes widened. ‘Montauk?’

“You still go back there?” Poseidon asked.

Sally didn’t look up, picking at a loose thread on her nightdress. “Every chance I get.”

“Hasn’t been that often, recently.” Percy added. “Because Gabe’s a …”

“Percy.” His mother cut him off. “Language please.”

‘Three nights – same cabin.’ … Gabe said there wasn’t enough money.

“Something tells me he wouldn’t have been paying anyway.” Artemis muttered bitterly. This piece of trash was exactly why she wanted to remain a maiden.

Gabe appeared in the doorway and growled, ‘Bean dip, Sally? Didn’t you hear me?’

“Honestly, she’s not his servant!” Hera snapped.

Even Hestia was glaring now and Nico was hiding behind the book. He was certain, however, that Percy would not have stood for this once he learned his true heritage, so he was planning to visit the Fields of Punishment and finding this Gabe to give him a personal visit.

I wanted to punch him. … ‘I’ll make him enough seven-layer dip for the whole weekend. Guacamole. Sour cream. The works.’

A soft growling noise came from the campers and Michael turned bright red.

Apollo grinned at his son. “We’ll have something to eat soon.”

Gabe softened a bit. … ‘… it comes out of your clothes budget, right?’

Silena looked like she was going to pass out.

“Stop.” Lee told his brothers in a low voice. “I know you want to help, but you can’t. Just let Katie try and make her feel better.”

“CLOTHES BUDGET?!” Aphrodite shrieked.

“Uh oh.” Percy murmured, leaning towards his mother. “Take my advice, just smile and nod. Or you’ll find yourself in the middle of a terribly dramatic love story.”

“You sound like you’re speaking from experience.” Annabeth said, arching an eyebrow.

Percy winced. “I may have run into her once.”

“Ah.” Annabeth said, nodding. “That explains Rachel.”

Percy wanted to say that Rachel appearing wasn’t necessarily Aphrodite’s doing, just the whole jealousy/confusion thing they had going on for a while, but Annabeth was smiling, so he decided to take his own advice and smile and nod.
Hephaestus eventually managed to calm his wife by promising to make Sally a new wardrobe that was twice as big on the inside (which had the dual purpose of getting the mortal woman out of an Aphrodite-induced makeover).

‘Yes, honey,’ my mother said. ‘.. And maybe if the kid apologizes for interrupting my poker game.’

“Interrupting it!!” Thalia repeated in disgust. “He funded it!”

‘Yes, honey,’ my mother said. “.. And maybe if the kid apologizes for interrupting my poker game.’

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‘Yes, honey,’ my mother said. “.. And maybe if the kid apologizes for interrupting my poker game.’

“Interrupting it!!” Thalia repeated in disgust. “He funded it!”

Maybe if I … make you sing soprano for a week.

Nico broke off with a snicker. “Please tell me you did.”

“But my mom’s eyes warned me … Why did she care what he thought?

“I don’t.” Sally said. “But it keeps you safe.”

Percy looked at her sadly. “But you shouldn’t have to be miserable.”

“Part of being a mother is making sacrifices.” Sally told him gently. “And I don’t regret a single one if it keeps you alive.”

“Nearly didn’t.” Mr D grunted. “They always want to keep ‘em close …”

“That’s enough.” Poseidon said warningly.

‘I’m sorry,’ I muttered … His tiny brain was probably trying to detect sarcasm in my statement.

“I doubt he could.” Athena sniffed, as if such stupidity in one person was a personal insult.

‘Yeah, whatever,’ he decided. “For a moment, I thought I saw anxiety in her eyes … as if my mom too felt an odd chill in the air.

Percy shivered again.

“I could tell there was something wrong.” Sally said quietly. “I just … I didn’t want to believe it was to do with … all of this.”

But then her smile returned … Gabe took a break … griping and groaning about losing her cooking – and more important, his ’78 Camaro – for the whole weekend.


“Thank you.” Sally said, a trifle nervously. “I’m not staying with anyone who hurts my son, masking or not.”

‘Not a scratch … Not one little scratch.’

Annabeth rolled her eyes. “Like he’d be the one driving. He was twelve!”

Nico laughed. And laughed. And kept laughing until tears streamed down his cheeks and Thalia
tugged the book out of his hands with a sigh.

She giggled herself when she saw the next line.

**Like I’d be the one driving. I was twelve.**

“Well,” *Percy* said sagely as everyone laughed, “great minds do think alike.”

*Annabeth* swatted his arm. “You are not a great mind, seaweed brain.”

“But you are.” *Percy* said with a grin.

*Annabeth* shook her head. “I have no response to that.” She nudged *Nico*, who had collapsed against her. “Come on, kid, it wasn’t that funny.”

*Nico* sucked in a breath, let out a couple more snorts of laughter, and managed to regain control of himself. “You’re right, I’m sorry. I think everything’s collapsing on me.”

*Annabeth* and *Percy* exchanged worried looks. They often forgot that *Nico* was only twelve when the battle happened. Sure, they’d been that age on their first quest, but it was nowhere near the same.

The fact that the only crack so far had been a bout of hysterical laughter was quite impressive.

**But that didn’t matter to Gabe. … I made the hand gesture I’d seen Grover make … The screen door slammed shut so hard it … sent him flying … as if he’d been shot from a cannon.**

Sally raised an eyebrow at her son. “How did you do that?”

“I don’t know.” *Percy* admitted, ducking his head. “Sorry.”

“It’s not that, Percy.” *Grover* said slowly. “It’s just … That’s satyr magic. You shouldn’t be able to use it.”

“Well, Percy has a knack for doing things he shouldn’t be able to do.” *Annabeth* said.

**Maybe it was just the wind, or some freak accident with the hinges … I got in the Camaro and told my mom to step on it.**

“Or it was one of those things.” *Percy* said hopefully.

“Sorry.” *Thalia* said cheerfully. “You’re just special.”

**Our rental cabin was on the south shore … There was always sand in the sheets and spiders in the cabinets …**

*Athena* and *Annabeth* shuddered.

*Percy* put a hand over his girlfriend’s, hidden between them on the couch. “I’ll clean the cabinets before you go in.” He whispered.

*Annabeth* gave him one of those smiles he loved – the one that said that whatever he’d said was either very smart or had made her very happy.

… and most of the time the sea was too cold to swim in. I loved the place.

*Aphrodite* wrinkled her nose. “It sounds awful.”
“It probably does.” Percy agreed. “But I always felt closer to Dad there. Even before I knew.”

We’d been going there since I was a baby … It was the place where she’d met my dad.

Sally couldn’t help smiling, remembering that perfect winter.

As we got closer … Her eyes turned the colour of the sea.

Poseidon nodded. He had noticed that himself. It was what had first drawn him to the beautiful woman strolling through the surf, despite the chilly weather.

We got there at sunset … We walked on the beach, fed blue corn chips to the seagulls, and munched on blue jelly beans, blue saltwater taffy, and all the other free samples my mom had brought from work.


I guess I should explain the blue food.

Hermes snickered, but Apollo merely nodded, as though Nico had responded to him rather than just continued reading. “That would be nice, thank you.”

See, Gabe had once told my mom there was no such thing. … She did have a rebellious streak, like me.

Artemis was full-out grinning now. Maiden or not, she liked Sally.

Thalia snorted. “Percy, you don’t have a rebellious streak. You have an obedience streak.”

Percy shrugged. “It’s the sea. It doesn’t like to be contained.”

Poseidon gave his son a proud smile – both of them.

When it got dark, we made a fire. … She told me about the books she wanted to write one day, when she had enough money to quit the candy shop.

Sally glanced at Percy, wondering if she ever did.

Annabeth caught her eye. “You did.” She said. “You’re writing your first book at the moment. Looks like a good one.”

Eventually I got up the nerve to ask about … my father … I figured she would tell me the same things she always did, but I never got tired of hearing them.

“None of us do.” Annabeth said quietly. Her father’s stories about Athena had stopped about the time her stepmother appeared, but she still cherished each and every one of them.

Luke stared at the floor. His mother had never told him stories. She just … Well, better not to think about it.

‘He was kind, Percy,’ she said. … You have his black hair, you know, and his green eyes.’

“You do look a lot like your dad.” Annabeth commented, ignoring the soft grumbling of her stomach. Ever since the book had mentioned Sally’s blue cake, she had felt a little bit hungry.

So had everyone else who had ever eaten Sally’s cooking.
Mom fished a blue jelly bean out of her candy bag. … He would be so proud.’ What was so great about me? A dyslexic, hyperactive boy with a D+ report card, kicked out of school for the sixth time in six years.

“A lot.” Sally said fiercely. “That is only a small part of you, Percy. And it’s about average for demigods.”


Percy turned a little red. His future self wasn’t much better.

He was more comfortable around his father, for obvious reasons, but they didn’t exactly have a lot of heart-to-hearts.

Annabeth squeezed his hand.

‘How old was I?’ … He had to leave before you were born.’

“I did visit.” Poseidon confirmed, meeting Zeus’s glare. “I couldn’t linger though – as Hermes said, the longer we stay, the more of a target you are.”

Nico nudged Percy, who glanced at the book and pulled a face. “Um, Dad? I know that. And I know that you did what you could. On saying that, I’m twelve and twelve-year-olds don’t always have the …”

“We all think and say some things that might not be true.” Annabeth interrupted, taking pity on him. “However angry we get, we do all love our parents.”

I tried to square that with the fact that I seemed to remember … I resented him … for not having the guts to marry my mom. He’d left us, and now we were stuck with Smelly Gabe.

“Darling, that was never an option.” Sally said gently. “I knew that when we met.”

“We all know that.” Annabeth said, remembering the scene the sirens had shown her. “But every child wants their parents to be together, however unrealistic that may be.”

“Besides,” Hera said, glaring at Poseidon, “just like certain others in this room, he is already married.”

“Amphitrite loves me.” Percy said flatly. “I’m her favourite since Theseus … possibly more, since he dumped Ariadne and was a general dick about it. She doesn’t have a problem with it as long as Dad doesn’t try to order her around.”

“Which I do not.” Poseidon finished, not rising to Hera’s anger. “I realise that you and I have differing opinions on this, Hera, but as long as Amphitrite and I are both happy … You’ve met her?”

“Yeah.” Percy said slowly. “First meeting wasn’t amazing, but then I had just been … It was hectic, let’s put it that way.”

‘Are you going to send me away again?’ … ‘Because you don’t want me around?’ I regretted the words as they were out.

Annabeth released Percy’s hand and he mourned the loss for as long as it took her to hit him over the head.
“Ow! What was that for?”

“For being an idiot,” Annabeth said without any real heat. “Thinking your mother didn’t want you around. Honestly.”

“I said I regretted the words.” Percy protested, rubbing the back of his head. It didn’t hurt. It probably wouldn’t ever again, after his dip in the Styx, but he couldn’t let anyone else know that. Besides, his girl had quite the arm on her. He almost felt sorry for Luke.

My mom’s eyes welled with tears. … a flood of memories came back to me … During third grade, a man … had stalked me on the playground … no one believed me when I told them that … the man only had one eye, right in the middle of his head.

Percy tilted his head thoughtfully as some of the campers gasped. “Did you send him to keep an eye on me, Dad?”

“I didn’t.” Poseidon admitted. “He may have recognised you though.”

Percy glanced at the campers and rolled his eyes. “Come on, guys. Cyclopes are sons of Poseidon too, remember? They’re technically my half-brothers.”

“Not something you usually point out though.” Malcolm said fairly.

Percy shrugged. “Well, I either acknowledge them all or deny them all. And Tyson’s awesome.”

Annabeth smiled. “Tyson’s a sweetheart.”

There were probably a lot of people who wanted to know what or who Tyson was, but no one was going to ask.

Before that … a teacher accidentally put my down for a nap a cot that a snake … I’d somehow managed to strangle to death with my meaty, toddler hands.

“Didn’t Hercules do something like that?” Ares asked.

“I think so.” Percy said slowly. “But …”

“Percy has issues with Hercules.” Thalia said with a fond smile.

“Why?” Travis asked.

“Yeah, he’s like the greatest hero of them all!” Connor added.

“Let’s just say I met someone who knew him.” Percy said. “Several people who knew him. People who helped him with his quests and were abandoned without thanks or aid, even when he’d promised it.” He glanced at Artemis, who looked in turn at Thalia, who nodded.

So he was talking about Zoe.

That was interesting.

In every single school, something creepy had happened … I knew I should tell my mom … about my weird hallucination that I had sliced my maths teacher into dust with a sword.

“You really should.” Katie said, frowning.
Travis nudged her. “In case you hadn’t noticed, Katie-Kate, this has already happened. For both of
them.”

But I couldn’t make myself tell her. I had a strange feeling the news would end out trip to
Montauk, and I didn’t want that.

Percy sighed. “I was selfish.”

“You were human.” Annabeth said fairly. “It’s not like anyone had told you the truth. It’s not like
you knew that out there in the middle of nowhere, there was a flashing neon sign above your head.”

“Thanks, Wise Girl.” Percy said. “That makes me feel much better.”

‘I’ve tried to keep you as close to me as I could … But there’s only one other option, Percy …
A summer camp.’

Lee chuckled. “It does sound strange, put like that, doesn’t it?”

“That’s how you knew the number.” Chiron said. “You’d had it since he was a baby.”

Sally nodded. “I knew that one summer, I’d have to make the call. I just kept telling myself that
nothing had really happened. One more year.”

My head was spinning. Why would my dad … talk to my mom about a summer camp? And
… why hadn’t she ever mentioned it before?

“You knew, didn’t you?” Percy asked. “You knew there’d been an attack.”

“I didn’t want to admit it.” Sally said. “But I think I did. Your father told me that it tended to start at
around twelve.”

‘I’m sorry, Percy. … It might mean saying goodbye to you for good.’

“I still don’t understand that.” Percy admitted.

“Some kids stay at camp all year.” Annabeth explained. “Some of us choose to because we haven’t
got anywhere else to go, or because … because we think we don’t. But some of us don’t have a
choice. It’s too dangerous otherwise.”

“Yeah, or hell hounds invade your English exam.” Percy added, to horrified gasps.

Nico rolled his eyes. “It was Mrs O’Leary; she wanted to play fetch.”

“I didn’t say it was dangerous.” Percy said. “But everyone else saw a poodle. I’m now the kid
whose poodle followed him to school.” He caught sight of everyone else’s shocked faces. “Oh yeah,
I managed to inherit a pet hell-hound. She helps protect camp. She’s not a threat.”

“Unless you count the threat of getting licked to death.” Annabeth muttered. She cleared her throat.
“I’m sure the story will be in the books. Nico, if you would?”

‘For good? … That night I had a vivid dream.

“Oh no.” Annabeth sighed. “Here we go.”

“Demigods get special dreams.” Thalia explained to Percy, who looked bewildered. “They’re not the
future or anything … at least I don’t think they are, but they do tend to be very … enlightening.”

“As long as you know what you’re looking for.” Percy added.

Annabeth frowned. “Mine aren’t that bad.”

“You haven’t gone on any quests yet.” Thalia said kindly. “Plus, ours are generally worse because we’re more powerful.”

It was storming … a white horse and a golden eagle, were trying to kill each other at the edge of the surf.

“Our fathers.” Thalia and Percy concluded with a sigh.

The eagle … a monstrous voice chuckled somewhere beneath the earth, goading the animals to fight harder.

Athena frowned.

“Hades …” Zeus said warningly.

“Actually Father,” Athena said, before Hades could protest, “that doesn’t make sense. After all, Nico was just saying how horribly crowded the Underworld is – a fight that bad between the two of you would just cause more deaths.”

“Well, it must be Hades.” Poseidon said. “Who else beneath the earth would goad us on?”

“I can think of one person.” Percy murmured.

I ran towards them … I saw the eagle dive down, its beak aimed at the horse’s wide eyes … I woke with a start.

“See, you already recognised him.” Thalia said. “I’d also like to point out that my dad was going to win.”

“No!” Nico snapped, when Percy opened his mouth. “We are not having that argument. The last time you two had an argument …”

“… had nothing to do with our fathers.” Percy pointed out.

Nico glared at him. “I don’t care, you nearly killed each other!”

“We did not.” Thalia disagreed.

“Well, you tried.” Nico said.

“We were not trying to kill each other.” Percy said. “Seriously injure, maybe – OW!” His protest was marginally late, but no one seemed to notice.

Annabeth lowered her hand, glaring at him. “That’s not funny.”

“Yes it was.” Thalia said, grinning. “Look, Percy and I are both very similar people – didn’t you tell him we’d be best friends or worst enemies?”

“Yes.” Annabeth said, frowning. “And I genuinely don’t know which it is.”
“We’re family.” Percy said. “Sometimes we fight. Sometimes it gets out of hand.”

“Out of hand.” Nico muttered. “There’s a clearing in the woods that didn’t used to be there.”

“Okay, it got a lot out of hand.” Thalia said with a shrug. “We fixed it.”

“Wouldn’t it be nice,” Hestia said, “if you two could get along that well as well?”

Zeus and Poseidon both flinched under her stare.

After a few seconds, Nico took pity on his uncles and began again.

**Outside, it was really storming … With the next thunderclap, my mom woke … ‘Hurricane.’**

“Smart woman.” Athena said, her attention returning to the book.

**I knew that was crazy … I head a distant bellow … that made my hair stand on end.**

Percy grimaced, running a hand over his hair. “That wasn’t literal either.”

“A bellow?” Poseidon repeated. “What did you send now?!” With the constant fighting between him and his brother, he hadn’t exactly been keeping a close eye on what had been happening with his son.

**Then a much closer noise … Grover stood framed in the doorway … But … he wasn’t exactly Grover.**

Annabeth frowned. “What do you mean ‘he wasn’t exactly Grover’?”

“He wasn’t disguised anymore.” Percy explained. “Excuse me for not expecting a satyr at the door.”

‘Searching all night,’ he gasped. … What didn’t you tell me?’

Sally shivered. She’d known that Grover was watching over Percy at school, but he shouldn’t have been turning up during the summer.

**I was frozen … ‘O Zeu kai alloi theoi!’ he yelled.**

“Language, Grant.” Mr D snapped.

Grover flinched. “S-Sorry sir.”

‘It’s right behind me! … Grover didn’t have his trousers on … and where his legs should be …

“That explains that chapter title.” Connor said, sounding disappointed. “It’s not nearly as exciting as I’d hoped.”

**My mom looked at me sternly … her face deathly pale in the flashes of lightning.**

“It was like every nightmare I’d ever had come true.” Sally whispered, itching to grab her son and hold him tight. Her face paled further when she remembered the rest of the night, the car exploding, then whatever Percy had gone through after she … disappeared.

And his future self was about to relive it.
She grabbed her purse … Grover ran for the Camaro – but he wasn’t running, exactly … Because where his feet should be, there were no feet. There were cloven hooves.

“Well, it took you long enough.” Thalia said.

“Well, I’m sorry if I didn’t know satyrs existed before that.” Percy retorted.

“Could we maybe have something to eat?” Annabeth asked. “They get grouchy when they’re hungry.”

“It is too early for lunch,” Hera began, getting some groans from Hermes and Apollo, “but,” she added, glaring at them, “I’m sure we can have a snack.”

“Leave it to me.” Hestia said with a smile.

As she left, Poseidon allowed himself to look at Sally for the first time, only to do a double take. “Sally … why are you wearing a nightdress?”
“It is an interesting fashion statement.” Aphrodite remarked, eyeing it dubiously.

“Well …” Sally said, trying to figure out how to word it. “You just heard that I didn’t have a chance to get dressed and something happened … on the way to camp … and I got … lost.”

Poseidon froze, his mind ticking over what had happened that morning, turning to glare at Hades. “What did you do?!”

Hades shrugged, trying to pretend he wasn’t a little cowed by his brother’s anger. “I brought her here.”

“Before that.” Poseidon hissed.

“Oh, for Olympus’ sake!” Aphrodite cried. “The poor girl is sitting there in a nightgown and you two are arguing over whose fault it is!”

“That’s not exactly …”

“Come with me, dear; we’ll find you something nicer.” Aphrodite said, vanishing in a puff of pink smoke and taking Sally with her.

“Relax.” Percy said quietly to his younger self, who looked worried. “Mom’ll be fine. You’re much better off with her giving you a makeover than messing with your love life.”

Amazingly, when they returned, Sally hadn’t changed all that much, aside from designer jeans and a blouse. The few strands of grey in her hair had disappeared, but she had managed to get away with leaving it down, dark curly locks falling over her shoulders. She was wearing a very light dusting of make-up, which also served to make her look much younger.


“Thank you sweetheart.” Sally said, blushing a little. It had been a little exhausting, not to mention overwhelming, but at least she wasn’t in her nightdress anymore.

Hestia reappeared at that moment, along with some bowls of chips and carrot sticks.

Nico held up the book, helping himself. “Who wants it?”

“I may as well take it.” Luke said, surprising everyone. Aside from his revelation that he had blamed himself for Thalia’s death before Kronos convinced him to switch that blame to the gods, he had been silent.

“Alright.” Nico said, handing him the book.

Luke turned to the next chapter.

Chapter Four

My Mother Teaches Me Bullfighting
Poseidon stiffened, silently praying that it wasn’t the monster he thought it was.

We tore through the night … I didn’t know how my mom could see anything, but she kept her foot on the gas.

“Only way to drive.” Ares said approvingly.

“Only way to wreck your bike, you mean.” Hephaestus grumbled.

Aphrodite patted his hand in commiseration, much to his surprise.

Every time there was a flash of lightning, I looked at Grover… the smell was one I remembered … The smell of a wet barnyard animal.

Silena wrinkled her nose and Grover rolled his eyes.

“Thanks.”

All I could think to say was, ‘So, you and my mum … know each other?’ … ‘… she knew I was watching you.’

“Chiron came to see me at the beginning of the school year.” Sally explained quietly, her eyes fixed on the future version of her son. “I already knew, of course, but he told me they were going to put a couple of people in the school just to be safe.”

‘Watching me?’ …

‘That doesn’t matter right now.’ …

‘… From the waist down, my best friend is a donkey –’

“You’re lucky you didn’t get trampled for that.” Annabeth informed him, her worry making her voice sharper.

She, after all, was the one who had nursed Percy back to health.

Grover let out a sharp, throaty ‘Blaa-ha-ha!’ … ‘I’m a goat from the waist down.’

“I thought it didn’t matter.” Chris said.


‘You just said it didn’t matter.’ … ‘So you admit there was a Mrs Dodds!’

“Would you let it go with the Mrs Dodds?!” Thalia sighed.

“I spent half a school year thinking I was going mad.” Percy pointed out. “Wouldn’t you be relieved if you found out you weren’t?”

Thalia conceded his point with a nod.

‘Of course.’ … ‘… You started to realise who you are.’

“Not really.” Percy said. “I was still seriously confused when I got to camp.”
“Subconsciously.” Grover elaborated.

‘Who I – wait a minute, what do you mean?’ … Whatever was chasing us was still on our tail.

Poseidon had a feeling he knew who was chasing them. If he was right, he was not going to be happy.

‘Percy,’ my mom said …

‘… Who’s after me?’

‘Just the Lord of the Dead and a few of his blood-thirstiest minions.’

“Grover!” Chiron chided.

Grover winced. “Sorry, Percy.”

‘Grover!’ … I could never dream up something this weird.

“I don’t know.” Thalia said thoughtfully. “Your brain does work in … interesting ways sometimes.”

My mom made a hard left. …

‘Where are we going?’ I asked. …

‘The place your father wanted to send you.’

Some of the campers smiled, thinking about camp, but they were all too tense – even Clarisse. They’d all heard about Percy’s encounter before he arrived, but only through the rumour mill.

‘The place you didn’t want me to go.’ …

‘Because some old ladies cut yarn.’

‘… They only do that when you’re about to … when someone’s about to die.’

“Nice save.” Will said.

‘Whoa. You said “you”.’ …

‘I meant you, like “someone”. Not you, you.’

“No, of course not.” Connor said.

‘Boys!’ my mom said. … I got a glimpse of … a dark fluttering shape now lost behind us in the storm.

Persephone gave her husband another glare.

‘What was that?’ … I found myself leaning forward in the car, anticipating, wanting us to arrive.

“That’s ‘cause Camp’s awesome!” Travis cheered.

“Demigod’s are drawn to Camp.” Annabeth explained to Percy. “It helps us get there if there aren’t
any satyrs around."

Outside, nothing but rain and darkness … I thought about Mrs Dodds … my limbs went numb from delayed shock.

Percy made a soft noise of surprise. “Okay, that’s weird.”

Thalia smirked. “You can’t feel your arms and legs, can you?”

“No.” Percy said, poking one of his arms. Or trying to, at least. He couldn’t actually get his limbs to cooperate.

She really hadn’t been human. She’d meant to kill me.

Sally shivered.

Then I thought about Mr Brunner … the hair rose on the back of my neck.

Percy groaned. The feeling returned back to his limbs, but the back of his neck was still prickling. “Here we go.”

There was a blinding flash, a jaw-rattling boom!, and our car exploded.

Everyone braced themselves looking at Percy, but he shook his head. “Nothing.”

Luke glanced at the next line. “It’s because you haven’t described the pain yet. Should I skip the next sentence?”

“You can’t.” Hestia said sadly. “The Fates made it clear that all the books were to be read.”

Percy nodded, setting his jaw. “Just do it, Luke.” The fact that Luke wanted to skip it, to spare him the pain almost made up for it.

I remember feeling weightless, like I was being crushed, fried and hosed down all at the same time.

Percy curled in on himself with a strangled groan, his insides twisting dangerously. It had been so long since he had actually been able to feel pain. “Keep going.” He gasped out.

I peeled my forehead off the back of the driver’s seat … The car hadn’t really exploded.

Percy relaxed, straightening up. “It’s gone.”

“So the pain lasts as long as the description.” Annabeth concluded, white-faced. “Which means that even if it does affect the rest of us, it shouldn’t be as bad as it is for you, because these are your memories.”

“Are you calling me unobservant?” Percy asked, his head still spinning.

Annabeth shrugged with a small smile, letting him guide the subject into safer waters. “You said it, not me.”

We’d swerved into a ditch … Lightning.

“Zeus!” Poseidon roared.
“You broke the oath!” Zeus snapped.

“So did you, you don’t see me drowning Thalia!”

Percy sighed, picking up the bowl of chips. “This could take a while. Want one?”

Thalia took the offered bowl. “Thanks.”

“Stop.” Hestia said softly.

Zeus and Poseidon fell silent.

“You are both in the wrong.” Hestia said. “But, Zeus, he is a child. You know the pain you went through when Thalia died. Why do you wish this on your brother also?” When she received no answer, she turned back to the fire. “Luke, continue please.”

That was the only explanation … ‘Grover!’ … Even if you are half barnyard animal, you’re my best friend and I don’t want you to die!

There were a few nervous snickers, but no one spoke.

Then he groaned, ‘Food,’ and I knew there was hope.

Grover blushed and a few more people laughed.

‘Percy,’ my mother said … I saw a figure … His upraised hands made it look like he had horns.

“No.” Poseidon whispered. “You sent him?”

“I thought it was fitting.” Hades said. “After all, wasn’t it you who made Pasiphae fall in love with that bull in the first place?”

That shut his brother up quickly, a pained look crossing his face.

He had. And now here was a second of his sons going head to head with the result.

I swallowed hard … I looked up desperately at the hole in the roof … the edges were sizzling and smoking.

“Don’t climb out that way,” Annabeth whispered.

“Thankfully,” Percy said, “I didn’t.”

‘Climb out the passenger’s side! … Do you see that big tree?’

“Oh, and I’m finally mentioned.” Thalia remarked, confusing some of the newer campers.

‘What?’ … Mom, you’re coming too.’

“She can’t cross the boundary line.” Hera told him. “No mortal can.”

“It’d be nice if they could.” Katie said wistfully. “Even if it’s only for one day. I know my dad would like to see what I do at Camp.”

The agreement of some of the other campers caused Chiron to look thoughtful. Maybe some kind of
parents’ day towards the end of summer wouldn’t be a bad idea. At the very least it would help bridge some of the gaps between Camp and their mortal lives.

Her face was pale … The man … kept coming towards us … the points that looked like horns …

“They really are horns.” Thalia said, patting Percy on the head. “Good job.”

“Give me a break, I was twelve.” Percy grumbled, batting her hand away. “And I hadn’t spent the last year or so fighting monsters.” He added, anticipating her next argument.

Thalia considered this. “Fair enough.”

‘He doesn’t want us,’ my mother told me … ‘… Go. Please.’

I got mad, then … at the thing with horns that was lumbering towards us … like a bull.

“Oh, you’ll get there.” Annabeth sighed.

Percy threw his arms up in frustration, but didn’t bother arguing. Okay, so he had been a little slow in cottoning on. But could anyone really blame him?

I climbed across Grover … I scrambled outside, dragging Grover from the car … I couldn’t have carried him very far if my mom hadn’t come to my aid.

“Thanks Ms Jackson.” Grover mumbled.

“I knew Percy wouldn’t leave either of us.” Sally said. “I figured it was better to help. I didn’t really want to leave you there either.”

Together, we draped Grover’s arms over our shoulders … I got my first clear look at the monster … He wore no clothes except underwear – I mean, bright white Fruit-of-the-Looms …

The Stolls sniggered. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.” Percy confirmed.

… which would have been funny except for the top half of his body … But he couldn’t be real.

The other campers, with the exception of Luke and Annabeth, were just grateful that their heritage had been quietly explained by a satyr. Okay, there had been monsters involved, but nothing this bad, and they had back-up.

I blinked the rain out of my eyes. ‘That’s –’

‘Pasiphae’s son,’ my mother said.

“Oh, well done!” Athena said, smiling.

‘I wish I’d known how badly they want to kill you. … Names have power.’

“And we still had to have that conversation?” Annabeth asked.

Percy shrugged.
The pine tree was still way too far … The bull-man hunched over our car … we were only about fifteen metres away.

Poseidon felt almost sick with worry. They would never make the boundary in time.

‘Food?’ Grover moaned … Doesn’t he see us?’ … he’ll figure out where we are soon enough.’

“Move.” Silena murmured, twisting the bottom of her shirt in her hands.

As if on cue, the bull-man bellowed in rage. He picked up Gabe’s Camaro … and threw it down the road … Not a scratch, I remembered Gabe saying.

“Oops.” Nico said innocently.

Luke smiled – the first proper smile Annabeth could remember seeing from him since … Well, since Thalia died, really.

Oops.

Nico grinned proudly. There were definitely worse people to be like.

‘Percy,’ my mom said. … ‘I’ve been worried about an attack for a long time.

“You knew he would come?” Hera asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Not him exactly, no.” Sally admitted. “But I knew something would. I read up on as many monsters as I could, made sure I knew what to do if they came.”

I should have expected this. I was selfish, keeping you near me.’

Mr D would have said something, but Poseidon’s glare stopped him.

‘Keeping me near you? … Another bellow of rage … He’d smelled us.

Poseidon stopped glaring at Dionysus and returned to looking worriedly between Percy and Sally. Obviously they both survived, but that didn’t mean they hadn’t been hurt.

The pine tree was only a few more metres … ‘Go, Percy! Separate! Remember what I said.’

“Listen to her.” Persephone whispered.

I didn’t want split up, but I had the feeling she was right … He lowered his head and charged … I jumped to the side.

Poseidon let out a sigh of relief.

The bull-man stormed past me … and turned … towards my mother, who was setting Grover down in the grass.

His relief quickly vanished, his gaze fixing on Sally, who kept her eyes on her son.

We’d reached the crest of the hill … I could see … the lights of a farmhouse … We’d never make it.

“Run.” Apollo said. “You and Grover are the only ones who can cross the line. And there are people
there who can help.”

“But I didn’t know.” Percy said softly. “I still had no idea what was going on.”

The bull-man grunted … ‘I can’t go any further. Run!’

Hera beamed. This was a mother.

But I just stood there, frozen in fear … His hand shot out and grabbed her … as she struggled, kicking and pummelling the air.

Poseidon began to rise from his throne, his glare fixed on Hades.

‘Mom!’ … ‘Go!’

“And she’s still trying to save you.” Hera murmured.

Percy pressed his shoulder against his mother’s, reassuring himself that she was still there, and she smiled down at him.

Then, with … a blinding flash, and she was simply … gone.

“Gone.” Hades protested. “Not dead. She’s here, isn’t she? All’s well that ends well.”

“That is beside the point.” Zeus said, clearly siding with Poseidon.

“You can’t really take sides on this point.” Nico said, glaring at him. “You killed my mother.”

“That’s enough.” Hestia said, once again the calming force. “I will not have fighting in this room, brothers, you will take it outside after this chapter if you must. And Nico makes an excellent point. Not a single one of you is faultless.”

‘No!’

Anger replaced my fear … the same rush of energy I’d got when Mrs Dodds grew talons.

Annabeth looked thoughtful. “Was that anger? Or was it the rain?”

Percy shrugged. “Bit of both, maybe?”

The bull-man bore down on Grover … I stripped off my red rain jacket.

“Oh, Percy.” Sally sighed.

‘HEY!’ … Ground beef!’

Annabeth buried her face in her hands. “Seaweed Brain, we need to do something about your brain-to-mouth filter.”

“What’s wrong with it?” Percy asked.

Annabeth lifted her head to glare at him. “You don’t have one!”

‘Raaaarrrr!’ … I had an idea – a stupid idea, but better than no idea at all.

“And nothing’s changed.” Thalia said.
I put my back to the big pine tree …

“Oh, thanks!” Thalia said, rolling her eyes.

“Well, I didn’t know, did I!” Percy asked.

…and waved my red jacket … thinking I’d jump out of the way at the last moment.

“It’s not a bad plan.” Athena conceded. “But he seems to have already learned his lesson on that front.”

But it didn’t happen like that … I leaped straight up … landing on his neck.

“That was the rain.” Percy said with certainty.

How did I do that? … the monster’s head slammed into the tree …

Thalia gasped suddenly, doubling over.

“Thalia?” Annabeth asked. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah.” Thalia said, breathing heavily. “Just got winded, that’s all. Wasn’t expecting to get anything while I was a tree.”


Thalia looked at him, reading his guilt. After all, he was the one who poisoned her before the Golden Fleece was found, which would make the next book profoundly uncomfortable for her. “Just read. I’m fine.”

Luke didn’t look convinced, but he found his place again regardless.

…and the impact nearly knocked my teeth out.

Percy rubbed his jaw.

The bull-man staggered … the smell of rotten meat burned my nostrils.

Percy blinked, trying to keep phantom rain out of his eyes and trying not to throw up at the smell that returned to him.

The monster shook himself … Grover started groaning … I wanted to yell … if I opened my mouth I’d bite my own tongue off.

“Then keep it shut.” Sally murmured, her face pale. She had given up putting on a brave face and was clinging to Percy’s hand.

‘Food!’ … I got both hands around one horn … then – snap!

“Snap?” Ares repeated. “What snapped? No way he managed to break the thing off.”

The bull-man screamed and flung me through the air … My head smacked against a rock.

As Sally gave a gasp, Percy jolted forwards, muffling a grunt of pain at the sudden impact to his head.
Annabeth brushed a hand against the back of his head. “No lasting damage.”

When I sat up … I had a horn … the size of a knife.

Poseidon smirked at Ares. “You were saying.”

Ares slumped in his throne, scowling. “Kid got lucky.”

The monster charged … I drove the broken horn … under his furry rib cage.

“Very lucky.” Percy amended, blinking rapidly to clear his vision.

The bull-man roared … The monster was gone.

The campers cheered, causing Percy to blush, while his future self merely gave a small bow of acknowledgement.

The rain had stopped … my knees were shaking.

Percy’s smile faded, his legs growing weaker.

My head felt like it was splitting open.

He grimaced, letting his head fall back against the back of the couch.

I was weak and scared and trembling with grief.

Thalia frowned, patting his leg. “Just a little bit longer.” She murmured. “It should finish soon.”

I’d just seen my mother vanish … there was Grover … I wasn’t going to let him go.

Grover looked a little astounded. “Thanks Percy.”

“Don’t mention it.” Percy said with a weak smile. He may not have been literally reliving it the way his future self had, but that didn’t mean it was fun. He tightened his grip on his mother’s hand, reminding himself that she was here.

The last thing I remember is collapsing … a pretty girl, her blonde hair curled like Cinderella’s.

Annabeth blushed. “You’re right, that was flattering. You were half-unconscious though.”

Percy didn’t move or opened his eyes, but he brushed a hand against hers on the couch. “I was still accurate.”

They both looked down at me, and the girl said, ‘He’s the one. He must be.’

“And just what,” Athena asked, a little tartly, “did you mean by that?”

Annabeth met her mother’s gaze calmly. “I know about the prophecy.”

“What prophecy?” Malcolm asked, but no one answered him.

‘Silence, Annabeth,’ the man said. ‘He’s still conscious. Bring him inside.’

Luke looked up. “That’s the end.”
“What prophecy?” Malcolm repeated.

“Nothing that concerns any of you.” Chiron said sharply. “Annabeth found out about it by accident.”

“I wasn’t talking about that prophecy.” Annabeth said. “I was talking about the one you got, about my first quest.”

“And actually,” Percy said, lifting his head, the pain ending with the chapter, “the Great Prophecy might concern them. After all, things are going to change. How does that affect the prophecy?”

All heads turned to Apollo, who looked thoughtful. “I don’t know.” He admitted. “I’ve never encountered this before. We’d need the Oracle.”

“But the Oracle can’t leave the attic, can she?” Annabeth asked.

Percy, Nico and Thalia all shuddered.

“Oh, she can.” Thalia said grimly. “If she thinks someone needs to hear something, she can leave.” She could see Luke quietly speaking to Percy and a couple of the others, probably filling them in.

When he’d finished, Will frowned. “Has she always been a …?”

“A mummy?” Apollo finished. “No, she hasn’t. Normally, the Oracle moves from person to person. Once one person dies, someone else takes over. But that hasn’t happened in a long time and when someone tries …”

“Bad things happen.” Hermes said darkly.

“At least until the curse is broken.” Percy said. “Our Oracle now is …”

But he was interrupted, by a tentative knock at the door.

Chapter End Notes

People are either going to love me or hate me for this. I am not planning on this being a 'bashing' story, as far as I can help it (obviously I can't keep Future Luke from getting a bit bruised ... or Ares for that matter), but I have yet to meet a character I genuinely dislike ... although I haven't got all the way through Heroes of Olympus yet. So saying, there is NOT going to be any Rachel-bashing or (when I get there) Reyna-bashing, even though I ship Percabeth and Jasper.
Playing Pinochle with Horses

“Enter.” Zeus called.

The door swung open and the new arrival took a few steps inside before freezing with a startled squeak.

Annabeth glanced towards her and nudged her boyfriend. “Go on.”

Percy took a second to make sure that she meant it and left the couch to approach the visitor. “Do you know who I am?”

For a second, her trepidation cleared and was replaced by irritation. “Obviously.”

“Just making sure you’re from our time.” Percy said. “You know why you’re here?”

“I had a … a dream.” She said, her eyes darting along the line of gods. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.” Percy said, offering her his hand.

Taking it with a nervous smile, she allowed him to lead her to the assembled gods, where she curtseyed, still dressed in her school uniform.

“Everyone, this is Rachel Elizabeth Dare.” Percy said. “Our new Oracle.”

Annabeth greeted Rachel with a perfectly friendly smile and a hug, like they hadn’t been playing a kind of tug-of-war with Percy for the last year, and introduced her properly to Thalia and Nico, and then to Luke.

Rachel eyed him before turning to the crowd of campers and easily picking out his younger self. “Yes.” She told him firmly. “You should.”

Then she straightened her skirt and sat down beside Nico.

Hiding a smile, Apollo leaned towards her. “Rachel, do you know who I am?”

“Yes sir.” Rachel said. “You spoke to me when I became the Oracle.”

“That was a brave thing to do.” Apollo said.

“Not really.” Rachel said. “I knew I’d be alright. I’d seen it, you see. I’d seen what had happened before. A woman … and a baby, a little boy. I saw her try it and it went horribly wrong. But after … certain things happened … Chiron mentioned it to me. He mentioned that he was trying to get the curse lifted. And I … I knew.”

“How were you involved before?” Athena asked.

“I was a very clear-sighted mortal.” Rachel answered. “Percy and I had a few run-ins … Was the part about the books really a dream? Because I can never tell; my Oracle dreams sometimes get mixed up with real dreams, and I end up thinking that someone needs to go on a quest to recover a sword and a giant bunny rabbit.”

That broke the tension and several people chuckled.
“The books are real.” Athena told her, hiding a smile. “And you may be the ideal person to ask: what will happen with the Great Prophecy?”

“Which one?” Rachel asked. “The one the last Oracle had or the one I had?”

“The last one.” Percy said. “Because it’s already happened for us, but it hasn’t for them and if we change everything … Is it set in stone, or obsolete?”

“I don’t know.” Rachel admitted. “Hang on.” She rolled her shoulders and closed her eyes, taking several deep breaths.

Then, she spoke, her voice slow and calming:

“A half blood of the eldest gods
Shall reach sixteen against all odds
And see the world in endless sleep
The hero’s soul, cursed blade shall reap
A single choice shall end his days
Olympus to preserve or raze.”

She opened her eyes. “That one?”

Percy nodded, ignoring the horrified muttering among the campers. His younger self, in particular, looked horrified.

“When you say ‘raze’?” Malcolm asked shakily. “Do you mean r-a-z-e or r-a-i-s-e? Because one is significantly worse than the other.”

“First one.” Annabeth told him bluntly. “If it was the second, we wouldn’t really need a prophecy, would we?”

“So that’s why they took the oath.” Her younger self murmured. “To make sure the prophecy wouldn’t come true.”

Percy nodded. “So the prophecy holds then, Rach?”

Rachel rolled her eyes. “Percy, just be patient. You know I can’t pull something out like that on cue. I need some sort of …”

She doubled over with a gasp, before stilling and straightening up, her eyes glowing a brilliant green.

“The crooked stirs in dungeon deep
Would see the world in endless sleep
His pathway blocked by hero’s choice
And when all above have equal voice
A claim ne’er missed again and then
Peace overcomes the dark again.”
Her eyes flickered and she collapsed onto Nico, who yelped and caught her.

“She’ll be alright in a moment.” Percy assured his mother, who had jumped to her feet. “We’ve seen her do this before.”


Percy nodded his thanks and gently held it to Rachel’s lips as she came round. After a few sips, she was able to take it from him and gulp down the rest of it.

“Thanks.”

“What did that mean?” Katie asked eagerly.

Rachel raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know. When the Oracle talks through me, I don’t remember it.”

“I’ve got it.” Annabeth said, tearing out a sheet of paper from a notepad and handing it to her.

Rachel ran an eye down the lines and nodded. “Yeah, that’s an easy one.”

“Is it?” Apollo asked, half-amused, half-serious.

“Oh yeah.” Rachel said. “Then again, we have hindsight. This prophecy’s for you lot, not us. It’s telling you how to fix things.” She glanced at it. “Rhyming’s not amazing though. ‘Again’ and ‘then’?”

Percy shook his head. “So we’ll keep reading then?”

“What about the prophecy?” Zeus prompted. “You said you understood it.”

“I do.” Rachel said. “So do the rest from my time. But if we tell you what it means, you won’t want to believe us.”

Apollo and Hermes exchanged a look. Generally the clowns on the council, they tended to be overlooked, but neither of them was stupid.

Neither of them had missed the reference to something crooked in a ‘dungeon deep’.

Hermes thought back to Luke’s confession that he had blamed himself for Thalia’s death. Thalia had referenced someone talking to Luke … possibly getting inside his head …

Hermes made up his mind. He needed to talk to his son – both of them. Maybe talking to Thalia first would be a good idea.

“So are we midway through a chapter?” Rachel asked. “Or is it a new one?”

“It’s a new one.” Annabeth answered. “Do you want it?”


Percy gave her a brief rundown of the first four chapters and she turned to the fifth.

**Chapter Five**

*I Play Pinochle with a Horse*

Percy face-palmed. “Sorry!”
Unlike Grover, Chiron took this in good humour. “Not to worry, Percy. Most new campers are a little overwhelmed when they meet me.”

I had weird dreams full of barnyard animals. Most of them wanted to kill me. The rest wanted food.

“So what you’re saying is,” Thalia said, “even your normal dreams are weird.”

“That’s what I’m saying.” Percy agreed.

I must’ve woken up several times, but … I just passed out again.

Percy’s head dropped back against the couch again.

“Percy?” Annabeth called. She got no verbal response, but he squeezed her hand. “Keep going, Rachel, he’s okay.”

I remember lying in a soft bed, being spoon-fed … pudding.

His eyes slowly opened and a smile touched Percy’s lips as the taste returned to him.

The girl with curly blonde hair … scraped drips off my chin with the spoon.

“Oh, you were his nurse?” Aphrodite cooed.

“Some of the time.” Annabeth said, while her younger self blushed.

When she saw my eyes open, she asked, ‘What will happen at the summer solstice?’

Annabeth shook her head, her blush receding. “Can’t believe I thought you knew something.”

I managed to croak, ‘What?’ … ‘… We’ve only got a few weeks!’

“‘We’ haven’t got anything.” Athena said, a little sharply. “You don’t need to get involved, Annabeth. It’s dangerous.”

‘I’m sorry,’ I mumbled, ‘I don’t …’ … the girl quickly filled my mouth with pudding.

Rachel broke off with a giggle. “Well, that’s one way to shut you up.”

The next time I woke up, the girl was gone.

A husky blonde dude … stood in the corner … He had blue eyes – at least a dozen of them – on his cheeks, his forehead, the backs of his hands.

Hera smiled.

When I finally came around for good, there was nothing weird about my surroundings … The breeze smelled like strawberries.

Several of the campers sighed happily.

Percy took a deep breath. “That is really strange.” He remarked. “I know that I can’t smell strawberries, but … I can.”
There was a blanket over my legs … my mouth felt like a scorpion had been using it for a nest.

Percy gagged. “Why?!”

Thalia patted him on the shoulder, smirking.

My tongue was dry and nasty and every one of my teeth hurt.

“I hate myself.” Percy muttered.

“It’s only going to get worse.” Nico said.

Percy rolled his eyes. “Thanks.”

On the table next to me was a tall drink … with green straw and … a maraschino cherry.

“Nectar.” Apollo explained to Sally. “The pudding earlier was ambrosia.”

“Can mortals have that stuff?” Sally asked.

“Mortals can’t.” Apollo answered. “Demigods can have a little, but not too much.”

My hand was so weak I almost dropped the glass … Grover was leaning against the porch railing … Just plain old Grover.

Not the goat boy.

The Stolls snickered.

So maybe I’d had a nightmare … and we’d stopped here … for some reason.

“Ah, denial.” Hermes said. “Such a powerful force.”

And … he placed the shoe box in my lap.

Inside was a … bull’s horn … It hadn’t been a nightmare.

Sally smiled sadly, squeezing her son’s hand.

‘The Minotaur,’ I said.

“What did your mother tell you about names?” Hera asked sternly.

“Sorry.” Percy said.

“I still don’t understand that.” Percy admitted. “I mean, I get your names. Every time we say them, it’s like a prayer, so you hear us. But the monsters don’t hear us, do they?”

“It causes the Mist to fracture a little.” Annabeth explained. “Makes it easier for them to find you. And it’s almost like tempting fate.”

‘Um, Percy … You’ve been out for two days.

“Two days?” Sally repeated, staring at her son.

“I’m alright, Mom.” Percy assured her.
How much do you remember?’

‘My mom. Is she really …?’

He looked down.

“I’m sorry, Percy.” Grover said, a little miserably. “I hadn’t seen what happened. If I had, I might have known she wasn’t.”

“I don’t think it would have made me feel any better.” Percy said honestly.

I stared across the meadow … directly in front of us … the huge pine tree … Even that looked beautiful in the sunlight.

Thalia frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Percy sighed, but didn’t answer.

My mother was gone … Nothing should look beautiful.

“Oh.” Thalia murmured, her frown melting away.

‘I’m sorry,’ … I’m the worst satyr in the world.’

“No, you’re not.” Thalia said sternly. “You care. And that’s the most important thing.”

He moaned, stomping his foot so hard it came off.

“His foot came off?” Apollo repeated.

I mean, the Converse hi-top came off.

“Oh.” Apollo muttered. “That makes more sense.”

Artemis rolled her eyes.

The inside was filled with Styrofoam … ‘Oh, Styx!’ … Thunder rolled across the clear sky.

“Father,” Thalia said, “is that you or is it just a natural reaction to the word?”

Zeus looked thoughtful. “It isn’t me. The Styx is a powerful force in its own right. I hadn’t really considered it.”

“She hears things.” Hades said. “She is the bridge between life and death. It is not a name you use lightly.”

Thalia (and Rachel) took that to mean that it was a natural reaction, and the latter found her place again.

As he struggled to get his hoof back in … that settles it … my mom really had dissolved into yellow light.

Percy took a shaky breath. He wasn’t sure if he was literally reliving the grief or if he was just remembering it, but he could feel the ache deep inside him. Only Annabeth’s grip on his hand and Thalia’s on his shoulder kept him grounded.
I was alone … I would have to live with … Smelly Gabe?

“Absolutely not.” Sally said sharply. “If something ever happens to me, you’re going to Camp.”

“Nothing’s going to happen to you.” Percy vowed. “But okay.”

No, that would never happen … I would pretend I was seventeen and join the army.

Annabeth laughed. “Percy, you were not going to pass for seventeen. You were kind of a scrawny twelve-year-old.”
“I was nearly thirteen.” Percy protested without any real heat. “And the only real exercise I’d had was dodgeball in gym class.”

“What’s your excuse now?” Thalia asked with a grin.

Percy sniggered. “Walked into that one, didn’t I?”

“Yes you did.” Annabeth agreed, giving him a covert glance as she did. Swimming and sword-fighting (which he did throughout the school year at the weekends, not just at Camp) had worked wonders.

I’d do something … Grover … looked as if he expected to be hit.

“It wasn’t your fault.” Percy protested, though he was still a little put out by the previous discussion (he couldn’t figure out why his future self was so blasé about the whole thing).

I said, ‘It wasn’t your fault’

‘… I’m a keeper. At least … I was.’

“You aren’t leaving, are you?” Katie asked. She was quite fond of all the satyrs at Camp; she couldn’t imagine a single one of them disappearing.

“I might not have a choice.” Grover said glumly.

Chiron patted him on the shoulder. “You never know, Grover. Let’s just wait and see.”

‘But why …’ I suddenly felt dizzy … He helped me hold my glass … I was expecting apple juice.

“What does it taste like?” Sally asked curiously.

“It’s different for everyone.” Thalia explained. “It would only taste like apple juice if you really, really liked apple juice.”

It wasn’t that at all … It was chocolate-chip cookies … with the chips still melting.

Annabeth sighed. “Oh, your mom’s chocolate chip cookies. That doesn’t surprise me.” She paused. “I now really want some of those cookies.”

“They’re the best.” Nico agreed, a little dreamily.

Drinking it, my whole body felt warm … I felt as if my mom had just … told me everything was going to be okay.

Percy’s entire body relaxed, the residual taste of nectar sweeping through him and warming him
from the inside.

Before I knew it, I’d drained the glass … sure I’d just had a warm drink, but the ice cubes hadn’t even melted.

“That’s because it’s magic.” Annabeth said.

Percy hummed lazily. “Would never have guessed.”
Annabeth looked annoyed for all of a second before she laughed. “Wow, Seaweed Brain, you are out of it!”

“I normally don’t have time to appreciate nectar.” Percy said. “And I normally have it when I need an energy boost. Apparently, when you don’t need one, it acts the opposite.”

“Until you have too much, nectar will do what your body needs.” Athena said, including all of the children in her explanation. “In this case, it seems Percy needed to relax.”

“He was getting a little bit tense.” Thalia agreed.

‘Was it good?’ … ‘I should’ve let you taste.’

“Bad idea.” Hermes said. “Satyrs can’t drink nectar. It’d kill them.”

His eyes got wide … Chocolate-chip cookies … Homemade.’

Nico’s stomach growled slightly and he blushed.

Sally made a note to ask if there was a kitchen she could borrow. She didn’t mind whipping up some of her cookies for the children.

He sighed. ‘And how do you feel?’

‘Like I could throw Nancy Bobofit a hundred metres.’

Artemis huffed, but didn’t say anything. She didn’t like that girl. And that was saying something.

‘That’s good … I don’t think you should risk drinking any more of that stuff.’

“Is it dangerous?” Sally asked, concerned.

“Not as long as we don’t have too much.” Thalia answered. “We don’t need a lot anyway.”

‘What do you mean? … Chiron and Mr D are waiting.’

The campers settled down for what was bound to be a rather tedious conversation. After all, they all knew about Camp and what they were.

The porch wrapped all the way around the farmhouse.

My legs felt wobbly trying to walk that far.

Percy just sighed, smiling slightly when Annabeth bumped her leg against his.

Grover offered to carry the Minotaur horn … I wasn’t going to let it go.

Ares nodded approvingly. You always held on the spoils of war.
As we came around the opposite end of the house, I caught my breath … [description of the camp] … some of their horses had wings.

Sally sighed. “It sounds lovely.”

“I love it there.” Rachel said sadly. “I miss it.”

“We all do.” Percy said.

“You aren’t all year-rounders then?” Demeter asked. “You said it was September, but you arrived together …”

“It’s the first weekend of September.” Percy answered. “Friday evening to be exact. There’s … a lot of stuff going on at the moment, so Annabeth, Nico and I were at Camp for the weekend. That’s where we left from.”

Rachel sighed. “Unfortunately, I’m stuck at Clarion Ladies’ Academy,” she said the words with a falsely enunciated voice, “because my father has no idea.”

“To be fair, I’ve met your father.” Percy said. “You could get a prophecy in front of him and he probably wouldn’t notice.”

Down at the end of the porch, two men sat … The blonde-haired girl … was leaning on the porch rail next to them.

Annabeth shook her head. “Why do I get the feeling that I’m going to be reduced to my hair colour for the foreseeable future?”

The man facing me was small, but porky … I got the feeling this guy could’ve out-gambled even my stepfather.

With every word, Grover got paler and paler, gently but insistently pushing Percy behind Chiron.

Dionysus narrowed his eyes at Percy, who winced, but met his gaze.

Finally, he said, “I’m going to take that as a compliment, Peter.”

“Thank you sir.” Percy said, breathing a mental sigh of relief.

‘That’s Mr D … The girl, that’s Annabeth Chase … she’s been here longer than just about anybody.

Athena frowned. She knew her daughter had run away at seven, but had never found out why. When she had looked in on Frederick and his new family, they had seemed upset.

And you already know Chiron … ‘Mr Brunner!’ I cried.

“Seriously?” Thalia asked. “Grover just told you his name.”

Percy shrugged. “I was in shock.”

The Latin turned and smiled at me … He offered me a chair to the right of Mr D, who … heaved a great sigh … ‘ … don’t expect me to be glad to see you.’

Poseidon frowned.
As did most of the other gods actually.

“Dionysus, camp director means you are supposed to be welcoming to the children.” Hera said sternly.

Dionysus threw his hands up in exasperation. “It’s not like you like them! You can’t stand demigods.”

Hera paused, looking at the assembled half-bloods. Half of them were the result of affairs, the other half came from brief flings, neither of which she condoned as the goddess of marriage, and she had always hated half-bloods in principle. She ignored them when she met them, unless she needed something, but now that she considered it, she came to a rather startling conclusion.

She liked this group of children.

True, they were not all reverent and respectful, but they cared for one another, it was clear in the way they interacted.

Even Thalia was not what Hera had expected.

Then again, she had come to accept her husband’s godly children as part of her family. Was it really so hard to do it with demigods as well?

“No.” She said slowly, to everyone’s surprise. “I disagree with them on principal. I am the goddess of marriage, I do not agree with flings or affairs. But Persephone made an excellent point. It is not their fault. Maybe this is what the Fates wanted us to learn. So please begin treating the children a little better or we will find an alternative.”

Dionysus grumbled and fell silent.

‘Uh, thanks.’ … If Mr D was a stranger to alcohol, I was a satyr.

A few of the campers laughed nervously.

‘Annabeth?’ Mr Brunner called to the blonde girl.

“Seriously?” Annabeth asked, amused. “Grover’s introduced me, Chiron’s said my name and I’m still ‘the blonde girl’?”

She came forward … ‘… We’ll be putting him in cabin eleven for now.’

Luke sighed, scowling at the ground. It wasn’t fair on the kids that came in, scared and confused, to shove them in a tiny little corner with just enough space to curl up in, just because the gods couldn’t take responsibility for their own actions.

Annabeth said, ‘Sure, Chiron.’ … her eyes ruined the image.

“Meaning?!” Annabeth demanded, her younger self gaping at the book seemingly unsure whether to be flattered or outraged.

They were a startling grey … pretty, but intimidating too, as if she was analysing the best way to take me down in a fight.

“Meaning that.” Percy said simply.
“Oh.” Annabeth said, mollified, and settled back on the couch, her hand covering his again. “Thank you. And I was.”

“Oh course you were.” Percy said, with such fondness that Athena narrowed her eyes and his father raised an eyebrow.

Neither of them was quite certain what was going on between their children, but they weren’t sure they liked it.

She glanced at the Minotaur horn … I imagined she was going to say You killed a Minotaur! or Wow, you’re so awesome! or something like that.

Annabeth snorted. “In your dreams, Seaweed Brain.”

“You didn’t know her all that well, did you?” Thalia asked with a grin.

“Well, I had only just met her.” Percy pointed out.

Instead she said, ‘You drool when you sleep.’

A lot of people laughed at that, as Percy went bright red. “Thanks.”

“Sorry.” Annabeth whispered. “I didn’t know this would get read to everyone.”

Then she sprinted off down the lawn, her blonde hair flying behind her.

Aphrodite sighed. She could see the bond joining these two demigods. There were several in the room actually, most of them pale enough that they were only potential, but there were two she was particularly interested in.

Percy and Annabeth’s was bright and strong, so they had obviously acknowledged their feelings for one another (she couldn’t wait for the drama that would bring).

But there was also one joining Luke and Thalia, intriguing on two points.

First of all, Artemis’s Hunters never had bonds. They never even had potentials.

Not that Artemis would let Aphrodite anywhere near her sisters anyway, but she didn’t need to get close to see that.

It was one of the reasons she abided by Artemis’s wishes that she leave the Hunters alone – they were happy as maidens. They never got a pang of loneliness at night, they never wished for another being to hold, they never fell in love.

And that wasn’t the oath, it was just them.

But Thalia, Artemis’s lieutenant, had a bond, which, also intriguing, was frayed.

Dangerously frayed, but still there, clinging to existence.

Artemis seemed to notice her gaze and leaned towards her. “Leave my Hunter alone.”

“I’m not doing anything.” Aphrodite said honestly. “But look.” She lifted her mirror, allowing Artemis to see through the glass and see what she could.

She heard Artemis’s breath catch and the other goddess sat back. “We’ll talk later.”
'So,' I said … ‘… Mr D … does that stand for something?’

“It’s a relevant question.” Rachel said nervously, when several of the gods gave Percy stern looks. “He doesn’t know yet.”

Mr D stopped shuffling the cards … ‘Young man, names are powerful things. You don’t just go around using them for no reason.’

“Then explain why.” Poseidon said, giving his own glare to said gods.

‘Oh. Right. Sorry.’ …

‘… I’d hate to think I’ve wasted my time.’

Sally tutted. “You’re just confusing him now.”

‘House call?’

‘My year at Yancy Academy …’ ... I did have a fuzzy memory of there being another Latin teacher … he had disappeared and Mr Brunner had taken the class.

“That would be the Mist.” Nico said. “Also, is it common for schools to teach Latin?”

“Only the private ones.” Percy said. “And we need to get you into school.”

“Do I have to?” Nico whined.

“Yes.” Annabeth said firmly. “You can’t just play with dead people all day.”

‘You came to Yancy just to teach me?’ …

‘… you made it here alive, and that’s always the first test.’

Chris looked nervous. “Do … Do some people not make it to Camp alive?”

“No.” Thalia said quietly. “Some of us don’t.”

Her voice was so haunted that those who didn’t know the story didn’t attempt to ask.

Annabeth looked like she was about to cry and Malcolm put an arm around his sister’s shoulders.

‘Grover,’ … I didn’t know why he should be so afraid of a pudgy little man in a tiger-print Hawaiian shirt.

Percy buried his face in his hands. “I feel like I should apologise now for any descriptions I come up with in the privacy of my own mind.”

Poseidon hid a smile. “He has a point. He was not to know these thoughts would be broadcast.”

‘You do know how to play pinochle?’ … I was liking the camp director less and less.

Many of the campers shifted uncomfortably. They weren’t very fond of Mr D either.

‘Well … I would expect all civilised young men to know the rules.’
“None of them know the rules.” Dionysus grumbled.

“Um … pinochle hasn’t really been played by children in years.” Sally said hesitantly. “Most children wouldn’t know how to play it.”

‘I’m sure the boy can learn,’ Chiron said

‘Please,’ I said, ‘… why would you go to Yancy Academy just to teach me?’

Mr D snorted. ‘I asked the same question.’

“Dionysus …” Poseidon said warningly.

The camp director dealt the cards … Chiron smiled at me … He expected me to have the right answer.

“It always runs so much smoother if you can come to the answer yourself.” Chiron explained. “You are so much more likely to believe it.”

‘Percy,’ he said. ‘Did you mother tell you nothing?’

‘She said … She wanted to keep me close to her.’

‘Typical,’ Mr D said. ‘That’s usually how they get killed.

Poseidon and Hera both gave Dionysus a stern look.

Young man, are you bidding or not?’ … ‘I’m afraid our usual orientation film won’t be sufficient.’

“Wait!” Annabeth said, sitting up straight and dislodging her brother’s arm. “You didn’t watch the orientation film?”

“You have an orientation film?” Sally asked in amusement.


“And no.” Percy added.

“That explains so much.” Annabeth said, looking at Percy. “I’m sorry. I assumed that you’d watched it.”

Percy shrugged. “It’s okay. I got everything in the end.”

‘Orientation film?’ I asked.

‘No,’ Chiron decided. ‘Well, Percy. You know … that you have killed a Minotaur. No small feat, either, lad.

“No, it wasn’t.” Poseidon said proudly.

What you may not know is that … the Greek gods – are very much alive.’ … ‘Mr D,’ Grover asked timidly, ‘… could I have your Diet Coke can?’

The Stolls laughed.
‘Eh? Oh, all right.’ … ‘You’re telling me there’s such a thing as God.’


Percy groaned. “Can we just establish that I had no idea what was going on, so I’m probably about to be really disrespectful . . .”

“What else is new?” Annabeth muttered.

“… so can we not vaporise me please?” Percy finished, ignoring her.

‘Well, now,’ Chiron said. ‘God – capital G, God … We shan’t deal with the metaphysical … gods, plural … the immortal gods of Olympus. That’s a smaller matter.’

“Smaller?” Zeus repeated, glaring at Chiron.

“Not metaphysical.” Chiron elaborated.

Hera patted her husband’s hand. “Leave it.”

‘Smaller!’

‘Yes, quite. The gods we discussed in Latin class.’

‘Zeus,’ I said. ‘Hera. Apollo. You mean them.’

“Ha!” Apollo cried, grinning at his sister.

Artemis rolled her eyes. “You’re an idiot.”

And there it was again – distant thunder … ‘I would be less casual about throwing those names around, if I were you.’

“I learned.” Percy said, anticipating several more chapters of that warning being repeated.

‘But they’re stories,’ I said. ‘… what people believed before there was science.’

“Oh, bad move.” Malcolm said, wincing. He had said the same thing when he had first discovered his heritage.

‘Science!’ Mr D scoffed. ‘And tell me, Perseus Jackson –’

I flinched when he said my real name, which I never told anybody.

“Why did you name him Perseus?” Hera asked curiously. “Perseus was a child of Zeus.”

Sally blushed a little. “I know, but … He was also pretty much the only Greek hero that had a happy ending, who lived a long life and died of old age. Most of them go young.”

The gods looked at each other and had to admit that she was right.

‘- what will people think of your “science” two thousand years from now? … Oh, I love mortals … They think they’ve come so~o~o far … And have they, Chiron? Look at this boy and tell me.’
“Now that isn’t fair.” Athena said indignantly. A lot of those scientists had been her children, after all. “Mortals are doing the best they can with what they have. Admittedly their faith is on shaky ground, but they have discovered exceptional things.”

I wasn’t liking Mr D much, but there was something about the way he called me mortal, as if … he wasn’t.

“That is because I am not, Peter.” Dionysus said, disappearing behind a wine magazine.

Percy sighed, shaking his head with an almost affectionate smile. Mr D would never change.

It was enough to put a lump in my throat … ‘Percy,’ Chiron said, ‘you may choose to believe or not, but … immortal means immortal. Can you imagine that … Existing, just as you are, for all time?’

The campers seemed divided on whether or not that sounded good or not.

I was about to answer … that it sounded like a pretty good deal, but the tone of Chiron’s voice made me hesitate.

Annabeth glanced questioningly at Percy. If he thought it was a good idea then, why did he turn it down?

You. A little voice said in her head. He never finished before you kissed him. He turned it down for you.

“I think it sounds terrible.” He said, not looking at her. “Everyone you care about would get old and die around you.” He glanced up at the gods. “I guess that’s kind of why you tend to keep your distance from demigod kids, huh?”

“It certainly contributes.” Apollo agreed, gazing at his sons. “But we also have to follow the rules on that point.”

Hermes scowled, but didn’t say anything. He couldn’t say anything, given how he had kept Luke at such a distance to keep him safe.

‘You mean, whether people believed in you or not,’ I said

‘Exactly,’ Chiron agreed. ‘… What if … someday people would call you a myth, just created to explain how little boys can get over losing their mothers?’

“That’s not fair.” Sally said, frowning.

Chiron inclined his head in acknowledgement. “I needed to reach an emotional response. On that level, at least, he knew.”

My heart pounded … ‘I wouldn’t like it. But I don’t believe in gods.’

Annabeth and Thalia carefully shifted away from Percy, who rolled his eyes.

“Some friends you are.” He muttered.

‘Oh, you’d better,’ Mr D murmured. ‘Before one of them incinerates you.’

‘Grover said, ‘… He’s in shock.’
“Perfectly understandable.” Hera said, glaring at Dionysus.

“Did you put something in her drink this morning?” Hermes whispered to Apollo.

Apollo gave him a worried look. “I was hoping you did. She’s starting to scare me. Maybe she’s an automaton.”

“Boys!” Hera snapped, glaring at them.

They both shrank back.

“Definitely her then.”

“Yep.”

‘A lucky thing, too,’ Mr D grumbled … He waved his hand and a goblet appeared … and … filled itself with red wine.

“Dionysus!” Zeus growled, causing his son to flinch.

My jaw dropped, but Chiron hardly looked up.

‘Mr D,’ he warned, ‘your restrictions.’

… ‘Old habits! Sorry!’

“Old habits.” Zeus muttered. “I’m sure.”

More thunder… the wineglass changed into a fresh can of Diet Coke … Chiron winked at me.

‘Mr D offended his father a while back, took a fancy to a wood nymph who had been declared off-limits.’

“And just why was she off-limits?” Hera asked icily.

Zeus turned red and muttered something under his breath.

‘A wood nymph,’ I repeated … ‘Yes,’ Mr D confessed. ‘Father loves to punish me.

“I don’t.” Zeus argued.

“Really?” Mr D asked. “Then why is it that my punishment lasts for decades when the others barely get a slap on the wrist. They’ve all disobeyed you at least once.”

“He does have a point.” Athena said quietly.

The first time, Prohibition … The second time … he sent me here … “Work with youths rather than tearing them down.”

“I see you’re doing a wonderful job.” Poseidon muttered. Several of the others were bristling with irritation as well.

Wisely, Mr D stayed silent.

Ha! Absolutely unfair.’ … ‘And … your father is …’
‘Di immortals, Chiron,’ Mr D said. ‘I thought you taught this boy the basics.

“He did.” Percy said. “But I was in shock.”

My father is Zeus, of course.’ … ‘You’re Dionysus,’ I said. ‘The god of wine.’

“Difficult too.” Dionysus muttered. “Since I’m not allowed any.”

Zeus sighed and waved his hand, causing a goblet of wine to appear in front of his son. “You may have one a week.” He said when his Mr D’s jaw dropped.

“Thank you.” Dionysus said, taking a reverent sip and sighing with happiness.

Mr D rolled his eyes. ‘… Did you think I was Aphrodite, perhaps?’

The goddess in question wrinkled her nose. “Absolutely not.”

‘You’re a god.’

‘Yes, child.’

‘A god. You.’

He turned to look at me straight on, and I saw … a hint that this whiny, plump little man was only showing me the tiniest bit of his true nature … I knew that if I pushed him, Mr D would show me worse things … that would leave me wearing a straitjacket in a rubber room for the rest of my life.

“Dionysus.” Poseidon repeated warningly.

Mr D waved his hand. “I wouldn’t actually do it. It’s the easiest way to get them to believe.”

‘Would you like to test me, child?’ he said quietly.

‘No. No, sir.’

… He turned back to his card game. ‘I believe I win.’

“No way.” Hermes said. “You never win.”

‘Not quite, Mr D,’ Chiron said … ‘The game goes to me.’

“That sounds more like it.” Apollo said with a grin.

I thought Mr D was going to vaporize Chiron … but he just sighed … as if he were used to being beaten by the Latin teacher.

“I am.” Mr D said, not quite as gloomily as he would normally have done.

He got up, and Grover rose, too.

‘I’m tired,’ Mr D said. ‘… But first, Grover, we need to talk, again, about your less-than-perfect performance on this assignment.’

“But Percy got here safely.” Katie said, her voice trembling a little. “Grover succeeded, didn’t he?”
“That would be my argument.” Percy agreed, sounding annoyed. “However, the Council of Cloven Elders are words I won’t use in front of my mother and like to make life difficult.”

Grover’s face beaded with sweat … Mr D turned to me. ‘Cabin eleven, Percy Jackson.

“Do you know,” Percy said thoughtfully, “that is the first and only time he’s used my real name.”

“He must have used it since.” Sally said.

Percy frowned in thought. “Maybe. If he has, it’s few and far between. He never uses our real names. I think he does it on purpose.”

Sally gave Dionysus a sour look. He didn’t notice, absorbed as he was in the first drink he’d had years.

And mind your manners.’ … ‘Old Dionysus isn’t really mad … he can’t stand waiting another century before he’s allowed to go back to Olympus.’

“We’ve seen him return to Olympus though.” Annabeth said, a little nervously.

“He can attend council meetings.” Athena explained. “Other than that, he is barred.”

‘Mount Olympus,’ I said … ‘You mean the Greek gods are here? Like … in America?’

“Oh, Percy,” Thalia said sympathetically. “Do try to keep up.”

‘Well, certainly. The gods move with the heart of the West … The fire started in Greece. Then, as you well know … the heart of the fire moved to Rome, and so did the gods. Oh, different names, perhaps … but the same forces, the same gods.’

The gods exchanged looks. Their children would never know that they had other half-siblings from their Roman counterparts.

‘And then they died.’

‘Died? No. Did the West die? The gods simply moved … Wherever the flame was brightest, the gods were there … America is now the heart of the flame … And so Olympus is here. And we are here.’

“Wow.” Sally said, sounding a little dazed. “That was quite the speech.”

Rachel pouted at Percy. “I didn’t get a speech like that.”

“You got slashed at with a sword.” Percy pointed out.

“Exactly my point.” Rachel said turning back to the book.

“Wait.” Sally said. “What exactly are you two?”

“Complicated.” Rachel said. “I suppose I’m kind of his ex … girlfriend?”

“Except we were never actually dating.” Percy pointed out. “Just kind of … dancing around the subject and never actually committing.”

“And then I became the Oracle.” Rachel finished. “So we’re just friends. And happy that way.”
“They just have an interesting history.” Annabeth said, grinning. “You’ll see what we mean.”

“You weren’t that happy about it when it was happening.” Thalia murmured under her breath.

**It was all too much … ‘Who are you, Chiron? Who … who am I?’**

“You are such a drama queen.” Thalia said with a laugh.

**Chiron smiled … ‘Well, that’s the question we all want answered, isn’t it?’**

“I didn’t see that coming.” Annabeth admitted.

“You should have done.” Percy said. “I blew up a toilet.”

“You did what?” Sally asked.

“Not intentionally.” Percy said hastily. “It was an accident.”

“I can’t really blame you.” Annabeth admitted, much to her mother’s dismay.

**But for now, we should get you a bunk in cabin eleven … there will be toasted marshmallows at the campfire tonight, and I simply adore them.’**

“Mm, marshmallows.” Chris hummed.

**And then he did rise from his wheelchair … ‘What a relief,’ the centaur said. ‘I’d been cooped up in there so long, my fetlocks had fallen asleep. Now, come, Percy Jackson. Let’s meet the other campers.’**

Rachel looked up. “That’s the end of the chapter. And thank you for letting me get through that description in one shot.”

“Well, there wasn’t really much to say.” Annabeth said. “Aside from Percy calling Chiron a horse.”


Chiron smiled. “That’s quite alright, Percy. I would suggest to all of you, however, that you avoid that with any other centaur, because most aren’t used to young half-bloods the way I am. They would be quite insulted.”

The campers all nodded, looking serious, and Rachel held the book up. “Who wants it?”

“Lunch first.” Demeter said, waving a hand.

Thankfully, the table that appeared was *not* just filled with cereal, but all sorts of fruits and spread.

Hades smirked. “No pomegranates?”
As it happened, I got it done sooner than I expected. BTW, am I the only one who pictures Hermes as Richard Speight Jr? I know he didn't play him in the movies-I-won't-talk-about, but still.
Now where were we? Ah, yes. Hades intentionally pissing Demeter off. Good times.

Persephone gave her husband a glare. “Must you? You know she’s still sensitive!”

“I’m still sensitive!” Demeter shrieked. “I want to know why you aren’t!”

Persephone sighed. “Not in front of the children please, Mother. I happen to like pomegranate.” She glared at her husband. “See what you did?”

Nico leaned over to Thalia. “I guess calling her ‘Nana’ will go down badly right now.”

“I think it might be the last thing you ever do.” Thalia said, standing up to grab a plate.

Chiron ushered the campers over to get some food as well and everyone settled down to watch the Hades and Persephone Show.

Thalia had caught enough of it in the Underworld the previous winter, so she took a seat next to Luke and gave him a serious look. “Try to make it look like we’re not debating War and Peace over here.”


“What are the chances of your past self asking one of us for help?” Thalia asked.

“Low, I should think.” Luke said. “He might ask me for advice. He doesn’t know Nico, he’s only just met Percy, he won’t want to worry Annabeth, and he won’t want to face you again. He knows he hurt you by now.”

Thalia chose to ignore the guilt in his voice for now. “What are the chances of him going straight to a higher power – either my father or yours?”

Luke winced. “If he’s sensible, high.”

Thalia sighed. “I’m going to regret this. What are the chances of him running and starting early?”

Luke hesitated. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” Thalia repeated. “How do we find out?”

“You could talk to him?” Luke suggested. “He’ll listen to you.”

Thalia sighed. “Luke, you shouldn’t need me to tell you this is a really, really bad idea.”

Luke’s gaze dropped. “I know. I messed up, Thals; I’m sorry.”

Thalia’s hand brushed the bead on her necklace. She didn’t have a camp necklace, but she had that
summer’s bead, engraved with the names of the Titan War dead. “It’s going to take more than an apology, Luke. You were right about that.”

“Well, this looks serious.”

*Thalia* hastily stopped talking and both scrambled to stand for a second, before Hermes waved for them to stay where they were, dropping to sit beside them.

“One of you want to tell me what’s going on?”

*Thalia* purposely avoided *Luke*’s panicked eyes, silently urging him to talk to his father.

“Come on, son.” Hermes said quietly. “I’m not stupid.”

*Luke* seemed to fold in on himself. “I messed up, Dad. I let someone get inside my head and I did some stupid, *awful* things and if my past self doesn’t fix things …”

“It’s going to kill him.” Hermes finished heavily.


Hermes gazed across the room at the younger version of his son, the oldest camper there, making sure the other campers were all alright, even the other counsellors. “I knew you had a dark fate ahead of you. I was hoping that staying away would spare you.”

*Thalia* heard *Luke* swallow hard and let her knee bump against his in silent support.


“No, you were fourteen,” Hermes said with a weak smile. “All teenagers say things like that, I’m told.” He stood up, ruffling *Luke*’s hair. “This evening, you and I will tackle your younger self. See if we can talk him round. Okay?”


As Hermes left, *Thalia* gave *Luke* a genuine smile. “That is how you’re going to make up for this.” She said quietly. “And, for the record, I want what you did to be enough. I’m not trying to be stubborn.”

“I know.” *Luke* said. “I don’t blame you, Thalia. It was all I could do to stop him, but I never once thought it would make up for what I did. Annabeth thought it was, and I told her I’d try for rebirth, but … I never believed I deserved Elysium.”

*Thalia* gave him a considering look, as the fire began burning brighter, Hestia’s way of calling everyone back to the reading circle. “Oddly enough, I think I believed you did.”

When everyone was settled again, Chiron picked up the book. “I will read the next chapter.”

**Chapter Six**

*I Become Supreme Lord of the Bathroom*

Clarisse scowled daggers at Percy, who tried to ignore her.

Once I got over the fact that my Latin teacher was a horse … I did not trust Chiron’s back end the way I trusted his front.
Once again, Percy covered his face with his hands. “Sorry.” He said over the stifled giggles.

We passed the volleyball pit. Several of the campers nudged each other … ‘That’s him.’

“What were they talking about?” Nico asked. “They can’t all have known about the prophecy, surely?”

“No.” Annabeth admitted. “But they did know about the Minotaur. And there was a rumour going round that only a child of the Big Three would be powerful enough to do something like that.”

Most of campers were older than me … I looked back at the farmhouse… something caught my eye, a shadow in the uppermost window of that attic gable … I was being watched.

“That was the Oracle, right?” Percy asked.

“Yes.” Apollo said. “And she must have something to say to you, or you wouldn’t have seen her move.”

“What’s up there?’ I asked Chiron …

… ‘Not a single living thing.’

Rachel gave a small smile. “Well, he’s not wrong.” Her predecessor creeped the hell out of her.

I got the feeling he was being truthful. But I was also sure something had moved that curtain.

Athena was reluctantly impressed. Most children would have assumed they had imagined it.

‘Come along, Percy’ … We walked through the strawberry fields … Chiron told me the camp grew a nice crop for export to New York restaurants and Mount Olympus.

Demeter smiled. “They are lovely strawberries too.”

‘It pays our expenses,’ he explained … Mr D has this effect on fruit-bearing plants … It worked best with wine grapes, but Mr D was restricted … so they grew strawberries instead.

Mr D didn’t even complain. Even one glass of wine had tempered him a little.

I watched the satyr playing his pipe … I wondered if Grover could work that kind of magic with music.

Grover blushed. “No, I can’t.”

“Yet.” Percy said. “You’ll get it.”

“If you say so.” Grover said miserably.

“Grover,” Percy said, catching his attention. “Trust me. You’ll get it.”

I wondered if he was still inside the farmhouse … ‘Grover won’t get it too much trouble, will he?’ … ‘Grover has big dreams, Percy. Perhaps bigger than are reasonable.

Grover’s shoulders drooped again and Chiron sighed. “I apologise, Grover.”

“No, it’s alright.” Grover said glumly. “I haven’t done a very good job.”
“Then answer me this.” Annabeth said. “Why did the Fates ask you here?”

No one answered, but Grover looked marginally more cheerful.

To reach his goal, he must first demonstrate great courage by succeeding as a keeper, finding a new camper and bringing him safely to Half-Blood Hill.’

“But he did that.” Katie repeated.

‘But he did that!’

‘I might agree with you … Grover was unconscious when you dragged him over the property line. The council might question whether this shows any courage on Grover’s part.’

“He did everything he could.” Thalia protested. “It’s not his fault Percy’s stubborn.”

“First of all, hey!” Percy protested. “Secondly, Thals, you do realise this has already happened for us, right?”

I wanted to protest … If I hadn’t given Grover the slip … he might not have got in trouble.

“My getting in trouble was the best outcome.” Grover said with a sigh. “You would not have liked the alternative.”

‘He’ll get a second chance, won’t he?’

Chiron winced. ‘I’m afraid that was Grover’s second chance, Percy. The council was not anxious to give him another, either, after what happened the first time, five years ago.

“And that wasn’t his fault either!” Thalia growled.

Olympus knows I advised him to wait longer … Grover has been the equivalent of a middle school student for the past six years.’

“Poor thing.” Conner whispered.

‘That’s horrible.’

‘Quite,’ Chiron agreed. ‘At any rate … Perhaps now he will find some other career …’

“You stick with it, Grover.” Nico said firmly. “Follow your dreams.”

“Uh, thanks.” Grover said, unsurely. Nico was nothing like he had imagined the children of Hades to be.

‘That’s not fair,’ I said. ‘What happened the first time? Was it really so bad?’

Chiron looked away quickly. ‘Let’s move along, shall we?’

Thalia sighed. “You can tell people about me, you know. When people know, they come and talk to me.”

Luke’s eyes widened. “You could hear us?”

“Not really.” Thalia admitted. “I can’t really remember much. I remember darkness, but it doesn’t
feel as long as it was. But sometimes … I could feel something. A warmth, like someone was there. I could recognise you and Annabeth, like we were back on the run and there weren’t any stars, but I knew where you were because I could just … I just could.” Her voice had become soft and reminiscent. “Everyone else blended together, but I knew when they were there.”

A few seconds later, her words seemed to catch up with her and she cleared her throat. “So, yeah, tell people. My spirit’s protecting that valley. It’s not some big secret. Maybe leave their names out of it, so they don’t get bugged all the time.”

“Would someone tell us what happened?” Will asked. “I’m trying to work out how you’re a tree. No offence.”

_Thalia_ gave him a smile. “None taken. I’m sure the story will come up in the books.”

“Hypocrite.” _Percy_ said, grinning.

“I said I don’t mind Chiron telling people.” _Thalia_ said. “Not that I want to relive it.”

**But I wasn’t quite ready to let the subject drop. Something had occurred to me … as if he were intentionally avoiding the word death.**

“You knew, didn’t you?” Sally asked.

“The lack of a body was somewhat of a giveaway.” Chiron agreed. “I didn’t want to encourage Percy to do anything stupid.”

“Too late.” _Annabeth_ sighed.

_The beginnings of an idea … started forming in my mind … ‘Does that mean the Underworld is real, too?’_

Several people, gods included, sucked in a breath, and Sally turned terrified eyes on her son. “Percy, I forbid you to go the Underworld to get me back, understand?”

_Percy_ hesitated. “Mom, I promise I did not go to the Underworld to get you back.”

Sally relaxed and _Annabeth_ gave him a scolding look.

She didn’t argue though – technically, _Percy_ had gone to the Underworld to fetch the Master Bolt.

_Chiron’s expression darkened … ‘Yes, child … But for now … until we know more … I would urge you to put that out of your mind.’_

“Until you know more?” Sally repeated. “What do you mean?”

Poseidon was now looking worried.

_Percy_ sighed. “You’ll see.” He realised now that Chiron had already suspected his parentage, known that if his father claimed him, it would mean a quest.

‘What do you mean, “until we know more”?’

‘Come, Percy. Let’s see the woods … The woods are stocked, if you care to try your luck, but go armed.’
Chiron sighed. “I really should have shown him the film.”

“What are the woods stocked with?” Sally asked, her voice suggesting she didn’t really want to know.

“Oh, all kinds of things.” Percy said. “Nothing we can’t handle.”

‘Stocked with what?’ … ‘You’ll see … Do you have your own sword and shield?’

“Why would he?” Hestia asked. “The boy’s been living as a mortal.”

‘My own –’

‘No,’ Chiron said. ‘… I’ll visit the armoury later.’

I wanted to ask what kind of summer camp had an armoury …

“The kind where the campers are all on monster hit lists.” Annabeth answered.

… but there was too much else to think about … We saw … the arena where Chiron said they held sword and spear fights.

Sally flinched.

“We train them first.” Luke said, noticing her concern. “No one fights anyone above their skill level.”

‘Sword and spear fights?’ I asked.

‘Cabin challenges and all that,’ he explained. ‘Not lethal. Usually.

“Usually?!” Sally repeated in a high voice.

“Mom, I have never seen a camper killed because of one of those fights.” Percy said gently.

“Plus no one goes into those fights wanting to kill.” Annabeth added. “Well … some of the Ares kids might sometimes, but even they aren’t that bad.”

Oh, yes, and there’s the mess hall.’ … ‘What do you do when it rains?’ I asked.

“I still don’t know the answer to that.” Percy said, while some of the campers smiled.


“Oh, I see.” Percy said.

Chiron looked at me as if I’d gone a little weird … Finally, he showed me the cabins … And they were without doubt the most bizarre collection of buildings I’d ever seen.

Annabeth smiled fondly. “They are a little strange, aren’t they?” And there’s more than twelve now. It’s going to become far too crowded, we might have to … “Hey!” She said aloud, when Percy tapped her on the head. “What was that for?”

“You were building in your head again.” Percy said with an easy smile.
Except for the fact that each had a large brass number … they looked absolutely nothing alike. Number nine has smokestacks like a tiny factory.

Hephaestus smiled, watching Beckendorf carefully manipulating a piece of metal on his lap. His son had been largely quiet, preferring to focus on his work.

**Number four had tomato vines on the walls and a roof made out of real grass.**

“Oh lovely.” Demeter said. “How are the tomatoes doing?”

Katie beamed at her mother. “Wonderfully.”

**Seven seemed to be made of solid gold, which gleamed so much in the sunlight it was almost impossible to look at.**

“Yeah, but it’s awesome.” Michael said, exchanging a high five with his brothers.

They all faced a commons area … dotted with Greek statues, fountains, flower beds, and a couple of basketball hoops (which were more my speed).

*Thalia* laughed. “Yeah, but you’re hopeless.”

“Am not.” *Percy* grumbled.

In the centre of the field was a huge stone-lined firepit … A girl about nine years old was tending the flames, poking the coals with a stick.

Hestia smiled at him. “You saw me?”

*Percy* nodded. “I’m sorry. I should have stopped.”

“Of course not.” Hestia said with a smile. “I prefer to work unnoticed. I’m impressed you noticed me at all.”

The pair of cabins at the head of the field, numbers one and two, looked like his-and-hers mausoleums … Cabin one was the biggest and bulkiest of the twelve. Its polished bronze doors shimmered … lightning bolts seemed to streak across them.

Zeus smiled. “Do you use that cabin often, Thalia?”

“Not really.” *Thalia* admitted. “The few times the Hunters swing through, I stay with them. I only used it for a few months after I … came back before I joined them and … honestly, I bunked with Annabeth quite a bit.”

“Or borrowed mine.” *Percy* added. “Because I was at school.”

“It’s nothing against you, Father.” *Thalia* said hastily. “It’s just … that cabin’s full of statues and it’s a little creepy, if I’m honest.”

Poseidon smirked. “I told you the statues were a bad idea.”

“And,” she added, “there’s no bathroom.”

“There’s no what?” *Annabeth* repeated, startled.
Thalia sighed. “You heard me.”

Cabin two was more graceful somehow … The walls were carved with images of peacocks.

Hera smiled proudly, more because the cabin was forever empty than the cabin itself.

‘Zeus and Hera?’ I guessed.

‘Correct,’ Chiron said. ‘… No one ever stays in one or two.’

“At least they shouldn’t.” Hera said, glaring at her husband.

Okay. So each cabin had a different god, like a mascot … But why would some be empty?

Annabeth shook her head. “Sorry, Percy, I really thought you knew more than you did.”

I stopped in front of the first cabin on the left, cabin three … ‘Oh, I wouldn’t do that!’

Poseidon frowned slightly. “Even if he wasn’t one of mine, I wouldn’t strike him down for looking.”

Before he could pull me back, I caught the salty scent of the interior … ‘Come along, Percy.’ … Number five was bright red – a real nasty paint job, as if the colour had been splashed on with buckets and fists.

Clarisse bared her teeth in a grin.

The roof was lined with barbed wire … Inside I could see a bunch of mean-looking kids … The loudest was a girl maybe thirteen or fourteen.

“That would be Clarisse then.” Annabeth said.

She wore a size XXXL Camp Half-Blood T-shirt … and gave me an evil sneer. She reminded me of Nancy Bobofit, though … her hair was long and stringy, and brown instead of red.

Before Clarisse could say anything, Percy frowned. “Well, that was uncalled for. Sorry.”

Clarisse looked surprised, but managed to regain some kind of composure. “Don’t tell me we’re friends in whatever future you’ve come from.”

“Not friends.” Percy conceded. “But we’ve been through enough, all of us, that an analogy like that is out of order.”

I kept walking, trying to stay clear of Chiron’s hooves. ‘We haven’t seen any other centaurs,’ I observed.

‘No,’ said Chiron sadly. ‘… You might encounter them in the wilderness, or at major sporting events.

Percy, Annabeth and Nico exchanged a grin. The Party Ponies had stuck around after the Battle of Manhattan and it had been quite the revelry, until Chiron made them leave.

But you won’t see any here,’

‘You said your name was Chiron … shouldn’t you be dead?’
“Percy!” Annabeth and Sally protested in unison.

Thalia tutted. “Honestly, Jackson, you don’t just ask if someone should be dead.”

Chiron paused … ‘I honestly don’t know … The truth is, I can’t be dead … I could be a teacher of heroes as long as humanity needed me … I’m still here, so I can only assume I’m still needed.’

Athena smiled at him. “Chiron, you will always be needed.”

Chiron blushed a little and bowed his head. “Thank you, my Lady.”

I thought about being a teacher for three thousand years … ‘Doesn’t it ever get boring?’

‘No, no,’ he said. ‘Horribly depressing, at times, never boring.’

“I can see that.” Annabeth murmured.

‘Why depressing?’ … ‘Annabeth is waiting for us.’

“So she can take all the questions now.” Travis said.

“Because she’s a genius.” Connor added.

Annabeth blushed.

The blonde girl … was reading a book in front of … cabin eleven.

“Are you kidding me?!” Annabeth demanded. “All of that, and I’m still ‘the blonde girl’?!”

“I didn’t write this!” Percy yelped. “The Fates did.”

“Using your memories.” Annabeth said. “And I can’t yell at them.”

When we reached her, she looked me over … like she was still thinking about how much I drooled.

Annabeth’s glare faded into a giggle. “I can’t remember, but I can honestly say it wasn’t that.”

I tried to see what she was reading … The letters looked Greek to me. I mean, literally Greek.

“Easier to read.” Annabeth and Malcolm chorused.

There were pictures of temples … like those in an architecture book.

“Of course it was.” Percy said.

Athena narrowed her eyes. There was that note of affection again.

‘Annabeth,’ Chiron said, ‘… Would you take Percy from here?’ … Out of all the cabins, eleven looked the most like a regular old summer camp cabin … Over the doorway was one of those doctor’s symbols … What did they call it …?’

“A caduceus.” Annabeth answered.

A caduceus.
Percy smirked at her, and she rolled her eyes.

Inside, it was packed with people … It looked like a gym where the Red Cross had set up an evacuation centre.

“Oh, for Olympus’ sake!” Hermes exploded. “Would you please claim your damn kids?! They’re not all mine!”

“You’ve missed a couple.” Ares scowled.

“Not intentionally.” Hermes said, glaring at him. “After I’ve been away for long, I check in at Camp, see if any of mine turned up while I was gone. Half of you don’t bother unless they’ve proved themselves!”

“That’s not an unreasonable expectation.” Athena said.

“Yes it is.” Hermes said coldly. “They are children. Not soldiers. Bad enough we have to treat them like it because they’re the only ones who can deal with a lot of our problems. They shouldn’t have to fight to get their parents’ affection.”

Luke was trying desperately to match the god in front of him with the image he had of his father. Was it possible that his emotions had clouded their last meeting? Maybe the prophecy was so bad that his father was trying to protect him. Maybe Kronos was lying.

He didn’t know what to believe anymore.

Except … yes, he did.

Because for Kronos to be telling the truth, Thalia had to be lying.

And Thalia wouldn’t lie to him about something like that, not when she knew the scars on his heart as easily as she did her own.

Chiron didn’t go in … But when the campers saw him they all stood and bowed respectfully … He galloped away … I stood in the doorway … They weren’t bowing any more.

“Were you expecting them to?” Thalia asked.

“No, of course not.” Percy said. “I just don’t like this part.”

They were staring at me … I knew this routine. I’d gone through it at enough schools.

“We all have.” Will said sympathetically. “I hate it too.”

‘Well?’ Annabeth prompted. ‘Go on.’

So naturally I tripped coming in the door and made a total fool of myself.

The Stolls snickered.

“It wasn’t that bad.” Luke said.

“It was hilarious.” Travis disagreed, grinning at Percy.

Percy couldn’t help grinning back.
There were some snickers from the campers ... ‘Regular or undetermined?’ somebody asked.
... ‘Undetermined.’

Everybody groaned.

Hermes frowned. “I know it’s frustrating, kids, but it’s what we do.”

“We know that, Dad,” Connor said. “It’s just that … Well, it didn’t really make much difference if he was regular or not. There’s no room.”

A guy who was a little older than the rest came forward. ‘Now, now, campers … Welcome, Percy. You can have that spot … over there.’


Sally gave the boy (young man, she corrected herself) a grateful smile, which he weakly returned.

The guy was about nineteen … He wore an orange tank top, cutoffs, sandals and a leather necklace with five different-coloured clay beads.

“You all have something like that.” Sally commented. “Is it a camp thing?”

“You get one bead for every summer.” Annabeth explained. “The design of the bead varies depending on what’s happened that year.”

The only unsettling thing ... was a thick white scar that ran from just beneath his right eye to his jaw, like an old knife slash.


“Luke?” Sally asked. “If you don’t mind me asking ...”

“It was a quest.” Luke told her, his eyes on the floor. “I failed. I got hurt.”

Hermes winced. He had the feeling Luke had been distracted on that quest – he’d purposefully given him an ‘easy’ one for his first time out, to try and keep May’s prediction from coming true.

‘This is Luke,’ Annabeth said ... could’ve sworn she was blushing.

“I was not!” Annabeth protested. “He w ... He’s my brother.”

If anyone noticed her near-use of the past tense, no one commented. If Luke wondered if she had just become used to his death or if she was trying to avoid unnecessary questions, he didn’t ask.

She saw me looking, and her expression hardened again ... ‘Cabin eleven takes all newcomers ... Hermes, our patron, is the god of travellers.’

“Patron.” Thalia repeated, shaking her head with a smile. “You’d have been better off saying ‘father’ – something tells me Kelp Head’s going to take a while to catch on.”

I looked at the tiny section of floor ... I had nothing to put there to mark it as my own ... no sleeping bag.

“How big was it?” Hermes asked, glaring at the other gods.
“Big enough sir.” Percy said.

“That wasn’t what I asked.” Hermes said.

“It’s about big enough to lie down in if you don’t stretch.” Luke answered, letting himself look at his father.

Hermes looked at him and Luke noticed, for the first time, the way his eyes softened with love.

_I was wrong. I need to do something._

Luke’s inner turmoil, however, would have to wait, as would Hermes’ anger at the gods. Hestia had risen from her spot by the heart, the glow of the fire in her eyes.

“Hermes is correct. These are your children. Some of you are waiting for them to prove themselves, which is bad enough, but some of you genuinely don’t think it matters. Well, it matters to them. When this is over, you are _all_ going to claim any children you may have.”

Hestia’s word settled matters. She may not have had the power Zeus did, but when she spoke, they listened.

_Just the Minotaur’s horn. I thought about setting that down, but then I remembered that Hermes was also the god of thieves._

The Stolls exchanged grins.

_I looked around at the camper’s faces, some sullen and suspicious …_

“They’re the unclaimed.” _Luke_ said with a sigh. “Sooner or later, they all look like that. The hope dies.”

_Thalia_ glanced at him, something in her chest clenching painfully. _That_ was her Luke, not the shell she had encountered after her resurrection.

… some grinning stupidly, some eyeing me as if they were waiting for a chance to pick my pockets.

“Yeah, they’re mine.” Hermes said with a proud grin.

‘How long will I be here?’ I asked.

‘… Until you’re determined.’

‘How long will that take?’

“Sometimes hours.” Annabeth answered. “Sometimes it never happens.”

The campers all laughed.

‘Come on,’ Annabeth told me. ‘I’ll show you the volleyball court.’

‘I’ve already seen it.’

_Thalia_ laughed. “Oh, Percy.”
‘Come on.’ … ‘Jackson, you have to do better than that.’

“I didn’t know about the demigod thing,” Percy said. “I assumed that the cabins were determined by … I don’t know, drawing straws or something.”

“Sorry,” Annabeth said. “I thought you knew.”

‘What?’ … ‘You know how many kids at this camp wish they’d had your chance?’

“Annabeth!” Thalia chided. “You remember what being on the run was like – those monster fights were not fun!”

While her younger self blushed a little, Annabeth shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. I felt they were the highlights.”

Thalia smiled reluctantly. “You’re hilarious.”

“I was starting to get cabin fever, if you’ll pardon the pun.” Annabeth said. “So sue me.”

‘To get killed?’

‘To fight the Minotaur! What do you think we train for?’

“To survive quests.” Athena said gently. “Quests have an aim, a purpose. They are not just about killing monsters.”

I shook my head. ‘Look … there’s only one … Theseus killed him in the labyrinth. So …’

‘Monsters don’t die, Percy. They can be killed. But they don’t die.’

“Well, that clears things up.” Nico said cheerfully.

Annabeth rolled her eyes.

‘Oh, thanks. That clears it up.’

‘They don’t have souls … Eventually, they re-form.’

“So does that mean the Minotaur will come back?” Percy asked.

“Eventually.” Chiron confirmed.

“We had a rematch a few weeks ago.” Percy said. “I won that one too.”

Annabeth swatted him over the head. “Try not to give too much away.”

I thought about Mrs Dodds. ‘You mean if I killed one, accidentally, with a sword-’

‘The Fu … I mean, your maths teacher … You just made her very, very mad.’

“Oh yeah.” Nico said, grinning. “Alecto hates you now.”

“How do you know her?” Katie asked.

“Son of Hades, remember?” Nico answered. “I spend an unhealthy amount of time in the Underworld.”
“And talking to dead people.” Annabeth added.

‘How did you know about Mrs Dodds?’

‘You talk in your sleep.’

“What else have you heard Percy say in his sleep?” Nico asked.

Annabeth rolled her eyes. “Oddly enough, I don’t make a habit of watching him sleep.” She smirked. “But wouldn’t you like to know?”

‘You almost called her something, A Fury? …’

Annabeth glanced nervously at the ground, as if she expected it to open up and swallow her.

Hades rolled his eyes. “They cannot enter Camp Half-Blood.”

‘You shouldn’t call them by name, even here. …’

‘Look, is there anything we can say without it thundering?’ I sounded whiny … I didn’t care.

“You did sound whiney.” Annabeth informed him. “But that wasn’t the orientation film – everyone’s like that when they first arrive.”

‘Why do I have to stay in cabin eleven, anyway? … There are plenty of empty bunks right over there.’

“That, however, is covered in the film.” Luke said. “How did you not realise he hadn’t seen it?” His tone was gentle and teasing, a soft prodding of a younger sister.

Annabeth reddened a little and muttered something about being distracted.

I pointed to the first few cabins … ‘You don’t just choose a cabin, Percy. It depends on … your parent.’

Thalia sighed. “Sometimes, Annabeth, simple is better.”

She stared at me … ‘I’m sorry about your mom, Percy … I’m talking about … Your dad.’

“Did you always know?” Percy asked.

“Not always.” Annabeth said. “Mother claimed me after I ran away and explained everything in a dream.”

‘He’s dead. I never knew him.’

Annabeth sighed. Clearly, she’d had this conversation before with other kids.

“I had.” Annabeth said with a sigh. “But they normally know what I’m talking about.”

‘Your father’s not dead, Percy … You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t one of us.’

“Except he doesn’t know who or what we are.” Thalia said.

“Alright, leave her alone.” Percy said. “It’s not her fault I didn’t see the film.”
‘You don’t know anything about me.’

‘No? … Diagnosed with dyslexia. Probably ADHD, too … Taken together, it’s almost a sure sign.

“That was just creepy.” Percy said. “It was like you’d read my mind or something.”

The letters float off the page when you read, right? … Of course the teachers want you medicated. Most of them are monsters. They don’t want you seeing them for what they are.’

“Annabeth, that’s a bit of an exaggeration.” Luke said with a grin.

“Well, a lot of the teachers are monsters.” Annabeth said. “I stand by it.”

‘You sound like … you went through the same thing?’

‘Most of the kids here did … you couldn’t have survived the Minotaur, much less the ambrosia and nectar … That stuff would’ve killed a normal kid … you’d be dead.

Sally grimaced. Still, she was sure the demigods had a way of knowing before they’d had too much.

Face it. You’re a half-blood.’

A half-blood.

I was reeling with so many questions I didn’t know where to start.

“Starting with ‘half of what?’.” Percy grumbled.

“What happened to ‘leave her alone’?” Annabeth asked.

Then a husky voice yelled, ‘Well! A newbie!’ …

‘Claris,’ Annabeth sighed. ‘Why don’t you go and polish your spear or something?’

Annabeth frowned. “Seriously? Was that the best I could come up with?”

“It sounds a little off for you.” Thalia agreed. “Maybe Percy’s contagious.”

“Hey!”

‘Sure, Miss Princess,’ the big girl said. ‘So I can run you through with it Friday night.’

‘Errette es korakas,’ Annabeth said, which … I had a feeling was a worse curse than it sounded.

“It is.” Percy said, smirking.

‘You don’t stand a chance.’

‘We’ll pulverize you,’ Clarisse said, but her eye twitched. Perhaps she wasn’t sure she could follow through on the threat.

“I can!” Clarisse protested.
Annabeth simply raised an eyebrow and smiled.

She turned towards me …

‘Percy Jackson,’ Annabeth said, ‘meet Clarisse, daughter of Ares.’

I blinked. ‘Like … the war god?’

Thalia sighed. “You thought her father had been named after the war god, didn’t you?”

“Well, how am I supposed to know these things if nobody tells me?” Percy asked.

“How about the fact that I’d have no reason to tell you who her father is otherwise?” Annabeth retorted.

“Annabeth 1, Percy 0.” Nico muttered.

Percy rolled his eyes. “I can hear you.”

“I know.” Nico said. “I said it loudly.”

Clarisse sneered. ‘You got a problem with that?’

‘No,’ I said … ‘It explains the bad smell.’

“Watch it, kid.” Ares growled.

Clarisse growled. ‘We got an initiation ceremony for newbies, Prissy … Stay out of it, wise girl.’

Nico’s jaw dropped. “No way. That’s where you got that?”

“Where who got what?” Athena asked.

“Percy calls Annabeth ‘wise girl’ all the time.” Nico answered. “It’s practically a p-”

“It’s a term of endearment.” Annabeth interrupted, glaring at him. The phrase wouldn’t make her mother any happier, but it was better than ‘pet-name’. “Like I call him Seaweed Brain.”

“Be fair, Wise Girl, that’s an insult sometimes.” Percy said with a grin.

Annabeth looked pained, but she did stay out of it … I had to earn my own rep.

“Boys.” Thalia muttered.

“Like you’d have wanted back-up.” Percy said.

I handed Annabeth my Minotaur horn … but before I knew it, Clarisse had me by the neck …

Clarisse had hands like iron.

“War god.” Annabeth and Thalia chorused.

“And you were a scrawny little thing.” Annabeth repeated with a grin.

Percy rolled his eyes. “Thanks.”
She dragged me into the girls’ bathroom … if this place belonged to the gods, they should’ve been able to afford classier toilets.

A few people laughed and Aphrodite wrinkled her nose. She didn’t like the idea of her children bathing in a place like that.

Clarisse’s friends were all laughing, and I was trying to find the strength I’d used to fight the Minotaur, but it wasn’t there.

“Ha!” Ares said, sneering at Poseidon, who glared at him.

Sally was vibrating with indignation, but she refused to show it. She knew enough about bullies to know that this Clarisse girl would not be cowed by her interjection and it would just make things worse for her son.

‘Like he’s “Big Three” material,’ Clarisse said … Annabeth stood in the corner, watching through her fingers.

“You were worried?” Thalia asked.

“Not … worried.” Annabeth said slowly. “More … intrigued. No one who took out the Minotaur should be that …”

“Useless?” Percy suggested flatly.

“No!” Annabeth insisted. “Well, yeah, okay. I figured that either you were going to pull something out of the bag or the whole thing had been sheer luck.”

Clarisse bent me over on my knees and started pushing my head towards the toilet bowl … I was looking at the scummy water thinking, I will not go into that. I won’t.

Poseidon smirked. This was going to be fun.

“What are you smiling at?” Ares asked. “Your son’s getting the snot beaten out of him.”

“Scummy or not,” Poseidon said, “that’s still water.”

Then something happened … the next thing I knew, I was sprawled on the bathroom tiles with Clarisse screaming behind me.

Ares slumped in his seat, scowling.

I turned just as water blasted out of the toilet … pushing her backwards into a shower stall.

“Percy …” Sally said, her lips twitching in a traitorous smile.

Percy gave her an innocent grin. “Yes Mom?”

Sally shook her head. “Never mind.”

She struggled, gasping … The showers acted up, too, and together all the fixtures sprayed the camouflage girls right out of the bathroom … like pieces of garbage being washed away.

Clarisse’s scowl deepened as the others laughed.

“That’s enough.” Chiron said firmly. “And, Clarisse, I’ve told you about that … initiation.”
Clarisse nodded grumpily, but the other campers, to their credit, did try to stop their laughter.

As soon as they were out the door … the water shut off as quickly as it had started.

“Because the threat had finished.” Thalia said knowingly.

“Have you ever done anything like that?” Percy asked. “I know Nico has.”

“She fried a monster once.” Luke said.

Thalia looked at him for a second, before smiling. “Yeah, I did. Can’t remember what it was though.”

Luke thought for a second, then shook his head. “No, neither can I. I know you nearly fried me as well.”

Thalia laughed. “Unintentional, I swear.”

For a second, it was like nothing had happened between them and he allowed himself to enjoy it while he could, before her anger at him returned.

The entire bathroom was flooded. Annabeth hadn’t been spared. She was dripping wet …

Annabeth let out a small scream of shock, phantom water suddenly soaking her from head to foot.

“You look dry to me.” Thalia said, reaching around Percy to touch her shoulder. “You are dry.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t feel dry.” Annabeth retorted, glaring at her boyfriend.

“Sorry.” Percy said. “At least it was the shower water you got, and not the toilet water.”

… but she hadn’t been pushed out the door. She was standing in exactly the same place, staring at me in shock.

“I was.” Annabeth muttered.

I looked down … I didn’t have one drop of water on my clothes. Nothing.

“Hang on.” Thalia said, frowning. “All of that, and you didn’t think that possibly, maybe, he might be the son of the Sea God?”

Annabeth blushed. “I hadn’t even considered it. I figured the other two would keep the oath.”

“So did I.” Zeus growled, glaring at Poseidon.

“You already broke it.” Hera said tartly. “You’ve no room to talk!”

I stood up, my legs shaky … ‘You are dead, new boy. You are totally dead.’

Sally gave Clarisse a modified version of her ‘Mom glare’. It was surprisingly effective.

I probably should have let it go, but I said, ‘You want to gargle with toilet water again, Clarisse? Close your mouth.’

“Percy …” Thalia said, sighing. “Annie’s right, you don’t have a brain-to-mouth filter.”
“Before anyone says anything,” Annabeth said, glaring at the campers, “there are two people who’ve ever got away with calling me that. The rest of you will get hurt.”

“If you say so, Annie.” Luke said mildly.

Annabeth rolled her eyes. “You’re the other one.”

Her friends had to hold her back … Annabeth stared at me. I couldn’t tell whether she was just grossed out or angry with me for dousing her.

“I wasn’t grossed out.” Annabeth said. “It was shower water, like you said. I was mad though.”

“Why?” Thalia asked. “It was obvious he didn’t mean to do it.”

Annabeth shrugged. “I don’t know. I was twelve.”

“What?” I demanded. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking,’ she said, ‘that I want you on my team for capture the flag.’

“Yeah, so I can get beaten up.” Percy muttered.

“Athena always has a plan.” Annabeth said primly. “They’re predictable and it worked.”

Annabeth perked up. “It did?”

“Hasn’t it …?” Her future self paused, shuddering. “Oh, that’s weird.”

“What?” Percy asked.

“I’m dry again.” Annabeth said. “That was really strange.” She turned back to her younger-self. “Hasn’t the game happened yet?”

“Obviously not.” Percy said, before anyone could answer.

“Why do you say that?” Annabeth asked.

Percy shrugged. “That was when I was claimed, remember? But past-me hadn’t been yet, so the game can’t have happened. Plus, they said it was June 8th, which if memory serves me was Thursday evening, and Capture the Flag happens on Fridays.”

Nico leaned towards Thalia. “Did Percy just beat Annabeth at logic?”

Thalia was staring at them. “I think he did.”

“Don’t get used to it.” Annabeth warned. “It’s never going to happen again.”
In response to a query I had regarding Hermes' description of the quest as 'easy': firstly, he did describe it as 'easy', quotation marks included - he didn't consider it easy, but Luke himself bemoaned the fact that it had been done before. Let's face it, a quest where you can research a previously successful method has to be 'easier' than one where you have to figure out the how as well as actually do it. Luke also implies that he only got hurt because his heart wasn't in it. I choose to believe that's true.

I also mention in this chapter that all Aphrodite campers are summer-only, which is somewhat contradicted in The Lost Hero, which takes place in the winter. In The Lightning Thief, Percy watches the Aphrodite campers all leaving, and Annabeth references Aphrodite and Demeter cabins as the least likely to be targeted by monsters. So let's say that some, if not all Aphrodite campers either became year-rounders during or following the Titan War or returned to help with the search for Percy.

As per some comments, I have amended this chapter to reflect the correct ages of the senior counsellors.

“Was that the end of that chapter?” Sally asked.

“It was.” Chiron confirmed. “Would you like to read the next one?”

“I figure it might be a safe one.” Sally said, taking the book. “So, at the moment, this is still the past for us, right?”
Annabeth nodded. “Yes, Ms Jackson. We’ll let you know when it reaches the future.”

Sally smiled at her. “Please, Annabeth, call me Sally. That goes for all of you.” She added to the other campers.

Chapter Seven

My Dinner Goes Up In Smoke

Sally paused, thinking for a second. “Burnt offerings?”

“Is that another thing in the orientation film?” Percy asked.

Chiron sighed. “I really should have shown you that.”

“Well, what’s done is done.” Sally said sensibly. “I’m sure he’s got the hang of it now.”

Word of the bathroom incident spread immediately. Wherever I went, campers pointed at me ... Or maybe they were just staring at Annabeth, who was still pretty much dripping wet.

This time, Annabeth didn’t scream when the phantom water soaked her, just heaved a heavy sigh.

She showed me a few more places: the metal shop (where kids were forging their own swords)
Beckendorf smiled proudly.

... the arts-and-crafts room (where satyrs were sandblasting a giant marble statue of a goat-man) ...

“Pan.” Annabeth corrected. “Don’t be disrespectful.”

“I didn’t write this.” Percy said for what felt like the hundredth time.

... and the climbing wall, which actually consisted of two facing walls that ... clashed together if you didn’t get to the top fast enough.

Percy grimaced. He hadn’t attempted that wall yet, and he wasn’t looking forward to it.

“That sounds dangerous.” Sally said frowning.

“Ambrosia does wonders.” Apollo said. “Plus my children have a healing touch.”

His sons grinned proudly.

Finally we returned to the canoeing lake ... ‘I’ve got training to do,’ Annabeth said flatly ...

‘Annabeth, I’m sorry ... It wasn’t my fault.’

“Well, it kind of was.” Thalia said. “You just didn’t mean to.”

She looked at me sceptically, and I realised it was my fault ... I had become one with the plumbing.

Nico burst out laughing and a lot of the campers weren’t far behind.

Percy blushed.

“Oh, Percy.” Thalia said, sniggering. “I love the way your brain works sometimes.”

‘You need to talk to the Oracle ... I’ll ask Chiron.’

“Because of that prophecy, right?” Percy asked nervously. “The one that Rachel recited?”

Rachel gave him a smile. “Remember, Percy, that prophecy is obsolete now. It’s okay. But, yes, I’d imagine that’s why Annabeth wanted you to speak to the Oracle.”

“So you did know.” Thalia said.

Annabeth sighed. “I don’t know. I just knew he was powerful, even if he didn’t know it.”

I stared into the lake ... I noticed two teenage girls ... about five metres below.

Sally paused and reread the line in her head. “What the ...?”

“Naiads.” Chiron told her kindly.

“Oh of course.” Sally said. “Why didn’t I think of that?”
They wore blue jeans and shimmering green T-shirts ... They smiled and waved ... I waved back.

‘Don’t encourage them,’ Annabeth warned. ‘Naiads are terrible flirts.’

‘Naiads ... That’s it. I want to go home now.’

_Thalia_ smiled sympathetically. “Everything that had happened and it’s naiads that make you want to go home?”

Percy shrugged. “It was all a little overwhelming.”

Annabeth frowned. ‘Don’t you get it, Percy? You _are_ home. This is the only safe place on earth for kids like us.’

‘You mean, mentally disturbed kids?’

“Well, that too.” Travis agreed with a grin.

‘I mean _not_ human ... Half human.’

‘Half-human and half what?’“I think you know.’

... ‘God,’ I said. ‘Half-god.’

“You did know.” Rachel said softly. “In your heart, you always knew.”


Annabeth nodded. ‘Your father isn’t dead, Percy ... What’s the most common thing gods did in the old stories? They ran around falling in love with humans and having kids with them. Do you think they’ve changed their habits in the last few millennia?’

“Unfortunately not.” Hera said darkly.

‘But those are just ... But if all the kids here are half-gods-’

‘Demigods,’ Annabeth said ...

‘Then who’s your dad?’


Her hands tightened ... I got the feeling I’d just trespassed on a sensitive subject.

“Sorry.” _Percy_ whispered.

‘My dad is a professor at West Point ... You assume it has to be a male god who finds a human female attractive? How sexist is that?’

_Thalia_ frowned. “Be fair, Annie, most of the stories don’t mention the goddesses. Not to mention a lot of them are sworn maidens.”

‘Who’s your mom, then?’
‘Cabin six.’

“How was he supposed to know what that meant?” Rachel asked.

“Alright, leave her alone now.” Percy repeated, his voice a little sharper.

‘Meaning?’

Annabeth straightened. ‘Athena. Goddess of wisdom and battle.’ …

‘And my dad?’

‘… Nobody knows.’

‘Except my mother. She knew.’

“I did.” Sally confirmed.

‘Maybe not, Percy. … Maybe he’ll send a sign … Sometimes it happens.’

Hermes glared at the other gods again.

‘You mean sometimes it doesn’t?’

Annabeth ran her palm along the rail. ‘The gods are busy. They have a lot of kids and they don’t always … Well, sometimes they don’t care about us, Percy. They ignore us.’

“We always care about you!” Demeter protested. Several of the gods looked similarly insulted, but Hermes cleared his throat.

“And how many children in my cabin belong to you, dear Aunt?” He asked.

Demeter hesitated, and Katie realised with a rush of shame that her mother didn’t know. The goddess snapped her fingers.

“You’re right.” She said softly. “We are not very good at showing it. All of my children currently at Camp have now been claimed.”

Hermes smiled. “Thank you.”

Athena and Apollo snapped their fingers as well, claiming their remaining children.

Aphrodite smiled proudly. “All of mine have been claimed already. Well, the ones at Camp have been.”

Hermes nodded. Contrary to popular belief, Aphrodite was very good with her children.

I thought about some of the kids I’d seen in the Hermes cabin … as if they were waiting for a call that would never come.

Several of the campers dropped their gaze. They still remembered waiting for their claiming.

I’d known kids like that … shuffled off to boarding school by rich parents who didn’t have time to deal with them. But gods should behave better.
This time, no one scolded him for his ‘disrespect’. The gods who would normally have done so were either too busy feeling guilty or agreeing with him.

Well, Ares probably would have said something (not agreeing or feeling guilty), but Hermes was still glaring at him.

“So I’m stuck here,’ I said. ‘That’s it? For the rest of my life?’

‘It depends … If you’re a child of Aphrodite or Demeter, you’re probably not a real powerful force.

“Hey!” Silena and Katie protested.

“I’m sorry.” Annabeth said. “I just meant that monsters are less likely to target you.”

The girls seemed to accept that, although the latter still looked upset.

Percy squeezed Annabeth’s hand. Silena’s death was still weighing on both of them.

The monsters might ignore you, so you can get by with a few months of summer training … most demigods either make their way here, or they get killed off.

“Hmm.” Nico said. “Maybe we shouldn’t send Annabeth on recruitment either.”

A few manage to survive in the outside world … But very, very few are like that.’

“So adult demigods are few and far between?” Sally asked.

“I’ve met one.” Percy said. “He surprised me. I didn’t realise they existed.”

“Well, that’s comforting.” Sally muttered.

“So monsters can’t get in here?’

Annabeth shook her head. ‘Not unless they’re intentionally stocked in the woods or specially summoned by somebody on the inside.’

‘Why would anybody want to summon a monster?’

‘Practice fights. Practical jokes.’

“Practical jokes?” Sally repeated. “What kind of practical joke requires a monster?”

“A funny one.” The Stolls chorused.

Luke gave them a stern glare. “No.”

“Not bad monsters.” Travis said hastily. “No one’s that stupid.”

‘Practical jokes?’

‘The point is, the borders are sealed …’

‘So … you’re a year-rounder?’
Annabeth nodded. From under the collar of her T-shirt she pulled a leather necklace ... It was just like Luke’s, except Annabeth’s also had a big gold ring strung on it, like a college ring.

Annabeth touched her necklace without thinking about it, automatically finding her father’s ring.

‘I’ve been here since I was seven, she said. ‘... I’ve been here longer than most of the counsellors, and they’re all in college.’

“Do the year-rounders go to college as well?” Sally asked.

“We don’t go far.” Luke told her. “I’m at NYU. History.”

“Well done.” Sally said with a smile.

“Not all the counsellors are in college.” Silena pointed out.

“Who are the counsellors?” Sally asked.

“I’m the counsellor of the Aphrodite cabin.” Silena answered. “I’m fifteen – none of Cabin Ten is a year-rounder. And Charlie’s the counsellor for the Hephaestus cabin – he’s the same age as me.”

“I’m in college.” Lee added. “NYU with Luke, Music. I’m the head counsellor of the Apollo cabin. Annabeth’s the counsellor for Athena, obviously she’s not in college …”

“We have tutors.” Annabeth explained, predicting Sally’s next question. “And Castor and Pollux pretty much share the duties for the Dionysus cabin, since they’re the only campers at the moment. They’re year-rounders and they’re fifteen.”

“Clarisse is fourteen.” Katie finished, frowning. “And’s she’s the Ares counsellor, but … I’m not the Demeter counsellor, so I’m not entirely sure why I’m here.”

Travis opened his mouth and Luke promptly slapped his hand over it.

“Who was the head counsellor when I started camp?” Percy asked.

Annabeth thought for a second. “It was … James, I believe. He left camp that year.”

Katie frowned. “He’s not planning on leaving.”

“Well … plans change.” Annabeth said, her eyes flickering towards Luke. “Katie took over as counsellor during the summer, and Miranda handles it during the rest of the year.”

“Then why isn’t Miranda here as well?” Katie asked.

Annabeth shrugged. “I don’t know. Ask the Fates.”

‘Why did you come so young?’

She twisted the ring on her necklace. ‘None of your business.’

‘Oh … So … I could just walk out of here right now if I wanted to?’

Sally’s smile disappeared. “You are not walking out.”

“I know.” Percy said. “I had nowhere to go. I was just asking.”
‘It would be suicide, but you could … But they wouldn’t give permission until the end of the summer session, unless … You were granted a quest … The last time …’

Her voice trailed off. I could tell from her tone that the last time hadn’t gone well.

Luke frowned at his younger self’s scowl. He hoped that he was beginning to question Kronos and his preconceptions, but it was almost impossible to tell. When did he become such a stranger that he couldn’t recognise himself?

“You aren’t Luke. I don’t know you anymore.”

Thalia had known. She had always known.

‘Back in the sick room … You asked me something about the summer solstice … What did that mean?’

“Enjoy your naivety while you can.” Thalia advised darkly. “Because once you know, there’s no going back.”

She clenched her fists. ‘I wish I knew. Chiron and the satyrs, they know, but they won’t tell me.

Athena sighed. “Annabeth, there’s no reason for you to know.”

Something is wrong in Olympus … we took a field trip during winter solstice.

Zeus straightened up. He had forgotten, among everything, that some of the campers had been in Olympus. If Poseidon hadn’t had Percy steal the bolt (and Percy had sworn on the Styx that his father had no hand in it), then was it possible one of the campers had.

Thalia caught her Father’s eye and realised that she would have to speak to him, and soon, if she was going to avoid a murder when the truth came out.

That’s when the gods have their big annual council.’

‘But … how did you get there?’ … She looked at me like she was sure I must know this already.

“Let me guess,” Percy said, “it’s in the film.”

Annabeth nodded, looking sheepish.

‘You are a New Yorker, right?’

‘Oh, sure.’ As far as I knew, there were only a hundred and two floors in the Empire State Building, but I decided not to point that out.

“Magic.” Travis and Connor said in a stage-whisper.

‘Right after we visited,’ Annabeth continued, ‘the weather got weird, as if the gods had started fighting … The best I can figure out is that something important was stolen.

Zeus narrowed his eyes. Right after their visit.
“Father?” Thalia asked. “After this chapter, could we talk? It’s important.”

The request brought about a silence in which you could have heard a pin drop.

Zeus nodded. “Of course, Thalia.”

And if it isn’t returned by summer solstice, there’s going to be trouble. When you came, I was hoping … I mean – Athena can get along with just about anybody, except for Ares. And of course she’s got the rivalry with Poseidon.

Percy and Annabeth glanced at each other. There was a rivalry they had happily ignored for the last three years.

But, I mean, aside from that, I thought we could work together.

“Absolutely not.” Athena said firmly.

Annabeth coughed. “Erm, Mother? You might be a little late on that one. Percy and I have worked together.”

“Very well.” Thalia added. “They’re a good team.”

Athena scowled and sat back, but said nothing.

I thought you might know something.’

I shook my head … ‘I’ve got to get a quest,’ Annabeth muttered to herself. ‘I’m not too young. If they would just tell me the problem …’

“You would still only be twelve, child.” Chiron said gently.

I could smell barbecue smoke coming from somewhere nearby. Annabeth must’ve heard my stomach growl.

“Percy, I think everyone heard that.” Annabeth said, grinning.

She told me to go on … I left her on the pier, tracing her finger across the rail as if drawing battle plan.

“Capture the flag?” Thalia asked.

Annabeth nodded. “I had a plan.”

“Athena always has a plan.” Percy and Nico chorused.

Back at cabin eleven, everybody was talking … For the first time, I noticed that a lot of the campers had similar features: sharp noses, upturned eyebrows, mischievous smiles.

Hermes grinned, his face lighting up in an identical smile.

They were the kind of kids that teachers would peg as trouble-makers.

“And they’d be right.” Katie muttered under her breath.

Thankfully, nobody paid much attention to me … The counsellor, Luka, came over. He had
the Hermes family resemblance, too. It was marred by that scar on his right cheek, but his smile was intact.

Luke smiled grimly, but it turned a little more genuine when Percy stammered out an apology. “Forget about it, kid.” He said. “You were better about it than most of the younger kids that come in.”

‘Found you a sleeping bag,’ he said. ‘And here, I stole you some toiletries from the camp store.’

I couldn’t tell if he was kidding about the stealing part.

“As if any of my children would kid about that.” Hermes said, before adding, “Although I’d hope that he wouldn’t need to steal you such necessities. I’d like to think the Camp would provide them anyway.”

“We do.” Chiron said with a smile. “That’s why we let them get away with it.”

I said, ‘Thanks.’

‘No prob.’ Luke sat next to me … ‘Tough first day?’

‘I don’t belong here,’ I said. ‘I don’t even believe in gods.’

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘That’s how we all started. Once you start believing in them? It doesn’t get any easier.’

Hermes’ smile faded and he looked sad. All he had wanted to do was protect him.

The bitterness in his voice surprised me … ‘So your dad is Hermes?’ I asked.

He pulled a switchblade out of his back pocket … I thought he was going to gut me …

“Percy!” Annabeth protested.

“I wasn’t going to do that.” Luke said with a weak smile. “Even if it is a touchy subject.”

… but he just scraped the mud off the sole of his sandal. ‘Yeah. Hermes.’

‘The wing-footed messenger guy.’

Hermes snorted. “Nice.”

Hera raised an eyebrow. “Are you not offended?”

“He’s a kid.” Hermes said, shrugging. “And he’s just found out. We’ve already seen him act perfectly respectful – he’s not trying to be rude.”


“That’s Apollo, Luke.” Hermes said gently. “Although we do crossover sometimes in hospitals, so it’s an easy slip to make.”

‘Travellers, merchants, thieves … That’s why you’re here … Hermes isn’t picky he sponsors.’
Katie frowned. “That didn’t sound very good.”

I figured Luke didn’t mean to call me a nobody.


Percy glanced at his future self, who nodded in agreement, confirming it. So much of Luke’s kindness that summer had been questioned in Percy’s head. It was nice to know that it wasn’t all an act.

He just had a lot on his mind.

‘You ever meet your dad?’ I asked.

‘Once.’

I waited, thinking that if he wanted to tell me, he would. Apparently he didn’t.

“It happened a long time ago.” Luke said. “Before Camp. I was an angry teenager and … my mother isn’t very well and hasn’t been since …”

“Since she tried to take over from the Oracle.” Rachel finished softly.


Rachel nodded sadly. “I told you, there was a curse. The spirit didn’t take hold properly. She’d be plagued with visions, but no way of really dealing with them.”

“I tried to talk her out of it.” Hermes said sadly. “I should have tried harder.”

Luke looked like he was about to start hyperventilating. “Is that why you left?”

“No, I left to keep you safe.” Hermes answered, his eyes begging his son to understand. “I could never stay long anyway, but then your mother saw something … she said that you had a terrible fate ahead of you, and I figured that the further away you were from me, the less likely that was to come true.”

While Luke looked shell-shocked, Travis and Connor moved to sit either side of him, leaning against their older brother to ground him.

I wondered if the story had anything to do with how he got his scar.

“Definitely not.” Hermes said, frowning. “Although I did give him the quest.”

Luke thought about asking why his father had chosen that quest, but decided that he’d had enough bombshells for the time being. His mind was racing, trying to figure out how to fix what he’d done.

Luke looked up and managed a smile. ‘Don’t worry about it, Percy. The campers here, they’re mostly good people. After all, we’re extended family, right? We take care of each other.’

The campers smiled, even Clarisse. Despite the rivalries between the various cabins, everyone knew that they had support when it came down to the wire.

Annabeth and Thalia smiled too, although their smiles were tinged with sadness. That sounded like
the Luke they had grown up with.

He seemed to understand how lost I felt, and I was grateful for that … Luke had welcomed me into the cabin … the nicest thing anybody had done for me all day.

“Hey!” Annabeth protested. “I showed you round Camp!”

“Well, you were also kind of treating me like an idiot.” Percy said, a little reluctantly. “Although if you thought I’d seen the film, I don’t blame you. And I said the nicest, not ‘the only nice thing’.”

I decided to ask him my last big question … ‘Annabeth … twice, she said I might be “the one” …’

Luke folded his knife. ‘I hate prophecies.’

“Don’t we all.” Percy muttered.

‘What do you mean?’

His face twitched around the scar. ‘Let’s just say I messed things up for everybody else … Chiron hasn’t allowed any more quests.

“That’s not the only reason.” Chiron said gently. “You are not the first camper to get injured, Luke. The Oracle gives signs when a quest is due to happen, and there simply had not been any.”

Annabeth’s been dying to get out into the world … He’d had a prophecy from the Oracle … She had to wait until … somebody special came to the camp.’

Athena raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Really.” Chiron confirmed. “But I had no idea it related to the Great Prophecy.”

‘Somebody special.’

‘Don’t worry about it, kid,’ Luke said. ‘Annabeth wants to think every new camper who comes through here is the omen she’s been waiting for.

Annabeth blushed. “I’m not that desperate.”

“Of course not.” Thalia said with a straight face.

Now, come on, it’s dinnertime.’

The moment he said it, a horn blew in the distance. Somehow, I knew it was a conch shell, even though I’d never heard one before.

“Perk of the sea.” Percy said with a grin.

“One of the many.” Thalia grumbled. She always found it slightly unfair that Percy got so many little perks. All she had was thunder, lightning and flight, the latter of which she couldn’t use, because she was terrified of heights.

The thunder and lightning was, admittedly, very cool though.

Luke yelled, ‘Eleven, fall in!’
The whole cabin, about twenty of us, filed into the commons yard ... Campers came from the other cabins, too, except for the three empty cabins at the end, cabin eight, which had looked normal in the daytime, but was now starting to glow silver as the sun went down.

Artemis smiled.

We marched up the hill to the mess hall pavilion ... In all, there were maybe a hundred campers, a few dozen satyrs, and a dozen assorted wood nymphs and naiads.

“It’s nice that they join you for dinner.” Demeter said with a smile.

At the pavilion, torches blazed around the marble columns ... Each cabin had its own table ... cabin eleven’s was way overcrowded. I had to squeeze on to the edge of a bench with half my butt hanging off.

Aphrodite frowned. “That can’t be comfortable.”

“Wouldn’t be so bad if they claimed their kids.” Hermes muttered. Still, it should be better now – unless today’s claiming was a one-time event.

I saw Grover sitting at table twelve with Mr D, a few satyrs and a couple of plump blond boys who looked just like Mr D.

“Castor and Pollux.” Annabeth and Percy chorused, trying not to let their sadness bleed through.

Pollux still hadn’t recovered from his brother’s death, although he had smiled genuinely for the first time in a year towards the end of the summer.

Chiron stood to one side ... Annabeth sat at table six with a bunch of serious-looking athletic kids, all with her grey eyes and honey-blonde hair.

Annabeth brushed said hair out of her face. “Family trait.”

Clarisse sat behind me ... She’d apparently gotten over being hosed down, because she was laughing and belching right alongside her friends.

Clarisse gave Percy a dirty look that told him, no, she was not over being hosed down. Not in the slightest.

Finally, Chiron pounded his hoof against the marble floor ... Wood nymphs came forward with platters of food: grapes, apples, strawberries, cheese, fresh bread and yes, barbecue!

Thalia smiled fondly. “Mr Bottomless Pit.”

“I’m a growing boy.” Percy said.

My glass was empty, but Luke said, ‘Speak to it. Whatever you want – non-alcoholic, of course.’

... I had an idea. ‘Blue Cherry Coke.’

The soda turned a violent shade of cobalt.

Sally smiled.
I took a cautious sip … She’s in the Underworld. And if that’s a real place, then some day …

“Don’t even think about it.” Sally repeated.

Nico rolled his eyes. ‘I’m with Annabeth, Perce – how have you survived this long?”

“Luck.” Percy said flatly. “And you guys.”

‘Here you go, Percy,’ Luke said, handing me a platter of smoked brisket.

I loaded my plate … when I noticed everybody getting up, carrying their plates towards the fire … I wondered if they were going for dessert or something.

Luke smiled. “Sorry, Percy, I should have said.”

Percy shrugged. “You didn’t know I didn’t know.”

‘Come on,’ Luke told me … ‘Burnt offerings for the gods. They like the smell.’

… I couldn’t help wondering why an immortal, all-powerful being would like the smell of burning food.

Apollo chuckled. “I suppose it does sound odd when you put it like that.”

Luke approached the fire, bowed his head, and tossed in a cluster of fat red grapes. ‘Hermes.’

I was next … *Whoever you are, tell me. Please.*

“I will.” Poseidon said. “Soon.”

I scraped a big slice of brisket into the flames.

When I caught a whiff of the smoke, I didn’t gag … I could almost believe that the gods could live off that smoke.

“We can’t.” Artemis said. “But it doesn’t stop some people from trying.”

Her brother smiled innocently. “It was a bet.”

“Of course it was.” Artemis muttered.

When everybody had returned to their seats and finished eating … Mr D got up with a huge sigh. ‘Yes, I suppose I’d better say hello to all you brats.

Several of the gods glared at him.

*Well, hello. Our activities director, Chiron, says the next capture the flag is Friday. Cabin five presently holds the laurels.*

Ares grinned. “That’s my kids.”

Clarisse beamed proudly.

A bunch of ugly cheering rose from the Ares table.
‘Personally,’ Mr D continued, ‘I couldn’t care less, but congratulations. Also, I should tell you that we have a new camper today. Peter Johnson.’

Percy rolled his eyes.

Chiron murmured something.

‘Er, Percy Jackson,’ Mr D corrected. ‘… Now run along to your silly campfire. Go on.’

Everybody cheered. We all headed down towards the amphitheatre, where Apollo’s cabin led a sing-along.

“Do the cabins take turns?” Sally asked curiously.

“No, it’s always Apollo.” Luke answered. “They’re the musical ones.”

“Unless something’s happened.” Percy said. “They’re also the Healers, so if they’re all in the infirmary, the rest of us have to make do.”

We sang camp songs about the gods and ate toasted marshmallows and joked around, and the funny thing was … I felt that I was home.

“That’s because you are.” Hestia said softly.

Later in the evening … I didn’t realize how exhausted I was until I collapsed on my borrowed sleeping bag.

“Everyone’s first day is like that.” Lee said. “It’s an emotional rollercoaster and then you crash.”

My fingers curled around the Minotaur horn … I wish I’d known how briefly I would get to enjoy my new home.

Sally sighed. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

Percy smiled sheepishly. “Sorry, Mom.”

“It wasn’t your fault.” Annabeth said. “Amazingly.”

“Is that the end of the chapter?” Thalia asked, getting to her feet.

Sally nodded. “Yes. You were going to talk to your father, weren’t you?”

Zeus got up as well. “What is this about, Thalia?”

“That lost-and-found problem you have.” Thalia answered.

Zeus nodded. “Then perhaps my brothers should join us.”

Hades and Poseidon both looked surprised, but rose as well.

“Oh boy.” Thalia muttered. “Wish me luck.”
Capture The Flag

Chapter Notes

Things I thought were obvious but I'm going to say anyway:

A) Luke is going to end up redeeming himself. I like him.

B) Sally is my favourite. She’s not going anywhere.

_Thalia_ followed her father and her uncles out of the throne room to a small sitting room down the hall. She preferred this room; it felt much less pretentious.

“Now Thalia,” Zeus said, once they had seated themselves, “speak.”

_Thalia_ took a deep breath. “At some point, the book is going to reveal who took the master bolt and the helm of darkness and none of you is going to like it. The thing is … the person that did this … there’s more to it. I’m not condoning what they did and I’m not asking you to ignore it, but … If they come forward and confess, is there any way you could show them …”

“Leniency?” Zeus finished.

_Thalia_ winced. “I know it’s a tall request, Father, but this person is being manipulated by something far older and stronger than he is.”

“What?” Poseidon asked.

“Who?!” Zeus demanded.

Hades chuckled humourlessly. “Isn’t it obvious, brothers? The Oracle spoke of it in her prophecy – ‘the crooked stirs in dungeon deep’.”

“No.” Zeus said firmly. “I forbid any mention …”

“And that is what will destroy you, Father.” _Thalia_ said sharply. “You refused to acknowledge the threat and we paid the price, just like always. Killing the Lightning Thief won’t stop him. It will just switch his attention to another demigod. What are you going to do, kill us all just in case?”

“That will cause a war within the family.” Poseidon warned.

“What do you propose I do then?!” Zeus demanded. “Let him get away with this … this insult?!”

Hades looked thoughtfully at _Thalia_. He was just as furious as Zeus, but he also had a long history of disagreeing with him. “What do you suggest, niece?”

_Thalia_ steeled herself. “A deal. Aside from … um … our friend way, way, way downstairs, there are two people involved here, one who took the items and one who now has them. If they come forward before the book reveals it and show remorse, then you acknowledge that. If not … Well, I can ask you not to kill anyone, but I’m not stupid enough to try to stop you.”

Hades nodded thoughtfully. “That does seem fair.”
“You agree with this?” Zeus asked, surprised.

Hades sighed. “You forget that part of my job is judging the dead, Zeus. Those that come before judgement with remorse are judged less harshly. That has always been true.”

Seeing that Poseidon was nodding in agreement, Zeus sighed. “Very well. If this thief comes forward with genuine remorse, I will not kill him. I make no other promises, however.”

_Thalia_ let out a sigh of relief. “Thank you Father, Uncles.”

Now she just had to figure out how to get Luke to confess.

They returned to the throne room to find that Persephone had the book on her lap. She smiled at her husband as he sat down, and opened the book to the next chapter.

**Chapter Eight**

**We Capture a Flag**

Annabeth and Malcolm cheered and Clarisse groaned.

Luke grinned at Percy’s bewildered expression. “We’ve formed an alliance with Athena for the game tomorrow night.”

The next few days I settled into a routine that felt almost normal, if you don’t count the fact that I was getting lessons from satyrs, nymphs and a centaur.

Rachel giggled. “It does take some getting used to.”

Each morning I took Ancient Greek from Annabeth … After a couple of mornings, I could stumble through a few lines of Homer without too much headache.

_Percy_ absently rubbed his temple, but the ache was more of a ghost than anything.

The rest of the day, I’d rotate through outdoor activities, looking for something I was good at.

_Thalia_ cracked a smirk. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

_Percy_ rolled his eyes. “What was the verdict?” He murmured.

_Thalia_ shook her head. “Later.”

Chiron tried to teach me archery … He didn’t complain, even when he had to desnag a stray arrow out of his tail.

The Apollo boys sniggered.

“Percy,” _Thalia_ said, “where was Chiron standing?”

“Erm, behind me?” _Percy_ said sheepishly.

“Oh dear.” Artemis said, trying to hide a smile. “Well, it’s safe to say you’re not my brother’s son.”

“Not all Apollo kids are good at archery.” Michael said, nudging Will. “Are they?”

“I get by.” Will said defensively.
“I know.” Michael said, his smile softening. “I was joking, kid. You’re the best Healer we have.”

Nico frowned at Percy. “I’ve seen you use a bow before. That was a good shot.”

“The one and only.” Percy said. “And there was a goddess guiding it.”

Foot racing? No good either … it was a little humiliating to be slower than a tree.

Travis and Connor sniggered.

And wrestling? Forget it. Every time I got on the mat, Clarisse would pulverise me.

Ares sneered at Poseidon, who ignored him.

‘There’s more where that came from, punk,’ she’d mumble in my ear.

The only think I really excelled at was canoeing …

“Well, that makes sense.” Thalia said.

… and that wasn’t the kind of heroic skill people expected to see … I didn’t have Hephaestus’s skill with metalwork or – gods forbid – Dionysus’s way with vine plants.

“Yes, you have been a bit of a puzzle.” Chiron said. “Then again, we hadn’t considered all the options.”

Luke told me I might be a child of Hermes, a kind of jack-of-all-trades, master of none.

Hermes smiled, not taking any offence. “Sorry, kid.”

But I got the feeling … He really didn’t know what do make of me either.

“Thanks for trying.” Percy said.

Luke gave him a smile and ruffled his hair. “We were going to find you a niche, kid. We will.”

Despite all that, I liked camp … I tried not to think too much about my mom … surely there was some way to save her, to bring her back …

“Percy …” Sally said warningly.

“There is no bringing the dead back.” Persephone said gently. “No one has ever managed it.”

I started to understand Luke’s bitterness … Why couldn’t my dad, whoever he was, make a phone appear?

“We can, but we aren’t allowed to.” Apollo said, glaring at Zeus.

“Enough.” Hera said tiredly. “We can debate the rules later.”

Thursday afternoon … I had my first sword-fighting lesson.

“That was yesterday.” Annabeth said. “Just before we came here.”

Everybody from cabin eleven gathered in the big circular arena, where Luke would be our
“Naturally.” Thalia said.

We started with basic stabbing and slashing … The problem was, I couldn’t find a blade that felt right in my hands.

Luke frowned. “That’s because they were forged on land?”

“Exactly.” Poseidon said.

Either they were too heavy, or too light, or too long … Luke announced he would be my partner, since this was my first time.


“I was hopeless.” Percy said with a groan.

“Hey, you said so yourself.” Luke said, nudging him. “It was your first time.”

‘Good luck,’ one of the campers told me … Luke showed me thrusts and parries and shield blocks the hard way. With every swipe, I got a little more battered and bruised.

“Oh great.” Percy muttered, bracing himself.

‘Keep your guard up, Percy,’ he’d say, then whap me in the ribs with the flat of his blade. Percy winced and then yelped when Thalia prodded him in the ribs. “What was that for?!?”

“That is so weird.” Thalia murmured.


“Shove it, Castellan.” Percy grumbled.

Persephone took pity on him and kept reading.

‘No, not that far up!’ … By the time he called a break, I was soaked in sweat.

“Oh, that’s disgusting.” Annabeth said, shifting away from Percy.

“I’m not actually soaked.” Percy said, examining his own – apparently dry – shirt. “It just feels like it.”

Everybody swarmed the drinks cooler. Luke poured ice water on his head, which looked like such a good idea, I did the same.

“Oh, you’re done.” Nico said with a grin.

“What?” Luke asked. “Wait a minute … it wasn’t beginner’s luck at all, was it?”

“Nope.” Annabeth said cheerfully. “The water re-energises him.”

Instantly I felt better. Strength surged back into my arms. The sword didn’t feel so awkward.

‘Okay, everybody circle up!’ Luke ordered … He told everybody he was going to demonstrate a disarming technique: how to twist the enemy’s blade with the flat of your own sword so that he had no choice but to drop his weapon.

“It’s a useful tool.” Ares said. “But not one you want to rely on too much.”

‘This is difficult,’ he stressed … He demonstrated the move on me in slow motion. Sure enough, the sword clattered out of my hand.

“Which was to be expected.” Thalia finished. “Since a) you’re not a master swordsman, so you couldn’t hope to block it and b) it’s a demonstration.”

‘Now in real time,’ he said … His eyes narrowed, and he started to press me with more force.

Thalia glanced at Luke. “Jeez, go easy on the kid. He’s only twelve.”


The sword grew heavy in my hand … so I figured, What the heck?

Clang.

A couple of the campers applauded, the Stolls whistling loudly.

“That’s my boy.” Poseidon beamed.

Luke’s sword sword rattled against the stone. The tip of my blade was a couple of centimetres from his undefended chest.

Thalia smiled. “How long had it been since someone beat you?”

Luke sighed. “That would have been the first.”

The other campers were silent … My short burst of manic energy abandoned me.

“Or you’ve just dried off.” Annabeth said.

But Luke insisted. This time, there was no contest … After a long pause, somebody in the audience said, ‘Beginner’s luck?’

“That would have been me.” Connor said. “Didn’t even consider the water.”

Luke wiped his the sweat off his brow … ‘Maybe,’ he said. ‘But I wonder what Percy could do with a balanced sword …’

“He’s very good.” Thalia said, her eyes gleaming.

“No.” Percy said.

Thalia frowned. “You don’t know what I’m going to say.”

“I can take a guess, Thalia.” Percy said. “No.”

“How about a rematch?” Annabeth suggested.
Percy turned to her with a betrayed expression. “Annabeth!”

“What?” Annabeth asked innocently. “You told Thalia ‘no’, not me.”

“I thought you would be wise enough not to suggest it.” Percy said. “Besides, the fight’s no fairer …”

“It would be if you duelled our Luke.” Travis said. “The age gap is smaller. He’s still got more experience, but not by as much.”

“Is everyone going to conspire against me?” Percy asked. “No fighting in the throne room, remember?”

Hestia gave him what could only be described as a mischievous smile. “I’ll make an exception.”

There was a murmur of agreement among the gods.

“Luke doesn’t have a sword.” Percy pointed out. “And neither of us have …”

With a clang, he and Luke were dressed in armour, and Hermes handed his son a sword. “No problem.”

“You don’t have one either.” Luke said, frowning at Percy.

Percy sighed and pulled the pen out again, flipping the cap off and handing it to Annabeth before giving Riptide a few practice swings. “Ready.”

The spectators backed up to give them some room, forming a circle around the demigods.

Annabeth smiled, pouring herself a glass of water. “Want me to count you in?”

“If you wouldn’t mind.” Percy said, a little tersely. It had been a long time since he’d had a practice duel, one where the outcome wasn’t life or death. “And I’m fine.” He added, before Annabeth could stand up.

Annabeth held up the glass. “You don’t want it?”

“Don’t need it.” Percy said.

Annabeth shrugged. “Suit yourself.” She set the glass down in front of her. “Ready? Begin.”

The swords met in a clang of metal.

“That was not counting us in.” Percy said, blocking Luke’s next strike.

“You don’t get counted in in real life.” Thalia said.

“This isn’t real life.” Percy said. “This is an educational display, so I hope you’re all paying attention.”

The campers were definitely doing that, riveted by the flight playing out in front of them.

“They’re too evenly matched.” Thalia murmured, after five minutes. “There’s never going to be a clear winner.”

“There will be if I throw this over Percy.” Annabeth said, waving at the water.
“He wants to win without it.” Thalia said. “I get that.”

Annabeth bit her lip. “This was a bad idea, wasn’t it? They’re going to …” She inhaled sharply when Percy’s blade just nicked Luke under his armour, not nearly enough to win him the fight.

“They’re going to get more and more intense.” Thalia finished. “And Percy’s gone through enough that …”

“It could end up deadly.” Annabeth said, her face pale. “This was a really bad idea, Thals.”

“Relax, Annie.” Thalia said. “I thought it’d be over in a few minutes. I underestimated both of them. We just need to call it a draw.”

“They won’t go for that.” Annabeth said.

“Oh yes they will.” Thalia said, raising a hand.

In unison, the two boys yelped, their swords falling to the ground.

“As Percy said,” Thalia said loudly, over the startled cries of the spectators, “this was an educational display. And the moral of this lesson is that you never take your eye of your surroundings.”

“Because you never know when there’s a daughter of Zeus waiting to give you an electric shock.” Percy finished. “What was that for?”

“There was never going to be a winner.” Thalia said. “And after this summer …”

“It was a bad idea.” Annabeth finished. “I’m sorry, I should never have suggested it.”

Percy sighed. “She’s right.” He held out a hand to Luke. “Good match though.”


Ares scowled. “I was hoping someone was gonna get creamed.” Aphrodite rolled her eyes. “Ugh, can’t you just be happy they’re good? Sephie, read please.”

Persephone pulled a face at the nickname and found her place again, letting everyone settle once more.

**Friday afternoon …**

“This is it!” Annabeth squeaked. “We’ve reached the future. Sorry.” She added.

Persephone smiled at her.

**Friday afternoon, I was sitting with Grover at the lake, resting from a near-death experience on the climbing wall.**

Sally gasped.

“Percy’s exaggerating.” Annabeth said tiredly. “No one’s ever had a near-death experience on that thing.”

Grover had scampered to the top like a mountain goat … The hairs had been singed off my forearms.
“And one of the Apollo kids fixed that right up.” Annabeth added.

We sat on the pier … until I got up the nerve to ask Grover how his conversation had gone with Mr D …

“So your career’s still on track?”

He glanced at me nervously. ‘Chiron t-told you I want a searcher’s license?’

“What’s a searcher’s license?” Sally asked.

Grover opened his mouth to answer, but Percy cut him off. “Sorry, Grover, it’s just that I ask you that question later, so is it alright if we let the book answer it?”

“Of course.” Grover said. “Saves repeating it.”

‘Well … no … did you get it?’ …

‘… If you got a quest and I went along to protect you, and we both came back alive, then maybe he’d consider the job complete.’

Grover sighed.

“But that could still happen.” Silena said.

“Unlikely.” Chris said. “Luke already said there hasn’t been a quest in two years. Why would Percy suddenly get one?”

Silena smirked. “Because when they first looked at the books, Annabeth said the titles sounded like quests, so they must get one.”

My spirits lifted. ‘Well, that’s not so bad, right?’

‘Blaa-ha-ha! … The chances of you getting a quest … and even if you did, why would you want me along?’

“Because you’re my best friend.” Percy said. “And you know more than I do.”

‘Of course I’d want you along!’ … Finally, I asked him about the four empty cabins.

‘Number eight … belongs to Artemis,’ he said. ‘… If she didn’t have one, she’d be mad.’

Artemis rolled her eyes. “That’s not the only reason. My Hunters use that cabin from time to time.”

‘Yeah, okay. But the other three, the ones at the end. Are those the Big Three?’

Grover tensed … ‘No. One of them, number two, is Hera’s … She’s the goddess of marriage, so of course she wouldn’t go around having affairs with mortals.

“None of us should.” Hera said, glaring at her husband.

That’s her husband’s job.
Grover yelped at Zeus’s glare and hid behind Chiron.

Poseidon chuckled. “He has a point.”

**When we say the Big Three, we mean the three powerful brothers, the sons of Kronos.’**

Thunder rattled the windows.

“Oh yes,” Thalia said conversationally. “We do not mention the K word. Even if there’s a legitimate reason to do so.”

‘Zeus, Poseidon, Hades … But Hades doesn’t have a cabin here.’

‘No. He doesn’t have a throne on Olympus either.’

Nico scowled and muttered something under his breath.

He sort of does his own thing down in the Underworld. If he did have a cabin here …’ Grover shuddered. ‘Well, it wouldn’t be pleasant. Let’s leave it at that.’

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Nico asked.

“Nico, he didn’t mean anything by it.” Thalia said, raising an arm. “May I?”

Nico frowned for a second, but nodded. He wasn’t generally comfortable with being touched, but he had also managed to end up with friends who used physical contact like a lifeline. Although it was nice sometimes, he thought, as she wrapped her arm around his shoulders.

“Grover had never met a child of Hades before.” Thalia said. “And, let’s face it, a lot of your half-siblings have been a little …”

“Dark?” Nico finished glumly. “Evil?”

“The opposite of you.” Thalia finished. “Okay, you can be a little dark sometimes, but you’re not evil, Nico.”

“And Camp’s not the same without you.” Annabeth added.

‘But Zeus and Poseidon – they both had, like, a bazillion kids in the myths …’

Grover shifted his hooves uncomfortably. ‘About sixty years ago … Zeus and Poseidon, made Hades swear an oath with them: no more affairs with mortal women.

“And yet my husband was the only one to keep that damn oath.” Persephone said, glaring at Zeus and Poseidon. She may not have been happy about Maria Di Angelo, but she did love her husband, and shutting his children away had hurt him deeply.

They all swore on the River Styx … Seventeen years ago, Zeus fell off the wagon. There was this TV starlet with a big fluffy eighties hairdo – he just couldn’t help himself.

“Wait a minute …” Sally said slowly. “Your mother was Beryl Grace?”

Thalia sighed. “Yeah, that’s her. Terrible actress, worse mother.”

“I seem to remember reading about her having two children.” Sally said. “There was a boy as well,
wasn’t there? Younger?”

“So not only did you break the oath,” Hera said icily, “you broke it with a woman whose private life was plastered all over the tabloids, putting your child in more danger.”

“Thalia?” Sally said gently. “What happened to your brother?”

*Thalia* swallowed hard. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Her voice was saturated with pain.

Sally got up and ushered *Percy* and *Annabeth* towards the other end of the couch, so she could sit beside *Thalia*, drawing her into a hug.

*Thalia* closed her eyes, resting her head on Sally’s shoulder. The story was coming. She could feel it. Still, it was better than thinking about Jason. Much better.

*When their child was born … well, the River Styx is serious about promises … he brought a terrible fate on his daughter.*

Zeus looked down. He hadn’t even considered the consequences breaking the oath would have on his daughter.

‘But that isn’t fair! It wasn’t the little girl’s fault!’

Persephone paused to give a dark glare to her husband and father.

*Grover* hesitated. ‘Percy, children of the Big Three have powers greater than other half-bloods … When Hades found out about the girl, he … let the worst monsters out of Tartarus to torment Thalia.*

Sally tightened her hold on the girl in her arms, feeling her shivering.

*A satyr was assigned to be her keeper when she was twelve …* He tried to escort her here with a couple of other half-bloods she’d befriended.

Malcolm was looking pale. “Annabeth … that was you and Luke, wasn’t it?”

Annabeth nodded, her face bypassing white and reaching grey.


*They almost made it …* All three Kindly Ones were after them, along with a hoard of hellhounds.

Persephone’s voice shook with anger.

*They were about to be overrun when Thalia told her satyr to take the other half-bloods to safety …* he had to protect the others.

“Of course you did.” Sally said quietly.

“And we’re glad you did.” Athena added, gesturing to Hermes, who was nodding.
So Thalia made her final stand alone, at the top of that hill.

Luke sucked in a rattling breath. He could still hear her telling him to take Annabeth and run, hear her pained cries, hear his own agonised scream as she fell.

As she died, Zeus took pity on her. He turned her into that pine tree … That's why the hill is called Half-Blood Hill.’

“I will never look at that pine tree the same way again.” Will said faintly.

Thalia sighed at the sudden attention. “I’m alright. I’m right here, alive and kicking …”

“And drooling in her sleep.” Annabeth added with a smirk. “Must be a Big Three thing.”

I stared at the pine in the distance … I wondered, if I’d acted differently, could I have saved my mother?

“You couldn’t have.” Thalia said. “Not without getting her over the boundary.”

“And I wouldn’t have left her if Luke hadn’t made me.” Annabeth added.

“And I wouldn’t have left her if Annabeth hadn’t been there.” Luke admitted. “And we’d been fighting monsters longer than you had. You did pretty well given the circumstances.”

‘Grover,’ I said, ‘have heroes really gone on quests to the Underworld?’

‘Sometimes … Percy, you’re not seriously thinking-’

‘No,’ I liked. ‘I was just wondering.

Hermes sighed. “You’re a terrible liar too – Chiron, what are you teaching these kids?!”

“Not how to lie.” Artemis said, rolling her eyes.

So … a satyr is always assigned to guard a demigod? … Chiron said you thought I might be something special.’

Grover looked as if I’d just led him into a trap. ‘I didn’t … Oh, listen, don’t think like that … You’re probably a child of Hermes. Or maybe even one of the minor gods, like Nemesis, the god of revenge.

“Goddess of revenge.” Annabeth corrected, trying not to think of Ethan.

Don’t worry, okay?’

I got the idea he was reassuring himself more than me.

“Surely a child of the Big Three is more likely to get a quest.” Malcolm said. “I know they’re a bigger target for monsters, but if keeping us safe was the main priority, no one would be sent on a quest.”

No one could answer him.

The night after dinner … it was time for capture the flag.
The campers cheered, and Sally released *Thalia* to return to her younger son’s side.

When the plates were cleared away … Annabeth and two of her siblings ran into the pavilion carrying a silk banner … Clarisse and her buddies ran in with another banner … gaudy red, painted with a bloody spear and a boar’s head.

“I prefer yours.” *Percy* murmured to *Annabeth*.

I turned to Luke and yelled over the noise, ‘… Ares and Athena always lead the teams?’

‘Not always,’ he said. ‘But often.’

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen it without them.” *Percy* said thoughtfully.

“We played against the Hunters once.” *Thalia* reminded him. “Before I joined them.”

“And we all learnt that putting you two on the same team is sometimes worse than putting you on opposing ones.” *Nico* said.

“So, if another cabin captures one, what do you do – repaint the flag? … Whose side are we on?”

“Mine.” *Annabeth* said.

*He gave me a sly look, as if he knew something I didn’t.*

*Percy* sighed. “She warned you, didn’t she?”

*Luke* shrugged. “She may have mentioned she had a plan.”


The scar on his face made him look almost evil in the torchlight.

*Thalia* managed to suppress her shudder.

‘We’ve made a temporary alliance with Athena …’

*Athena* had made an alliance with *Apollo* and *Hermes*, the two biggest cabins.

“Good move.” *Apollo* said. “There’s strength in numbers.”

*Apparently, privileges had been traded … in order to win support.*

*Ares* had allied themselves with everybody else … *Demeter*’s kids had the edge with nature skills and outdoor stuff, but they weren’t very aggressive.

*Demeter* sniffed. “I should hope not.”

*Aphrodite*’s sons and daughters I wasn’t too worried about. They mostly sat out every activity and checked their reflections in the lake and did their hair and gossiped.

“There’s nothing wrong with that.” *Aphrodite* said.
“And it doesn’t mean we can’t hold our own.” Silena added.

Percy smiled almost sadly. “Believe me, Silena, I know.”

**Hephaestus**’s kids weren’t pretty … but they were big and burly … They might be a problem.

Beckendorf smirked to himself.

**That, of course, left Ares**’s cabin: a dozen of the biggest, ugliest, meanest kids on Long Island, or anywhere else on the planet.

Ares grinned, possibly the only parent who could be proud of a description like that. He was looking forward to this.

**Chiron** hammered his hoof on the marble.

‘**Heroes!**’ he announced. ‘You know the rules … No killing or maiming is allowed.

“Well, that’s comforting.” Sally said faintly.

I will serve as referee and battlefield medic. Arm yourselves!’

**He spread his hands, and the tables were suddenly covered with equipment: helmets, bronze swords, spears, oxhide shields coated in metal.**

Sally’s eyes widened. “I don’t know what I was expecting, but … they could get seriously hurt.”

Ares muttered something under his breath and his mother gave him a venomous glare.

“It’s alright.” Hera said. “Apollo’s children and Chiron can heal anyone up. And you already heard the rules.”

‘**Whoa,**’ I said. ‘**We’re really supposed to use these?**’

Luke looked at me as if I were crazy. ‘**Unless you want to get skewered … You’ll be on border patrol.**’


Athena hid a smile. “I think I know what your plan was, Annabeth. Well done.”

Annabeth nodded, blushing slightly. “Thank you, Mother.”

**My shield was the size of an NBA backboard … I hoped nobody expected me to run fast.**

**Thalia** chuckled. “You get used to it.”

“Says the girl whose shield shrinks down to a charm bracelet.” Percy said.

Thalia shrugged. “You take what you can get.”

**My helmet, like all the helmets on Athena’s side, had a blue horsehair plume … I managed to catch up with Annabeth …**

‘**So what’s the plan?**’ I asked. ‘**Got any magic items you can loan me?**’
Her hand drifted towards her pocket, as if she were afraid I’d stolen something.

“Hey, you could have been one of Hermes’ for all I knew.” Annabeth said.

‘Just watch Clarisse’s spear … Stand by the creek, keep the reds away. Leave the rest to me. Athena always has a plan.’

“We know.” Percy said. “It normally gets me beaten up.”

Annabeth sighed. “It was one time, Percy. Let it go.” Her hand squeezed his and let go. She wasn’t worried about him reliving the Ares cabin. The hellhound, however, was not going to be fun.

She pushed ahead … Annabeth stationed me next to a little creek … Standing there alone … I felt like an idiot.

“Don’t say it.” Percy said, when Thalia opened her mouth.

The bronze sword, like all the swords I’d tried so far, seemed balanced wrong … There was no way anybody would actually attack me, would they? I mean, Olympus had to have liability issues, right?

Thalia laughed. “Of course not. Otherwise they wouldn’t send us on quests, would they? Besides, you should be fine. They’ll be trying to get past you, not attacking you. There’s a huge stretch of creek they could use instead, so you should be left alone. Unless, of course, someone is planning on breaking the rules.” She added casually.

Far away, the conch horn blew … Then I heard a sound … a low canine growl, somewhere close by.

“A growl?” Malcolm repeated, startled. “There’s nothing in the woods that makes a sound like that.”

I raised my shield instinctively; I had the feeling something was stalking me.

A shiver of unease ran through the campers. They had all had border patrol at least once, and they knew that feeling, but … that was strange.

“Maybe it’s me.” Annabeth said hopefully. “Not the growl, I mean – that could be his imagination, but I’ve got the invisibility cap Mother gave me, maybe I doubled back to give him some back-up.”

Sally raised an eyebrow. “Why would he need back-up? Thalia already said he shouldn’t have any trouble.”

“Because Clarisse is upset about the bathroom incident.” Annabeth explained. “That’s why I stationed Percy there, because I know she’ll go after him rather than trying to get the flag.”

“Why you …” Clarisse began.

“It’s not her fault you’re predictable.” Malcolm said, glaring at her.

“I am sure that Annabeth’s plan is a good one.” Chiron said. “But I know that Clarisse would not lead an intentional attack on another camper, especially when that camper is relatively untrained, especially not in a situation where it is expressly against the rules.”

“Attacking another camper in Capture the Flag isn’t against the rules.” Clarisse argued.
“It is when it’s unnecessary.” Thalia said.

Then the growling stopped … Five Ares warriors came yelling and screaming out of the dark.

Chiron gave Clarisse a very disappointed look and she scowled at the floor.

‘Cream the punk!’ Clarisse screamed.

Her ugly pig eyes glared at me through the slit of her helmet. She brandished a two-metre spear, its barbed metal tip flickering with red light.

Ares smirked. He recognised that spear.

Her siblings had only the standard-issue bronze swords … I could run. Or I could defend myself against half the Ares cabin.

“Fight.” The campers chorused.

Sally sighed. “I’m not going to bother trying.”

I managed to sidestep the first kid’s swing … Clarisse thrust at me with her spear … I felt a painful tingling all over my body … My shield arm went numb, and the air burned.

Percy made a strangled noise, the shock running through him.

Electricity … Another Ares guy slammed me in the chest … They could’ve kicked me into jelly, but they were too busy laughing.

“And that,” Athena said, “is how you beat them. Brawn can only hold up to brains for so long.”

‘Give him a haircut,’ Clarisse said … I raised my sword, but Clarisse slammed it aside with her spear … Now both my arms felt numb.

“Oh, not again.” Percy sighed. “Still, better than the lightning, I suppose.”

‘Oh, wow,’ Clarisse said …

‘The flag is that way,’ I told her.

“Percy!” Annabeth protested.

Percy smirked. “What makes you think I was pointing in the right direction?” He looked down at his useless arms. “What makes you think I was pointing at all? They knew the flag was my side of the creek, that’s the point of border patrol.”

I wanted to sound angry … ‘Yeah,’ one of her siblings said. ‘But, see … We care about a guy who made our cabin look stupid.’

‘You do that without my help,’ I told them. It probably wasn’t the smartest thing to say.

“Brain-mouth filter.” Annabeth muttered.

Two of them came at me. I backed up towards the creek …

“Keep going.” Thalia said, grinning.
“Why do you want him to fall in the creek?” Clarisse asked. “Aren’t you supposed to be his friend?”

“He’s a Son of Poseidon.” Thalia said, smirking at her. “You heard what happened when he poured water on his head. What do you think happens if he’s standing in it?”

Clarisse tried not to look worried.

… tried to raise my shield, but Clarisse was too fast … the electric point just about shocked my teeth out of my mouth.

Percy made another strange noise, trying to rub his jaw and failing. “Oh, this is really weird.”

One of her cabinmates slashed his sword across my arm, leaving a good-size cut.

Percy glanced down at his arm. “Uh oh.”

“What?” Annabeth asked. “It’s not like you can feel it – your arms are still numb from … Oh.”

“That is so strange.” Thalia said, taking Percy’s arm and examining the cut that had appeared.

“You’re actually bleeding.”

Apollo began to rise, but Percy shook his head. “It’s alright, Lord Apollo. It’ll sort itself in a few minutes.”

Seeing my own blood made me dizzy, warm and cold at the time.

Percy closed his eyes, the room spinning around him.

“What happened to ‘no maiming’?!” Sally demanded, staring at her son’s arm in horror.

Chiron was still gazing at Clarisse. “I will talk to her, Sally, I promise you.”

The rest of the campers were glaring at Clarisse now as well.

“She hasn’t done anything yet.” Percy managed to say. “And this wasn’t actually her.”

‘No maiming,’ I managed to say.

‘Oops,’ the guy said. ‘Guess I lost my dessert privilege.’

“Dessert privilege?!” Sally repeated. “They maim someone and they go to bed without dessert?!”

“No.” Chiron said. “That is a fairly common punishment for minor infractions. This is not minor, but it hasn’t happened before either. They will be in for a very nasty shock.”

He pushed me into the creek and I landed with a splash.

“Yes, they will.” Thalia smirked, watching the gash on Percy’s arm begin to knit together. “And there it goes.”

They all laughed … But then something happened. The water seemed to wake up my senses, as if I’d just had a bag of my mom’s double-espresso jelly beans.

Percy took a deep breath, opening his eyes. “Whoa, that’s better.”

Clarisse and her cabinmates came into the creek to get me, but I stood to meet them … I
swung the flat of my sword against the first guy’s head … I hit him so hard I could see his eyes vibrating as he crumpled into the water.

The Stolls cheered.

**Ugly Number Two and Ugly Number Three came at me … Both of them backed up quick. Ugly Number Four didn’t look really anxious to attack, but Clarisse kept coming … As soon as she thrust, I caught the shaft between the edge of my shield and my sword, and I snapped it like a twig.**

Clarisse screamed and Luke jumped forward to grab her arm, just in time to prevent her launching herself at Percy. “Whoa, hold up! He hasn’t done anything yet. And you attacked him, you can’t blame the guy for defending himself!”

“Watch me!” Clarisse growled.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” Aphrodite asked, raising a perfect eyebrow.

Ares shrugged. “I don’t fight my kids’ battles.”

Aphrodite pursed her lips. She knew the spear was a gift from Ares. She also knew that if someone broke or destroyed one of her gifts to her children, she would be angry on their behalf.

Then again, she thought, looking fondly at Silena, her children wouldn’t act in such a way.

‘Ah!’ she screamed. ‘You idiot! You corpse-breath worm!’

**She probably would have said worse, but I … sent her stumbling backwards out of the creek.**

“Well, you didn’t need my help.” Annabeth said cheerfully.

Then I heard yelling, elated screams, and I saw Luke racing towards the boundary line with the red team’s banner lifted high.

The Athena, Hermes and Apollo kids cheered, congratulating Luke and each other on their victory.

Only Clarisse looked truly angry – Beckendorf was still absorbed in whatever he was building, and Silena and Katie, while they would have preferred to win, were not invested enough in the Ares/Athena rivalry to be really upset.

He was flanked by a couple of Hermes guys covering his retreat … The Ares folks got up, and Clarisse muttered a dazed curse.

“Always keep your eye on the objective.” Athena advised the campers with a smile. “If you allow yourself to get distracted, this is what happened.”

‘A trick!’ she shouted. ‘It was a trick!’

They staggered after Luke, but it was too late … The red banner shimmered and turned to silver. The boar and spear were replaced with a huge caduceus, the symbol of cabin eleven.

The Stolls whooped and high-fived.

*Annabeth* grinned and nudged *Percy.* “Couldn’t have done it without you.”
“Next time, try.” Percy grumbled good-naturedly.

Everybody converged on the creek … Annabeth’s voice, right next to me in the creek, said, ‘Not bad, hero’ … she materialised, holding a Yankees baseball cap as if she’d just taken it off her head.

“Wow.” Sally said. “When you said an invisibility cap, I didn’t think you were being literal.”

Annabeth smiled. “It was a birthday present from my mom.”

I felt myself getting angry … ‘You set me up,’ I said …

Annabeth shrugged. ‘I told you. Athena …

“Always has a plan.” Thalia, Percy and Nico finished in unison.

… always, always has a plan …’ Then she noticed my wounded arm. ‘How did you do that?’

“Annabeth, I know you know what a sword …” Thalia trailed off. “Oh, it’s healed, hasn’t it?”

“Yep.” Annabeth confirmed.

“Does this mean you’re finally going to cotton on?” Thalia asked.

“Be nice to me.” Annabeth said. “I can’t be perfect all the time.”

‘Sword cut,’ I said. … As I watched, it turned into a small scar and disappeared.

“That’s pretty cool.” Chris said.

“It’s not fool-proof.” Percy said. “It doesn’t heal everything, so I do need you guys sometimes. But water always helps.”

“It’s a pretty cool thing to get.” Thalia admitted.

‘I – I don’t get it,’ I said.

Annabeth was thinking hard … ‘Step out of the water, Percy.’

“Yeah, she’s figured it out.” Nico said.

‘What –’

‘Just do it.’I came out of the creek and … almost fell over, but Annabeth steadied me.

“Thalia!” Annabeth said sharply, as Percy suddenly sagged towards her.

“Easy, Kelp Head.” Thalia said, catching Percy’s arm and helping Annabeth sit him upright again. “We got you.”

‘Oh, Styx,’ she cursed. ‘This is not good. I didn’t want … I assumed it would be Zeus …’

“Well,” Thalia said, brushing her hair out of her eyes, “there is a precedent.”
Before I could ask what she meant … A howl ripped through the forest.

“Alright, that’s not right.” Katie said, paling rapidly.

The campers’ cheering died instantly … There on the rocks just above us was a black hound the size of a rhino, with lava-red eyes and fangs like daggers.

Silena screamed and Persephone rounded on her husband. “What did you do?!”

Hades sighed. “My dear, I could not have had anything to do with this. Hellhounds cannot get past the boundary line. Someone must have summoned it from within the Camp.”

“He’s right.” Poseidon said, white-faced and furious.

“But who would do something that stupid?!” Thalia demanded, trembling with anger and more than a little nausea. It was one of the hellhounds that had dealt the fatal blow that night on Half-Blood Hill.

“Oh, I think you know.” Annabeth murmured over her boyfriend’s head.

Thalia gritted her teeth and tried not to turn around to yell at Luke. His younger self was just as pale as his campmates, fear and guilt warring in his eyes.

He hadn’t been given an order like this yet, but was he really going to do that? Would he really have brought a hellhound into Camp that evening, if they hadn’t been called to Olympus?

It was looking straight at me.

Sally whimpered, grabbing Percy’s hand.

Nobody moved except Annabeth … but the hound was too fast.

Luke closed his eyes. That had been the point of no return.

The moment he caused another demigod almost fatal injuries.

The moment he knew he would never – should never – be forgiven.

He had no control over that thing. It could have ripped Annabeth to shreds first.

And he could not have stopped it.

It leaped over her … I stumbled backwards and felt its razor-sharp claws ripping through my armour …

Percy let out a cry of pain, his entire body seizing as his shirt began to soak with blood.

Persephone kept reading, her words coming quicker.

… there was a cascade of thwacking sounds … The monster fell dead at my feet.

Sally breathed a sigh of relief.

Apollo smiled proudly at his sons.

By some miracle, I was still alive … Another second, and the monster would’ve turned me into
fifty kilograms of delicatessen meat.

Percy was breathing heavily, but he seemed to have recovered from the initial impact.

Chiron trotted up next to us …

‘Di immortales,’ Annabeth said. ‘That’s a hellhound from the Fields of Punishment.

“But who summoned it?” Annabeth whispered.

They don’t … they’re not supposed to …’

Luke came over … his moment of glory gone.

“Yeah, like that’s what I’m focusing on.” Luke said, his eyes fixed on Percy’s shirt.

Clarisse yelled, ‘It’s all Percy’s fault! Percy summoned it!’

‘Be quiet, child,’ Chiron told her.

Katie scowled. “Come on, of course it’s not Percy! He nearly got ripped to shreds!”

“Well, he must have been the target then.” Clarisse pointed out. “It jumped right over Annabeth – why not just attack her?”

“Because he knew.” Luke whispered, too quietly for most people to hear. “He knew what Percy was and wanted him out of the way.”

Thalia gave him a dirty look, trying to stem some of the bleeding. “Can we just let Queen Persephone read please?”

We watched the body of the hellhound melt into shadow … ‘Quick, Percy, get in the water.’

“Thank Olympus Annabeth has some sense.” Thalia muttered.

‘I’m okay.’

“Okay?!” Sally repeated incredulously. “You call that okay?!”

“Boys!” Thalia sighed. “Slightest hint of the sniffles and they’re dying, but gods forbid they show any reaction to an actual injury!”

‘No, you’re not,’ she said … I was too tired to argue. I stepped back into the creek … I could feel the cuts on my chest closing up.

Percy sighed, stretching as the cuts disappeared. “That’s better.”

“Are you sure?” Thalia asked.

Percy grinned at her. “What are you, my mother?”

“Speaking of …” Thalia said, nodding towards Sally.

Percy’s smile disappeared and he turned to her, reaching out a hand. “I’m fine, Mom.”

Sally grasped his hand. “It’s only going to get worse, isn’t it?”
Percy grimaced. “Afraid so.”

Some of the campers gasped … By the time I looked up, the sign was already fading … a trident.

“The claiming.” Michael whispered.

‘Your father,’ Annabeth murmured. ‘This is really not good.’

‘It is determined,’ Chiron announced … ‘Hail, Perseus Jackson, Son of the Sea God.’

Persephone closed the book. “That’s the end of the chapter.”

Chiron was looking very angry. “When I find out who summoned that hellhound, they will be in a great deal of trouble.”

Thalia glanced at Luke, asking him with her eyes if he had already done it. He shook his head.

“Chiron?” She asked. “I realise you’re angry – I am as well, believe me – but … we’re reading about your future now. It’s already happened for us, but none of your campers have done anything yet.”

“It’s not fair to punish them for something they haven’t done.” Percy agreed.

“Although it pains me to admit it,” Athena said, “they do have a point. I suggest we use this as an opportunity to find out why someone would do such a thing and try to address that instead.”

A couple of the gods (namely Ares and Zeus) looked like they disagreed, but the rest seemed to be thinking along the same lines, even Poseidon.

“That sounds fair.” Hera said. “The Fates clearly want us all to learn from this experience. That may be as good a lesson as any. Now who would like to read the next chapter?”
For a few seconds, everyone looked at the book in Persephone’s hands, then Demeter rose from her throne. “I will.” She took the book from her daughter and turned to the next chapter.

Chapter Nine

I Am Offered a Quest

Silena looked a little smug, proven right. Grover looked ecstatic.

The next morning, Chiron moved me to cabin three.

I didn’t have to share with anybody … and not listen to anybody else.

“That sounds so cool!” Travis said.

_Percy_ smiled. “It’s not so bad.”

And I was absolutely miserable.

Sally frowned. “But you just said …”

“It’s not so bad now.” _Percy_ corrected. “I’m used to it, and so are the other campers.”

Just when I’d started to feel accepted … I’d been separated out as if I had some rare disease.

“That’s not fair.” Sally protested. “He didn’t do anything.”

“Well, I can see why people would be nervous.” _Thalia_ said. “I nearly got Luke and Annabeth killed.”


“No,” _Thalia_ agreed. “But Hades would have gone through you two to get to me – who’s to say he and Father won’t go through the other campers to get to Percy?”

“We won’t let them.” Athena said, glaring at the two gods. “My children are there.”

“As are ours.” Hermes added, gesturing to the other gods.

Nobody mentioned the hellhound, but I got the feeling they were all talking about it behind my back.

_Annabeth_ sighed. “Paranoid. We were _not_ …” She trailed off. “Okay, we kind of were talking about it, but not in the way you thought.”

The attack had scared everybody … monsters would stop at nothing to kill me. They could even invade a camp that had always been considered safe.

Persephone frowned. “That wasn’t your fault, Percy. It’s the fault of whoever summoned it.”
The other campers steered clear of me as much as possible … my lessons with Luke became one-on-one. He pushed me harder than ever, and wasn’t afraid to bruise me up in the process.

*Thalia* glanced at *Luke*. She doubted Kronos had been particularly grateful for that training. Maybe some small part of him had already been rebelling.

‘You’re going to need all the training you can get,’ he promised … ‘Now let’s try that viper-beheading strike again. Fifty more repetitions.’

“That kind of training will come in handy.” *Thalia* said casually.


*Thalia* gave him a small smile, but said nothing.

*Annabeth* still taught me … Every time I said something, she scowled at me, as if I’d just poked her between the eyes.

“Annabeth.” *Thalia* chided.

Athena suppressed a proud smile.

After lessons, she would walk away muttering to herself: ‘Quest … Poseidon? … Dirty rotten … Got to make a plan …’

“A plan for what?” *Nico* asked.

*Annabeth* sighed. “Oh, I don’t even know anymore.”

*Percy* grinned. “I think she’d figured out I was the ‘special someone’ she’d been waiting for and was really wishing I wasn’t.”

Even Clarisse her distance, though … I’d rather get into fights every day than be ignored.

“Oh, you should have said something.” *Annabeth* said. “I’m sure Clarisse would be more than happy to indulge you.”

“You know, I think I’ll live.” *Percy* said.

I knew somebody at camp resented me, because one night I … found a mortal newspaper dropped inside the doorway, a *New York Daily News*, opened to the Metro page.

*Thalia* frowned. “Where did that come from? We don’t get the paper at Camp.”

“Some people do go in and out.” *Luke* said. “I know I did a couple of times that summer for the library, and I did pick up the paper a few times, but … I didn’t put one in Percy’s cabin.”

The article took me almost an hour to read … BOY AND MOTHER STILL MISSING AFTER FREAK CAR ACCIDENT

Sally sucked in a breath. “Oh, Percy …”

*Thalia* leaned towards *Luke*. “You didn’t, huh?”

“I swear, Thalia, that wasn’t me.” *Luke* whispered. “At least … I don’t remember doing it.”
BY EILEEN SMITH

Sally Jackson and son Percy are still missing one week after their mysterious disappearance … Ms Jackson’s husband, Gabe Ugliano, claims that his stepson … has expressed violent tendencies in the past.

“Excuse me?” Sally said icily. “Did he just imply that my son was …?”

“Yes.” Percy said. “Yes, he did.”

Police … urge anyone with information to call the following toll-free crime-stoppers hotline.

The phone number was circled in black marker.

Thalia threw another glance at Luke, but didn’t say anything. After all, with everything he’d done, this would be a pretty small thing, so why would he bother lying?

Still, that would have helped push Percy into taking that quest, just to try and get his mother back. On saying that, any camper could have picked the paper up to read it, found the article and put it in the cabin to mess with Percy’s head.

I wadded up the paper and threw it away, then flopped down in my bunk bed … That night, I had my worst dream yet.

“Oh, not another one!” Thalia sighed.

I was running along the beach in a storm … Not New York. The sprawl was different … palm trees and low hills the distance.

“That sounds like Los Angeles.” Lee said.

“Yes, it does.” His father agreed.

About a hundred metres down the surf, two men were fighting … Both wore flowing Greek tunics, one trimmed in blue, the other in green.

Hera sighed. “Again?”

They grappled with each other … I could hear the blue-robed one yelling at the green-robed one, Give it back! Give it back! Like a kindergartner fighting over a toy.

Hermes chuckled. “Yes, that about sums it up.”

The waves got bigger … Laughter came from somewhere under the earth, and a voice so deep and evil it turned my blood to ice.

The amusement among the gods died immediately as Percy shivered.

“Don’t say it.” Zeus said. “It’s Hades. It must be.”

Persephone glared at him. “That is not my husband, and you know it.”

‘Come down, little hero,’ the voice crooned. ‘Come down!’

“No, don’t.” Poseidon whispered.
The sand split beneath me … I woke up, sure I was falling.

Several people let out sighs of relief.

I was still in bed in cabin three … A storm was brewing, I hadn’t dreamed that.

Dionysus heaved a heavy sigh. “Wonderful. There go the strawberry plants.”

“But the storm will pass round us, won’t it?” Malcolm asked.

“Not if Zeus doesn’t want it to.” Athena answered.

I heard a clopping sound at the door, a hoof knocking on the threshold.

‘Come in.’

Grover trotted inside, looking worried. ‘Mr D wants to see you.’ …

For days, I’d been half expecting a summons to the Big House. Now that I was declared a son of Poseidon … I figured it was a crime for me just to be alive.

“Technically it is.” Thalia said quietly, pressing against Percy’s side.

The other gods had probably been debating the best way to punish me for existing, and now Mr D was ready to deliver their verdict.

“No one is going to harm the demigods.” Hera said firmly. “Even if their fathers did take oaths.”

Over Long Island sound, the sky looked like ink soup coming to a boil … I asked Grover if we needed an umbrella.

“You shouldn’t.” Demeter said, frowning. “But you might.”

‘No,’ he said. ‘It never rains here unless we want to.’ …

I realised he was right … But this storm … this one was huge.

“Father, don’t take it out on our kids.” Apollo said wearily.

At the volleyball pit … Everybody was going about their normal business, they looked tense. They kept their eyes on the storm.

“That must be terrifying.” Silena said quietly. ‘I’ve never seen a storm at Camp.”

Grover and I walked up to the front porch of the big house …

‘Come close,’ Mr D said. ‘And don’t expect to me to bow to you, mortal, just because old Barnacle-Beard is your father.’

Poseidon glared at him, but said nothing.

A net of lightning flashed across the cloud …

‘If I had my way,’ Dionysus said, ‘I would cause your molecules to erupt in flames … But Chiron seems to feel this would be against my mission … to keep you little brats safe from
harm.’

“Yes, that would qualify as harming him.” Artemis said.

‘Spontaneous combustion is a form of harm, Mr D,’ Chiron put in.

‘Nonsense,’ Dionysus said. ‘Boy wouldn’t feel a thing.

Apollo smirked at his sister. “He has a point.”

Nevertheless I’ve agreed to restrain myself. I’m thinking of turning you into a dolphin instead … if you’re at all smart, you’ll see that’s a much more sensible choice than what Chiron feels you must do.’

“And what do you feel he must do?” Sally asked.

Chiron sighed. “Well, if I’m right, it’s where the quest comes in. But there’s no point in repeating myself, so I’m sure Lady Demeter is about to answer that question.”

Dionysus picked up a playing card, twisted it, and it became … A security pass … then he was gone … Chiron laid his cards on the table, a winning hand he hadn’t got to use.

Dionysus scowled. “Even when I’m not there, he wins.”

‘Tell me, Percy,’ he said. ‘What did you make of the hellhound?’ …

‘It scared me,’ I said. ‘If you hadn’t shot it, I’d be dead.’

“We’d all have said something like that.” Luke said. “It’s not something we’d expect to deal with, especially not at Camp.”

‘You’ll meet worse, Percy. Far worse, before you’re done.’

‘Done … with what?’

‘Your quest, of course. Will you accept it?’ …

‘Um, sir,’ I said, ‘you haven’t told me what it is yet.’

Athena raised an eyebrow. “That was very wise. Always get the details first.”

Chiron grimaced. ‘Well, that’s the hard part, the details.’ …

‘Poseidon and Zeus,’ I said. ‘They’re fighting over something valuable … something that was stolen, aren’t they?’

“Good guess.” Thalia said. “And that just proves it’s your quest.”

Chiron and Grover exchanged looks … ‘How did you know that?’

My face felt hot … ‘The weather since Christmas has been weird … And … I’ve also been having these dreams.’

'I knew,' Grover said …

‘Your father and Zeus are having their worst quarrel in centuries. They are fighting over something valuable that was stolen. To be precise: a lightning bolt.’

Several of the campers gasped. They had heard whispers over the course of the reading and the night before, but they had all been hoping they had misheard or misunderstood.

I laughed nervously. ‘A what?’

‘Do not take this lightly,’ Chiron warned. ‘I’m not talking about some tinfoil-covered zigzag … I’m talking about a two-foot-long cylinder of high-grade celestial bronze, capped on both ends with god-level explosives.’

“Well, that’s fairly terrifying.” Will said flatly.

“Yes.” Thalia agreed. “One of the most dangerous weapons on the planet – you do not want it to fall into the wrong hands.”

‘Oh.’

‘Zeus’s master bolt … The symbol of his power … which packs enough power to make mortal hydrogen bomb look like firecrackers.’

“Okay, we’ve got the picture.” Chris said, a little nervously.

‘And it’s missing?’

‘Stolen,’ Chiron said.

‘By who?’

… ‘By you.’

Percy’s mouth fell open. “I didn’t take it!”

Annabeth sighed. “Well, they know that now.”

My mouth fell open.

‘At least … that’s what Zeus things. During the winter solstice … Zeus and Poseidon had an argument … The usual nonsense: “Mother Rhea always liked you best,” “Air disasters are more spectacular than sea disasters,” et cetera.

“Hey, they sound like your fights.” Nico said innocently.

Thalia and Percy both stuck their tongues out at him.

Afterwards, Zeus realised his master bolt was missing, taken from the throne room under his very nose.

“The last council of the gods …” Annabeth said slowly. “But that was when we were there.”

“Not something you want to draw attention to right now.” Hermes told her grimly.
He immediately blamed Poseidon. Now a god cannot usurp another god’s symbol of power directly – that is forbidden by the most ancient of divine laws.

“What happens if someone does?” Annabeth asked curiously. “Not that I’m suggesting any of you would,” she added hastily, “it’s just that it’s technically against the rules for you to contact your children, but a lot of you do anyway.”

“Those are rules, but they aren’t divine laws.” Athena explained. “The divine laws are governed by something much older than us. We literally can’t break them.”

But Zeus believes your father convinced a human hero to take it … Zeus has good reason to be suspicious …. Now Poseidon has openly claimed you as his son … Zeus believes he has found his thief.’

“Logically, that does make sense.” Thalia admitted.

“Thalia!” Percy said, looking wounded.

“I know you didn’t do it.” Thalia said. “I just said that I can see Father’s logic. Twisted though it may be.”

“Thalia.” Now it was Zeus’s turn, except he sounded disappointed.

“I’m sorry, Father, but Poseidon has never shown any interest in ruling Olympus.” Thalia said. “In preventing some of your more – ah – intense ways, perhaps, but not in ruling. Besides, Percy and I may disagree over which the more powerful weapon is, but his trident is nothing to laugh at – why would he want the Master Bolt?”

‘But I’ve never even been to Olympus! Zeus is crazy!’

Once again, Annabeth and Thalia shifted away from him.

“How’s that filter coming on?” Nico asked innocently.

Percy ignored him, smiling innocently.

Chiron and Grover glanced nervously at the sky …

‘Er, Percy …?’ Grover said. ‘We don’t use the c-word to describe the Lord of the Sky.’

‘Perhaps paranoid,’ Chiron suggested.

Hera snorted under her breath. “Yes, that would certainly work.”

‘Then again, Poseidon has tried to unseat Zeus before. I believe that was question thirty-eight on your final exam …’ He looked at me as if he actually expected me to remember question thirty eight.

Percy frowned. “Was that … something to do with a golden net?”

“Yes, it was.” Chiron said. “Well remembered.”

“Just a minute!” Poseidon protested. “That was Hera’s idea, not mine!”

Hera scowled at him. “As I recall, you were all in agreement.”
How could anyone accuse me of stealing a god’s weapon? I couldn’t even steal a slice of pizza from Gabe’s poker party without getting busted.

“Definitely not one of mine then.” Hermes said, his smile taking any insult from the words.

Chiron was waiting for an answer.

‘Something about a golden net?’ I guessed. ‘Poseidon and Hera and a few other gods … they, like, trapped Zeus and wouldn’t let him out until he promised to be a better ruler, right?’

“Completely unnecessary.” Zeus muttered under his breath.

‘Correct,’ Chiron said. ‘And Zeus has never trusted Poseidon since.

“No, I haven’t.” Zeus said, glaring at his brother.

“Oh, but you’ll trust Hera, even though it was her idea.” Poseidon repeated.

Of course, Poseidon denies stealing the master bolt … And now you’ve come along – the proverbial last straw.’

‘But I’d just a kid!’

‘Percy,’ Grover cut in, ‘if you were Zeus … your brother suddenly admitted he had broken the sacred oath … Wouldn’t that put a twist in your toga?’

“Exactly!” Zeus said. “For once, the satyr talks sense.”

“And what am I?” Thalia asked. “A figment of everyone’s imagination? Uncle Poseidon was not the first to break the oath, Father.”

“Thalia, I expect you to …”

“I will side with my family.” Thalia said firmly, a storm brewing in her eyes. “Percy and I have been through a lot together. Besides, it is thoroughly unfair of you to condemn your brother for doing exactly what you did twice.”

“Twice?” Athena repeated. “What do you mean, twice?”

“Thalia.” Hera said icily. “I suggest you stop there.”

Thalia glared at her. “No, I won’t stop there. The word brother may not mean much up here, but it does to me. Jason was the only reason I stayed with my mother, I raised him, and he’s gone. I still don’t know why. I still don’t know where. All I know is he was a child of Zeus, just as I was, and Mother decided to offer him up to you in some kind of appeasement and now my brother is dead!”

Percy put a hand on her shoulder. “Thals? You okay?”

Thalia drew in a shaky breath. “No, Percy, I’m not. I want my brother back.”

“Your brother is alive.” Hera said suddenly. “I can tell you that much. Your father,” she gave Zeus a very sour look, “did something incredibly stupid and I needed to smooth things over.”

For a moment, Thalia looked as though she would argue – or even hit her stepmother. Then she relaxed, sagging into Percy’s side. “He’s okay?”
Hera nodded. “Yes, child. And I know you won’t believe me, but I wasn’t trying to cause you pain. Your brother had his own path to follow.” She glanced at the box of books. “Your paths may yet meet.”

*Thalia* nodded jerkily. For now, that was enough. “I apologise, Lady Demeter. Could you continue please?”

Demeter didn’t look convinced, but after a quick glance at her sister, she did as requested.

‘But I didn’t do anything. Poseidon – my dad – he didn’t really have this master bolt stolen, did he?’

Chiron sighed. ‘Most thinking observers would agree that thievery is not Poseidon’s style.

“Thank you.” Poseidon said smugly.

**But the sea god is too proud to try convincing Zeus of that. Zeus has demanded that Poseidon return the bolt by the summer solstice. That’s June twenty-first, ten days from now.**

“Ten days.” Katie said slowly. “But that doesn’t make sense. That would make this June 11th, and it implied that Percy had been in Cabin 3 for longer than a day.”

“It may have been speaking generally.” Annabeth suggested. “Today’s the 9th. Tomorrow he experiences the beginning of the chapter. Day after that, this happens. He wouldn’t have long to settle, not if Lord Zeus believes he stole the bolt.”

*Poseidon wants an apology for being called a thief by the same date. I hoped that diplomacy might prevail, that Hera or Demeter or Hestia would make the two brothers see sense.**

“Your faith in us is appreciated.” Hera said. “However, no one can make them see sense when they get going.”

**But your arrival has inflamed Zeus’s temper … unless the master bolt is found and returned to the solstice, there will be war.**

The campers all shuddered.

‘And do you know that a full-fledged war look like, Percy?’

‘Bad?’ I guessed.

‘Imagine the world in chaos … Western civilisation turned into a battleground so big it will make the Trojan War look like a water-balloon fight.’

“In hindsight,” Percy said seriously, “I’m not entirely sure that wouldn’t have been better.”

*Thalia* rolled her eyes.

Ares was almost glowing with excitement, something Aphrodite didn’t fail to notice.

‘Bad,’ I repeated …

It started to rain. Volleyball players stopped their game and stared in stunned silence at the sky.
“I’m not surprised.” Lee said faintly. “I’ve never seen rain at Camp.”

I had brought this storm to Half-Blood Hill …

‘What better peace offering,’ Chiron said, ‘than to have the son of Poseidon return Zeus’s property?’

“Again, that does make sense.” Thalia said. “Except you don’t know where it is.”

‘If Poseidon doesn’t have it, where is the thing?’

I believe I know … Part of a prophecy I had years ago … well, some of the lines make sense to me, now.

“You know, I’d be really interested to hear that prophecy.” Rachel said. “It’s the same one that said Annabeth had to wait for someone special before a quest, right?”

Chiron nodded. “That’s right.” He glanced at the campers. “But seeing as several prophecies are becoming obsolete, I see no point in throwing another into the mix.”

Rachel smiled. “Fair enough. I’d like to talk to you about it later in private, if I may?”

“Of course.” Chiron agreed.

But before I can say more … You must seek the counsel of the Oracle.’

‘Why can’t you tell me where the bolt is beforehand?’

‘Because if I did, you would be too afraid to accept the challenge.’

“Well, that’s comforting.” Nico said bluntly.

I swallowed. ‘Good reason.’

‘You agree then?’

I looked at Grover, who nodded encouragingly.

Easy for him. I was the one Zeus wanted to kill.

Grover blushed. “I’m not entirely sure about that.” He muttered.

“Father’s not going to kill you.” Thalia said firmly.

‘All right,’ I said …

‘Then it’s time you consulted the Oracle … When you come back down, assuming you’re still sane, we will talk more.’

“Assuming you’re still sane?” Will repeated, looking at Rachel.

She smiled at him. “You’ve seen my prophecy. Trust me when I say that my predecessor is nothing like me.”

“She’s a mummy.” Will said. “We knew that, didn’t we?”
“You’re thinking about an Egyptian wrapped in bandages, aren’t you?” Rachel asked, getting a nod.

“Yeah, she’s nothing like that.” Percy said with a shudder. “Oh, no offence, Lord Apollo.”

“Oh, none taken.” Apollo said. “I wish she’d moved on before now. A curse makes sense.”

Four flights up, the stairs ended under a green trapdoor … The attic was filled with Greek hero junk … old leather steamer trunks plastered with stickers saying ITHAKA, CIRCE’S ISLE …

Percy grimaced.

… and LAND OF THE AMAZONS. One long table was stacked with glass jars … By the window … was the most gruesome memento of all … a human female body shrivelled to a husk.

Several of the campers cried out in horror.

“It’s alright.” Hestia said softly. “She won’t harm you.”

“Can’t she be laid to rest?” Katie asked hesitantly.

“Not as long as the Oracle continues to inhabit her.” Apollo said sadly. “Until then, she will never find rest.”

She wore a tie-dye sundress, lots of beaded necklaces, and a headband over long black hair … she’d been dead a long, long time.

“Sounds like the sixties at the latest.” Thalia murmured.

Looking at her sent chills up my back. And that was before she sat up on her stool and opened her mouth … I am the spirit of Delphi, speaker of the prophecies of Phoebus Apollo, slayer of the mighty Python. Approach, seeker, and ask.

“Okay, that’s creepy.” Chris said flatly.

“I’m just glad we have you now, Rach.” Percy said.

I wanted to say, No thanks, wrong door, just looking for the bathroom. But I forced myself to take a deep breath.

“What would have happened if he had?” Silena asked.

“When the Oracle has a prophecy for you, you will hear it.” Thalia said. “She probably would have followed him.”

The mummy wasn’t alive. She was some kind of gruesome receptacle for something else … It felt more like the Three Fates I’d seen … ancient, powerful and definitely not human.

Rachel nodded. “Yeah, that about sums it up.”

But not particularly interested in killing me, either.

“The Oracle won’t harm anyone.” Apollo said. “Except with her words. She speaks only the truth.”
I got up the courage to ask, ‘What is my destiny?’

Annabeth sniggered. “Bit melodramatic, wasn’t it?”

Percy shrugged. “Well, it covered all the bases.”

The mist swirled more thickly, collecting right in front of me … Suddenly there were four men sitting around the table … It was Smelly Gabe and his buddies … Gabe turned towards me and spoke in the rasping voice of the Oracle: *You shall go west, and face the god who has turned.*

“Hades!” Zeus growled.

“It didn’t say it was him.” Persephone said fiercely. “Just that he would meet the god in the West. It could be any of you!”

Thalia glanced at Luke, silently urging him to say something soon. She had no idea when Ares was revealed, but when he was, as Percy had said, he would sell Luke out in a heartbeat.

His buddy on the right looked up and said in the same voice: *You shall find what was stolen, and see it safely returned.*

Zeus settled at that, breathing a sigh of relief.

The guy on the left … said: *You shall be betrayed by one who calls you a friend.*

Hestia frowned. “That doesn’t sound good.”

Finally, Eddie, our building super, delivered the worst line of all: *And you shall fail to save what matters most, in the end.*

“That sounds worse.” Sally said, looking at her son. She had a feeling that she was ‘what mattered most’, but then Nico, Thalia and Annabeth all knew her in the future, so she must have escaped, mustn’t she?

The figures began to dissolve … I cried, ‘Wait! What do you mean? What friend? What will I fail to save?’

Apollo smiled grimly. “Sorry, kid. The Oracle doesn’t explain her prophecies, she never has.”

“And I can’t.” Rachel said, grimacing. “Hang on, I think I’m getting that …” She went rigid once more, her eyes glowing the same vivid green.

“You shall go west, and face the god who has turned.

You shall find what was stolen, and see it safely returned.

You shall be betrayed by one who calls you a friend.

And you shall fail to save what matters most, in the end.”

The light disappeared and Rachel drew in a breath. “Well, that was …” She paled. “Oh gods, here we go again!” She doubled over with a gasp, before straightening back into her prophecy trance.

“The thief shall speak ‘fore tale is through
Then three more heroes join you too
Who bridge the empires now divided
And soon will see them reunited.”

*Luke* and *Nico* caught her as she collapsed, the latter tapping her face until her eyes opened.

“I’m okay.” Rachel said, waving them off. “That second one was real. The first one was the Oracle re-providing Percy’s, but the second one …”

“Here.” *Annabeth* said, pushing it into her hands.

Rachel read it over, frowning. “What is it with the rhyming today? Divided and reunited?”

*Percy* rolled his eyes. “Do you know what it means?”

“Yeah, it means that whoever stole the Master Bolt and the Helm of Darkness is going to confess before we finish this book.” Rachel said. “And we’re getting three more readers, but I’m not sure when. But this second part, about empires divided … I have no idea.”

The gods glanced at each other. The obvious answer was Rome and Greece, but the two camps had been separated for nearly a hundred and fifty years – what would make them change that now?

For a few seconds, the room was silent, waiting for either a knock at the door or for someone to suddenly confess that, yes, it was they who stole the items.

But neither happened, and *Demeter* picked up the book once more. “Before I begin, does anyone wish to speculate on Percy’s prophecy?”

Everyone looked at Rachel who shook her head. “Oh no. You’re on your own with this one.”

“I think we’d drive ourselves crazy.” Athena said sensibly. “Especially since the book is going to explain it all anyway.”

*Demeter* nodded and found her place again.

**The tail of the mist snake disappeared into the mummy’s mouth … My audience with the Oracle was over.**

‘Well?’ *Chiron* asked me.

I slumped into a chair … ‘She said I would retrieve what was stolen.’ …

‘What did the Oracle say exactly?’ *Chiron* pressed. ‘This is important.’

“The Oracle is rarely that succinct.” *Chiron* said.

My ears were still tingling … ‘She … she said I would go west and face a god who has turned. I would retrieve what was stolen and see it safely returned.’ …

*Chiron* didn’t look satisfied. ‘Anything else?’

“You knew, didn’t you?” *Annabeth* asked.

“I assume so, child.” *Chiron* said. “She often adds in warnings when she speaks.”
I didn’t want to tell him.

What friend would betray me? …

And the last line … What kind of Oracle would send me on a quest and tell me, *Oh, by the way, you’ll fail.*

“It’s disconcerting.” Luke said. “But try not to dwell on it, or you’ll make it come true.”

His voice sounded flat to his own ears, but no one else seemed to notice.

No one except Thalia, who was watching him.

He had an awful feeling that he was the friend who would betray Percy, but what could he do?

Rachel telling him to confess was all very well, but Zeus would murder him on the spot.

What kind of hero are you? A voice in his head asked – Thalia’s, for once, not Kronos. Alright, you’ll be dead, but you know it won’t end with the Master Bolt. At least if you die now, you’ll spare Thalia and Annabeth from whatever horrors lie ahead.

He was decided. That evening, he would go to Zeus and he would tell him everything.

**How could I confess that?**

‘No,’ I said. ‘That’s about it.’

He studied my face. ‘Very well, Percy … The truth is not always clear until events come to pass.’

“You can say that again.” Percy muttered.

I got the feeling he knew I was holding back something bad, and he was trying to make me feel better.

“They do have double meanings as well though.” Rachel said.

‘Okay, I said, anxious to change topics. ‘So where do I go? Who’s this god in the west?’

‘Ah, think, Percy,’ Chiron said. ‘If Zeus and Poseidon weaken each other in a war, who stands to gain?’

“Not me.” Hades grumbled. “I have enough to do. *And* my Helm is missing.”

“Be fair, darling, they didn’t know that part.” Persephone said. “But they shouldn’t automatically blame you.”

‘Somebody else who wants to take over?’ I guessed.

‘Yes, quite. Someone who harbours a grudge, who has been unhappy with his lot since the world was divided aeons ago …’

I thought about my dreams, the evil voice that had spoken from under the ground. ‘Hades.’

“That voice was not me.” Hades said.
“There is no one else it could be.” Zeus said stubbornly.

*Thalia* rolled her eyes.

Chiron nodded. ‘The Lord of the Dead is the only possibility … Furies only obey one lord: Hades.’

“He does have a point on that one.” Athena said.

“I was trying to get the Helm back.” Hades said. “Why would I kill Percy if I’d stolen the Master Bolt, hmm? I could understand it if I thought he’d stolen it to frame me, but where’s the logic otherwise?”

‘Yes, but – Hades hates *all* heroes,’ Grover protested …

‘A hellhound got into the forest,’ Chiron continued. ‘Those can only be summoned from the Fields of Punishment … Hades must have a spy here. He … would very much like to kill this young half-blood before he can take on the quest.’

“The hellhound definitely had nothing to do with me,” Hades said. “At least, I’m not planning on it. Anyone could have summoned it. I don’t doubt *someone* has a spy there.”

‘Great,’ I muttered. ‘That’s two major gods who want to kill me.’

‘But a quest to …’ Grover swallowed. ‘I mean, couldn’t the master bolt be in some place like Maine? Maine’s very nice this time of year.’

A couple of the campers chuckled nervously.

“Satyrs don’t do well underground.” Grover said, chewing on a fork.

‘Hades sent a minion to steal the master bolt,’ Chiron insisted. ‘He hid it in the Underworld … Percy must go to the Underworld, find the master bolt, and reveal the truth.’

“Oh, not much then.” Percy said. “Piece of cake, really.”

A strange fire burned in my stomach … It was his fault my mother had disappeared … Now he was trying to frame me and my dad for a theft we hadn’t committed.

*I was ready to take him on.*

Percy snorted. “I’m really not. I was twelve. And stupid.”

“Hey!” His younger self protested.

“I stand by it.” Percy said. “He’s a god.”

Annabeth raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

“Anger is quite a powerful motivator.” Hera said wisely.

*Besides, if my mother was in the Underworld …*  

Whoa, boy, said the small part of my brain that was still sane. You’re a kid. Hades is a god.
Sally shook her head. “Percy, honey, forget about me. Just get yourself out of there alive.”

Grover trembling … how could I ask him to do this quest, especially when the Oracle said I was destined to fail? This was suicide.

“There must be another option.” Sally said.

“There is.” Percy said. “Becoming a dolphin.”

“We’d feed you.” Thalia said, straight-faced. “You could be like Flipper.”

‘Look, if we know it’s Hades,’ I told Chiron, ‘why can’t we just tell the other gods?

“Because we don’t know.” Chiron said. “We suspect. It isn’t the same thing. And, as it turns out, we’re wrong.”

Zeus or Poseidon could just go down to the Underworld and bust some heads.’

‘Suspecting and knowing are not the same,’ Chiron said. ‘Besides … Gods cannot cross each other’s territories except by invitation … No god can be held responsible for a hero’s actions. Why do you think the gods always operate through humans?’

“And here I thought it was just convenience.” Thalia said.

“Well, it is.” Annabeth pointed out. “They just don’t have another choice. Most of the time.”

‘You’re saying I’m being used.’

‘I’m saying it’s no accident Poseidon has claimed you now … He needs you.’

My dad needs me … Poseidon had ignored me for twelve years. Now he needed me.

“Chiron, that wasn’t worded very well.” Poseidon said with a frown. “Percy, I held off claiming you to keep you safe, until it was obvious you were my child, but …”

“Dad,” Percy interrupted, “I love you, but you’ve never been the best at explaining this.” He turned to his younger self. “He loves you, he’s proud of you, he’s got a bad habit of occasionally putting his foot in his mouth.”

Several of the campers looked horrified, as though they expected him to vaporise on the spot, but Poseidon laughed, a booming chuckle that echoed around the hall. “Strangely enough, your stepmother says that as well.”

“I know.” Percy said with a grin. “Where’d you think I got it from?”

I looked at Chiron. ‘You’ve known I was Poseidon’s son all along, haven’t you?’

‘I had my suspicions …’

I got the feeling there was a lot he wasn’t telling me about his prophecy, but I decided I couldn’t worry about that right now. After all, I was holding back information too.

“We never did learn about that prophecy.” Percy mused.

“I think if we needed to know, Chiron would have said something.” Annabeth said. “Rachel only
wants to know due to professional curiosity.”

‘So let me get this straight.’ I said. ‘I’m supposed to go to the Underworld and confront the Lord of the Dead.’

‘Check,’ Chiron said.

‘Find the most powerful weapon in the universe.’

‘Check.’

‘And get it back to Olympus before the summer solstice, in ten days.’

‘That’s about right.’

“Like I said,” Percy said, “piece of cake.”

“Percy, would you be serious?!” Sally said shrilly. “You could be killed, you could be vaporised, you could be …”

“Right here,” Percy interrupted gently. “Mom, I’m right here. You know I survive it.” He was stretching the truth a little bit. After all, Luke was right there as well. But what his mother didn’t know wouldn’t hurt her. “And I’m fairly sure getting vaporised and getting killed is the same thing anyway.”

Sally relaxed at that, but only a little.

I looked at Grover …

‘Did I mention that Maine is very nice this time of year?’ he asked weakly.

Malcolm smiled grimly. “Nice try, Grover.” Quests were undertaken in groups of three generally, and he had a feeling he knew who the third would be.

‘You don’t have to go,’ I told him. ‘I can’t ask that of you.’

‘Oh … it’s just that satyrs and underground places … You saved my life, Percy … if you’re serious about wanting me along, I won’t let you down.’

“You’re my best friend.” Percy said. “Of course I want you along.”

I felt so relieved I wanted to cry … I wasn’t sure what good a satyr could do against the forces of the dead, but I felt better knowing he’d be with me.

“Not very much, I’m afraid.” Grover admitted. “But I will do my best.”

‘All the way, G-man,’ I turned to Chiron. ‘So where do we go? The Oracle just said to go west.’

‘The entrance to the Underworld … is in Los Angeles.’

“Hence the dream.” Percy said, then frowned. “But if it isn’t actually in the Underworld, then why was I dreaming about it?”

“Probably because you were going there.” Thalia said.
‘Oh,’ I said. ‘Naturally. So we just get on a plane –’

“No!” Sally and Poseidon shouted.

“Percy, you cannot get on a plane!” Sally continued. “Never, do you understand?”
“But we’ve only got ten days.” Percy said. “To get across the country. Surely a plane is quicker.”

“You see, Percy,” Thalia said, glaring at her father, “I can get on a boat or go swimming and your father will do nothing. However, if you get on a plane, my father will blast you out of the sky. You need to keep your feet on the ground. Or in water. Anything but the air.”

‘No!’ Grover shrieked. ‘Percy, what are you thinking? Have you ever been on a plane in your life?’

I shook my head … My mom had never taken me anywhere by plane … her parents had died in a plane crash.

“That’s not the only reason.” Sally murmured.

‘Percy, think,’ Chiron said. ‘You are the son of the Sea God … You would be in Zeus’s domain. You would never come down again alive.’

Thalia scowled. “No, you wouldn’t.”

Overhead lightning cracked … ‘Two companions may accompany you. Grover is one. The other has already volunteered, if you will accept her help.’

Athena sighed. She knew this was coming.

‘Gee … Who else would be stupid enough to volunteer for a quest like this?’

The air shimmered … Annabeth became visible … ‘I’ve been waiting a long time for a quest, Seaweed Brain,’ she said. ‘Athena is no fan of Poseidon, but if you’re going to save the world, I’m the best person to keep you from messing up.’

“True.” Percy said.

“Which bit?” Athena asked.

“All of it, ma’am.” Percy said. “I know you’re no fan of my father, and that he’s no fan of yours, but I can honestly say that without Annabeth, I would not be sitting here right now.”

“Be fair.” Annabeth said, blushing slightly. “That goes both ways.”

‘If you say so yourself,’ I said … I needed all the help I could get.

Annabeth snorted. “Thanks.”

‘A trio,’ I said. ‘That’ll work.’

‘Excellent,’ Chiron said. ‘This afternoon, we can take you as far as the bus terminal … After that, you are on your own.’

Lightning flashed. Rain poured down on the meadows that were never supposed to have
Apollo frowned. “Would you stop taking it out on our kids? We haven’t done anything.”

‘No time to waste,’ Chiron said. ‘I think you should all get packing.’

“Not that it did us much good.” Percy muttered under his breath.

“Annabeth,” Athena said, “would you mind looking through the book for me? I think it would be a good idea if we break for dinner now, then read another chapter before turning in, but I don’t think finishing on any sort of cliff-hanger would be a good idea.”

“Of course.” Annabeth said, taking the book from Demeter. She flipped through the next few chapters, glancing at the titles and the last sentences of each. “Okay, I would say,” she glanced at the clock, “that idea sounds good. The chapter after the next one doesn’t end on a cliff-hanger, but it’s probably the sort of chapter we should read on fresh eyes.”

“Which is it?” Percy asked.

“Auntie Em.” Annabeth answered.

“Oh.” Percy flinched. “I agree, let’s do it that way.”

Their parents were not going to like that one.

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think in the box below :)

For news and updates on how the writing process is progressing not just with this fic, but all my stories, please visit titansrule24.weebly.com and click on News/Updates to find my new blog.
Sorry this is so late - I had a pretty bad weekend last week and it completely slipped my mind.

Dinner was a much calmer affair than lunch, mainly because Hades had managed to not anger his wife or, for that matter, his mother-in-law (well, not any more than his general existence did anyway).

Sally kept Percy close to her (not that he was complaining) and chatted with the campers about their favourite camp activities.

Athena grilled Annabeth about the building work on Olympus; her daughter was careful not to give away the details about how the place had been damaged in the first place, but was more than happy to tell the goddess about the new temples and buildings she was designing.

Thalia and Artemis spoke about the various hunts Thalia had been on, the latter carefully avoiding Aphrodite’s revelation earlier that day. They would have that particular discussion in private.

Rachel had cornered Luke and was engaging him in a lively discussion about her father’s company, camp and monsters, anything, really, to distract him from his quiet brooding.

Amazingly, they got all the way through the meal without a single incident. Towards the end, the gods drifted apart and, when everyone settled for the last chapter before they turned in, the seating arrangements had changed, so that many of the campers were sitting with their parents.

Aphrodite stroked her daughter’s hair and smiled. “Does anyone mind if I read the next chapter?”

“Not at all.” Demeter said, handing her the book.

Aphrodite turned to the next page and began to read.

Chapter Ten

I Ruin a Perfectly Good Bus

Annabeth snorted. “Well, that’s one way of putting it.”

It didn’t take me long to pack … an extra change of clothes and a toothbrush to stuff in a backpack Grover had found for me.

Sally frowned.

“That’s quite normal.” Chiron said sadly. “A lot of the children arrive at camp after running away or having to leave suddenly – most of them don’t have very much.”

The camp store loaned me one hundred dollars in mortal money and twenty golden drachmas.
“That wasn’t a loan.” Annabeth said. “We weren’t expected to pay them back.”

These coins were as big as Girl Scout cookies … Olympians never used less than pure gold.

“I should think not.” Athena murmured, her eyes fixed on her daughter. She didn’t like the idea of her daughter going on a quest with a son of Poseidon, and the chapter title had hardly filled her with confidence in the boy.

Chiron said the coins might come in handy for non-mortal transactions – whatever that meant.

Percy frowned. “Yeah, what does that mean?”

“Orientation film.” Luke said with an apologetic smile. “The goddess Iris will broadcast messages for a price. Think of it like a video call. Not to mention there are various supernatural hotspots around the country – drachmas will go pretty far.”

He gave Annabeth and me each a flask of nectar and an airtight bag full of ambrosia … if we were seriously hurt.

“And only if you’re seriously hurt.” Apollo added sternly.

It was god food … an overdose would burn us up, literally.

Sally shuddered.

Annabeth was bringing … a twelfth-birthday present from her mom.

Annabeth beamed.

She carried a book … to read when she got bored …

Thalia laughed. “Oh, Annie … Only you.”

Annabeth sighed. “I miss the days I genuinely thought I could get bored on quests.”

Her younger self frowned. “Well, we are travelling cross country. It’s going to take a few days.”

“And those days are not going to be spent sitting on a bus or a train and waiting.” Thalia said. “I can almost guarantee it.”

… and a long bronze knife, hidden in her shirt sleeve.

“Do you all have your own weapons?” Sally asked curiously. “Or are they borrowed from camp?”

“Generally speaking, we all have a weapon at camp we prefer.” Luke answered. “And some of us have a weapon that ‘calls out’ so to speak, so we keep hold of it. Annie’s didn’t come from camp though; I gave it to her when she was seven.”

Annabeth nodded, blushing a little. Her future counterpart dropped her gaze – she was having trouble even looking at her knife right now.

I was sure the knife would get us busted the first time we went through a metal detector.

“It’s celestial bronze.” Rachel explained. “Mortals can’t sense it or see it – even if it, say, gets shoved
through your rib cage.”

“Would you let it go?!” Percy asked in exasperation. “You snuck up on me and it didn’t even hurt!”

Grover wore his fake feet … In his pocket was a set of reed pipes … even though he only knew two songs … both of which sounded pretty bad on reed pipes.

Percy winced as Annabeth and Thalia both smacked him over the head. “Sorry, Grover. You get better.” He added hastily, when the satyr still looked embarrassed.

We waved goodbye … then hiked up Half-Blood Hill to the tall pine tree that used to be Thalia, daughter of Zeus.

Thalia sighed. “Would you stop?”

Percy shrugged. “I didn’t write this.”

Chiron was waiting for us … Next to him stood the surfer dude … ‘This is Argus … He will drive you into the city, and, er, well, keep an eye on things.’

Nico snorted. “Oh, the puns.”

I heard footsteps behind us.

Luke came running up the hill, carrying a pair of basketball shoes.

Luke frowned slightly. Those shoes were a gift from his father, but they usually stayed hidden under his bed.

‘Hey!’ … Annabeth blushed, the way she always did when Luke was around.

Annabeth groaned. “Out of interest, how long is this ‘I think she has a crush on him’ thing going to last?”

“Erm …” Percy shifted away from her. “At least a couple of books.”

Annabeth sighed, her head falling back against the couch. “Okay,” she said, trying to figure out how to word it, “have you ever had someone who you looked up to? Probably someone older than you, who you admired?”

“Yes.” Percy said, as a lot of people nodded.

“When I met Luke, I was seven.” Annabeth said. “He was fourteen. He and Thalia took me under their wings and looked after me, when they really didn’t have to. After Thalia died, I just had Luke. After the quest went wrong, he was … different. Withdrawn, distant … Most of the campers didn’t notice, but I did. He didn’t feel like my big brother anymore, but I still looked up to him. The … dynamics, let say, had been thrown out of sync, and I didn’t know where I stood anymore. So, yes, I got a little bit …”

“Flustered?” Thalia suggested. “Shy?”

“I like the second one better.” Annabeth muttered. “Plus I’m very fair-skinned, so I blush easily.”

Annabeth shrugged, but didn’t say anything.

‘Just wanted to say ... maybe you could use these.’

“That was nice of you.” Thalia said.

She saw Luke flinch, but only because she was looking for it.

He handed me the sneakers ... ‘Maia!’

Apollo looked at Hermes, who rolled his eyes.

“Do you really think,” he said, “that I’d wear them around you if they reacted to everyone?”

White bird’s wings sprouted out of the heels ... ‘... Gift from Dad ...’ His expression turned sad.

“It’s a nice gesture, Luke.” Hermes said kindly. “But Percy won’t be able to use them.”

“Because he’s not your son?” Luke asked.

“No, because he’s Poseidon’s.” Thalia said with a slight smile. “If he takes off, even a couple of feet, my father would kill him. He can’t use them.”

“That explains a lot.” Luke murmured, almost under his breath.

Thalia caught it and closed her eyes. Oh, Luke ... what did you do?

I didn’t know what to say ... I’d been afraid he might resent me for getting so much attention the last few days.


But here he was ... It made me blush almost as much as Annabeth.

Annabeth rolled her eyes, resigning herself to the fact that this was going to keep happening.

‘Hey, man,’ I said. ‘Thanks.’

‘Listen, Percy ... just ... kill some monsters for me, okay?’

“You were so not going to say that.” Thalia murmured under her breath.

“I wanted to tell him to be careful.” Luke muttered.

We shook hands. Luke patted Grover’s head ... then gave a goodbye hug to Annabeth, who looked like she might pass out.

“Oh, for the love of …”

“Annabeth!” Thalia interrupted. “We get it! Calm down.”

After Luke was gone, I told her ... ‘You let him capture the flag instead of you, didn’t you?’

Annabeth’s jaw dropped. “Don’t even joke!”
‘Oh … why do I want to go anywhere with you, Percy?’

_Nico_ opened his mouth, but _Annabeth_’s glare stopped him.

She stomped down the other side of the hill … _Argus_ followed … _I_ had a sudden bad feeling.

_I_ looked at _Chiron_. ‘I won’t be able to use these, will I?’

“Oh, so you _do_ have some self-preservation.” _Thalia_ said. “I had wondered.”

_He shook his head_. ‘Luke meant well, _Percy_.

_Thalia_ pursed her lips. There was something wrong with those shoes. She could just feel it.

**But taking to the air …** ‘Hey, _Grover_. You want a magic item?’

_Grover_’s eyes lit up. “Seriously?”

_His eyes lit up …** Pretty soon …** the world’s first flying goat boy was ready for launch.

_Travis_ and _Conner_ laughed.

‘_Maia!_’ _he_ shouted.

_He_ got off the ground okay, but then … went flying sideways down the hill like a possessed lawn mower …

The laughter got louder as _Grover_ turned red.

** … heading towards the van.**

_Before_ I could follow, _Chiron_ caught my arm. ‘I should have trained you better …’ … I was wishing my dad had given me a cool magic item to help on the quest, something as good as … _Annabeth_’s invisible cap.

_Poseidon_ frowned. “I did. You just haven’t been given it yet.”

‘What am I thinking?’ … _He_ pulled a pen from his coat pocket … ‘Percy, that’s a gift from your father …’ … I took off the cap, and the pen grew longer … _It_ was the first weapon that actually felt balanced in my hand.

“Did it really come from the sea?” _Percy_ asked.

“In a manner of speaking.” _Thalia_ said, glancing at _Artemis_. “I think the story will come into it at some point.”

‘The sword has a long and tragic history that we need not go into,’ _Chiron_ told me.

_Artemis_ sighed. Her poor _Zoe_.

‘_Its name is Anaklusmos_.’

“_Riptide,_” _I_ translated, surprised the Ancient Greek came so easily.

“_Still?_” _Annabeth_ asked fondly.
Athena raised an eyebrow. The Jackson boy’s affection when addressing her daughter was one thing, but whatever ‘it’ was seemed to go both ways.

For the first time in millennia, she caught Poseidon’s eye in silent agreement. After they had finished this chapter, they would take their children aside for a talk.

‘Use it only for emergencies … and only against monsters.’

“Yeah, Percy.” Rachel smirked.

No hero should harm mortals … but this sword wouldn’t harm them in any case.’

“How?” Sally asked.

“It’s celestial bronze.” Percy explained, uncapping the sword again. “Hold your arm out.”

Sally did so without the slightest hesitation, watching in fascination as the blade passed harmlessly through her hand as though it was made of smoke. “Incredible.”

I looked at the wickedly sharp blade … ‘The sword is celestial bronze … will pass through mortals like an illusion. They simply are not important enough for the blade to kill.

Rachel sniffed. “Oh, thanks.”

And I should warn you: as a demigod, you can be killed by either celestial or normal weapons. You are twice as vulnerable.’

“Oh, that’s comforting.” Sally said.

‘Good to know.’ … I tucked it in my pocket, a little nervous … ‘… It will always reappear in your pocket.


Percy nodded, recapping the sword and tossing the pen across the room. “Hold that, would you?”

Luke caught it, looking startled, and everyone watched the pen in his hand. After a few seconds, the pen vanished, and Percy reached into his pocket and pulled it out again.

“It’s like a boomerang.” He said with a grin. “It always comes back.”

Try it.’ … ‘Okay, that’s extremely cool,’ I admitted.

“Yeah, it is.” Beckendorf agreed, his mind already working a hundred miles a minute.

‘But what if a mortal sees me pulling out a sword?’

“Apparently, most of us don’t.” Rachel said. “I wish I didn’t; scared the crap out of me.”

“And yet, you still covered for me against the security monsters.” Percy said.

“Alright, you two, cut it out.” Thalia said in mock- sternness. “You’re just confusing people.”

Chiron smiled … For the first time, the quest felt real … I had no weapon stronger than a sword to fight off monsters and reach the Land of the Dead.
Annabeth sighed. “Must you be so pessimistic?”

“I prefer the term ‘realistic’,” Percy said.

‘Chiron …’ I said. ‘When you say the gods are immortal … I mean, there was a time before them, right?’

“Oh boy.” Thalia sighed. “You do have a habit of asking the big ones, Kelp-Head.”

‘Four ages before them, actually. The Time of the Titans was the Fourth Age, sometimes called the Golden Age, which is definitely a misnomer.

“You can say that again.” Zeus grumbled, scowling.

This, the time of Western civilisation and the rule of Zeus, is the Fifth Age.’ … I mean, as long as Western civilisation is alive, they’re alive. So … even if I failed, nothing could happen so bad it would mess up everything, right?’

Aphrodite hesitated. “It is not something I would recommend, child. Aside from anything else, there is humanity to think about.”

Chiron gave me a melancholy smile. ‘… The gods are immortal, yes. But then, so were the Titans.

Percy and Annabeth exchanged a glance.

They still exist, locked away … but still very much alive. … All we can do, child, is follow our destiny.’

“Easier said than done, that.” Percy muttered.

‘Our destiny …’ ‘Relax,’ Chiron told me. ‘… you may be about to prevent the biggest war in human history.’

Malcolm laughed nervously. “Who could possibly be relaxed about that?”

‘Relax,’ I said. ‘I’m very relaxed.’

Annabeth snorted. “Yeah, you were almost going backwards.”

When I got to the bottom of the hill, I looked back. Under the pine tree that used to be Thalia, daughter of Zeus …

“Just call it the pine tree!” Thalia said in exasperation. “You don’t need to keep bringing my name into it!”

Percy rolled his eyes, giving up. “Sorry.”

… Chiron was now standing … holding his bow high in salute. Just your typical summer-camp send-off by your typical centaur.

A few people chuckled.

“You know, it’s probably a good thing the Fates took the books from Percy’s thoughts.” Aphrodite
said, turning the page. “I mean, the price is horrible,” she added, looking sympathetically at the future readers, “but at least the tone’s a little lighter.”

**Argus drove us … into western Long Island … the real world seemed like a fantasy.**

“It is really strange.” Katie agreed.

**I found myself staring … ‘Ten miles and not a single monster.’**

*Thalia* sighed. “Percy, have you never heard of Murphy’s law? Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong, especially if you comment on how nothing’s gone wrong or ask what can possibly go wrong.”

She gave me an irritated look … we’re just not supposed to get along, okay? Our parents are rivals.’

Aphrodite sighed, rolling her eyes. “You don’t have to stick to your parents’ rivalries, you know.”

‘Why?’

She sighed. ‘How many reasons do you want?’

“And do you want them alphabetically or chronologically?” Apollo asked.

**One time my mom caught Poseidon with his girlfriend in Athena’s temple, which is hugely disrespectful.**

“Yeah, that was kind of out of order, Dad.” *Percy* said with a frown. “I mean, I know I’m supposed to take your side, but come on. In her temple?”

To everyone’s surprise (especially Athena’s), Poseidon merely sighed. “You’re right, Percy; it was an incredibly insulting thing for me to do. I was angry with Athena and I lashed out in a very childish way. And I have apologised. Numerous times. And she refuses to accept them.”

**Another time, Athena and Poseidon competed to be the patron god for the city of Athens.**

Aphrodite paused. “I think that one came first, actually.”

**Your dad created some stupid saltwater spring for his gift. My mom created the olive tree.**

“Well, you can eat olives.” *Nico* said fairly. “You can’t drink saltwater. Plus, olives are great on pizza.”

The people saw that her gift was better, so they named the city after her.’ … Argus smiled … one blue eye on the back of his neck winked at me.

So they had always been this way, *Nico* thought. In a way, it was comforting. It was bad enough to have an unrequited crush, but at least he knew that it was nothing against him – ‘Percabeth’, as he had heard Cabin Ten squealing about, had always been fated.

Besides, Percy was one of the few people that he was certain was completely and utterly straight.

*Nico* tried not to make that assumption about people, not since he had learned that being … well, the way he was, was no longer a crime or a deviance in this new century. He had learned that there were dozens of words that people could identify with, so he tried not to assume that everyone identified
with just one.

Percy, however, was probably the straightest straight person to walk the Earth and Nico was trying to be okay with it. He just hoped that the book stayed well away from his emotions.

**Traffic slowed us down in Queens. By the time we got into Manhattan, it was sunset and starting to rain.**

Silena frowned. “You’re already down one day.”

**Argus dropped us at the Greyhound Station … Taped to a mailbox was a soggy flyer with my picture on it … I ripped it down before Annabeth and Grover could notice.**

“We noticed.” Annabeth said. “We just didn’t say anything.”

**Argus unloaded our bags … then drove away … Smelly Gabe was probably up there right now … not even missing her.**

Hera scowled.

**Grover shouldered his backpack … ‘You want to know why she married him, Percy? … Your stepfather smells so repulsively human he could mask the presence of any demigod … She must’ve loved you a lot to put up with that guy – if that makes you feel any better.’**

“Oddly enough, it didn’t really.” Percy murmured to Annabeth, who hushed him.

**It didn’t, but I forced myself not to show it.**

Grover deflated, but Percy patted him on the shoulder. “It’s okay, man; you were trying. I appreciate it.”

**I’ll see her again, I thought. She isn’t gone.**

“Oh dear.” Persephone sighed. “This isn’t going to go well.”

“Well, the boy must succeed.” Hades said reluctantly. “Nico knows his mother in the future, after all.”

“That’s true.” Persephone said, turning a curious gaze on Percy. “Unless he retrieves the helm – then you might return her as a gesture of goodwill. Or she stayed there until my return and I talked you into it.”

Sally shuddered. “No offence, but I hope I didn’t stay there that long.” She turned to Percy. “But don’t do anything stupid, young man.”

**I wondered if Grover could still read my emotions … I hadn’t been straight with them.**

Annabeth gave a small smile. “I kind of guessed that, Percy. You were too calm about the whole thing.”

I hadn’t told them … I didn’t care … The more I thought about it, I resented Poseidon … He’d only claimed me because he needed a job done.

Poseidon sighed. “I promise, Percy, that is not the only reason.”
“Sorry.” Percy said. “We’re going to go over this a lot over the next week or so.”

“It’s not just him.” Luke said, seeing some of the gods looking disapprovingly at Percy. “We’ve all felt like that at least once.”

That was how Kronos got into his head.

_Tonight. Tonight. Tonight._

_All I cared about was my mom._

Sally sighed, resigning herself to the fact that her son was probably going to do something crazy to get her back.

_Hades had taken her unfairly … You will fail to save what matters most in the end._

_Shut up, I told it._

“Try not to dwell on it too much.” Rachel advised. “You’ll go mad.”

_The rain kept coming down._

_We got restless … and decided to play some Hacky Sack … Annabeth was unbelievable … I wasn’t too bad myself._

“Not as good as me though.” Annabeth said, her knee jiggling slightly. So far, aside from getting wet, she hadn’t experienced the effects of the book. She knew what was coming.

_The game ended when I tossed the apple towards Grover and it got too close to his mouth._

_In one mega goat bite, our Hacky Sack disappeared – core, stem and all._

Grover turned red and the campers laughed.

_Grover blushed … Finally the bus game … Grover started … sniffing the air like he smelled … enchiladas._

The laughter faded and everyone leaned forwards, listening more intently.

“Do you think he smells a monster?” Katie whispered.

“Oh, I hope not.” Sally murmured.

‘What is it?’ … ‘Maybe it’s nothing.’

“It definitely wasn’t ‘nothing’.” Annabeth muttered.

_But I could tell it wasn’t nothing … I was relieved when we … found seats together in the back of the bus._

“Bad idea.” Thalia said tersely. “Sit near the front, it’s an easy getaway.”

_We stowed our backpacks._

“And don’t put your bags away!” Thalia added. “Keep them near you at all times.”
Annabeth … clamped her hand onto my knee. ‘Percy.’

Athena’s frown was drawn more of worry than anger. Something was wrong.

An old lady had just boarded the bus … It was Mrs Dodds.

“Alecto.” Nico sighed.

“Hades!” Poseidon growled.

“Again?!” Persephone demanded.

“Were we not just talking about how the children should not be punished for things they have yet to do?” Hades asked. “I have yet to send Alecto, or anyone else, to interfere on a quest they have not yet left on.”

“They are children.” Athena said icily. “You are a god. You should know better. If anything happens to my daughter, I will make your existence very, very miserable.”

“I will help.” Poseidon added.

Older, more withered … Behind her came two more old ladies …

Persephone’s glare darkened.

… one in a green hat, one in a purple hat … They sat in the front row … it sent a clear message: nobody leaves.

This time, Annabeth chose not to make a joke about Nobody. Their parents were tense enough as it was.

The bus pulled out of the station … ‘I thought you said they could be dispelled for a lifetime.’

‘I said if you’re lucky,’ Annabeth said. ‘You’re obviously not.’

Thalia rolled her eyes. “Yeah, that about sums it up.” Her foot tapped nervously against the ground, even though she knew they would come out of it alive.

Annabeth was her little sister and Percy was as good as her brother. She had lost one brother already (her heart ached and she refused to dwell on Hera’s cryptic words); she couldn’t lose another one.

‘All three of them,’ Grover whimpered. ‘… We’ll just slip out the windows.’

“Except the bus is moving.” Nico said frowning.

‘They don’t open,’ Grover moaned.

“Seriously?” Silena asked. “That’s a serious hazard.”

‘A back exit?’ she suggested.

There wasn’t one.

Beckendorf looked up from whatever he was building, looking thoroughly offended. “Who designed that thing?”
“Clearly someone who didn’t know what they were doing.” Annabeth said, frowning. “There are laws about that kind of thing. Silena’s right, it’s a hazard.”

Even if there had been … we were … heading for the Lincoln Tunnel.

Sally was clinging to Percy’s hand.

‘They won’t attack us without any witnesses around,’ I said. … We hit the Lincoln Tunnel, and the bus went dark … Mrs Dodds got up … They all started coming down the aisle.

“Do something.” Sally whispered. “I don’t know what, but do something.”

‘I’ve got it,’ Annabeth said. ‘Percy, take my hat.’

“What?!” Thalia asked, before Athena could. “Annie, what’s that going to do?”

“Well, Percy will be invisible.” Annabeth said. “He was the one they wanted and his smell might just overpower us anyway.”

Had it been anyone else, Athena would have agreed. But that was her daughter.

‘What?’ … My hands trembled.

Percy grumbled and clamped his hands down on his knees.

I felt like a coward, but I took the Yankees cap and put it on … I managed to get up ten rows, then duck into an empty seat … Mrs Dodds stopped, sniffing, and looked straight at me. My heart was pounding.

Thalia took a shaky breath.

Apparently she didn’t see anything.

And let it out again.

She and her sisters kept going … I made it to the front of the bus … I was about to press the emergency stop button …

“Good idea.” Athena murmured.

… when I heard hideous wailing from the back row … The Furies surrounded Grover and Annabeth, lashing their whips, hissing: ‘Where is it? Where?’

Annabeth sighed. “I didn’t realise that was strange until later. I just assumed they were talking about him.”

The other people on the bus were screaming … Grover grabbed a tin can … and prepared to throw it.

“What good will that do?” Travis cried.

“It’s an excellent distraction.” Katie said sharply. “Now shut up.”

What I did next was so impulsive and dangerous I should’ve been named ADHD poster child of the year.
Nico gasped. “You mean you haven’t been?”

The bus driver was distracted … I grabbed the wheel from him and jerked it to the left.

Sally closed her eyes, silently praying.

Everybody howled … and I heard what I hoped was the sound of three Furies smashing against the window.

Annabeth yelped, something hard and invisible colliding with her side. “It was, but everyone else got thrown as well.” She said through gritted teeth.

Percy winced. “Sorry.”

‘Hey!’ … We careened out of the Lincoln Tunnel … shot off the highway … ended up barrelling down one of those New Jersey rural roads … right across the river from New York.

Sally breathed a sigh of relief. “Well, at least there’s less chance of innocent mortals getting hurt out there.”

There were woods to our left, the Hudson River to our right and the driver seemed to be veering towards the river.

“That wouldn’t be a bad thing.” Poseidon said hopefully.

Another great idea: I hit the emergency brake.

“Percy!” Annabeth gasped, the breath getting knocked out of her. “Damn your impulses!”

Percy wasn’t in quite as bad a state, since he had braced himself before impact.

The bus wailed … I stepped into the driver’s seat and let them pass.

Sally relaxed a little more now that all the mortals involved were safe. Still, her son was still trapped with those … things, and she just knew that he wouldn’t leave Grover and Annabeth.

The Furies regained their balance … I was free to go, but I couldn’t leave my friends.

“You’re going to do something stupid, aren’t you?” Thalia asked wryly.

I took off the invisible cap. ‘Hey!’

Thalia sighed. “How did I know?”

“Personal loyalty.” Athena said suddenly. “That’s your fatal flaw.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Percy said. “I try to keep aware of it.”

“You do very well.” Annabeth said. “Most of the time.”

The Furies turned, baring their yellow fangs at me, and the exit suddenly sounded like an excellent idea.

“Sure, now he goes for it.” Nico grumbled. No wonder Alecto was so amused by Percy – he would almost go so far to say that she was fond of him … in a psychopathic, I-will-kill-this-insolent-child-
Mrs Dodds stalked up the aisle, just as she used to do in class, about to deliver my F- maths test.

“I’m torn.” Annabeth said. “Seriously an F-? How did you even do that?!”

“With great skill.” Percy answered. “What’s the other reaction?”

“Why are you still calling her Mrs Dodds?” Annabeth asked, letting herself smile.

Percy shrugged. “Did you hear her introduce herself?”

Every time she flicked her whip, red flames danced along the barbed leather.

The camper shuddered.

Her two ugly sisters hopped on top of the seats … and crawled towards me … ‘You have offended the gods. You shall die.’

“How dare she speak for us?!” Zeus demanded.

Hades raised an eyebrow. “You’re the one who was threatening to blast the boy from the sky.”

Zeus huffed. “Yes, but your minions do not have the authority of Olympus, Hades; you would do well to remind them of that.”

‘I liked you better as a maths teacher,’ I told her.

Nico sighed. “Yeah, this is why she hates you.”

She growled … I took the bullpoint pen out of my pocket and uncapped it … She obviously didn’t like seeing it again.

“I’m not surprised.” Chris said, his voice tense.

‘Submit now,’ she hissed … Mrs Dodds lashed her whip around my sword hand while the Furies on the either side lunged at me.

Sally let out a little whimper that sounded like she’d bitten back a scream.

My hand felt like it was wrapped in molten lead …

Percy gritted his teeth, his eyes watering.

… but I managed not to drop Riptide … Annabeth got Mrs Dodds in a wrestler’s hold and yanked her backwards while Grover ripped the whip out of her hands.

The campers cheered, slapping Annabeth and Grover on the backs.

‘Ow!’ he yelled. … she broke open like a piñata.

“That’s two down.” Malcolm said, looking excited. “One to go!”

Mrs Dodds was trying to get Annabeth off her back. She kicked, clawed, hissed and bit …
Annabeth grimaced, shifting in her seat.

… but Annabeth held on … ‘Zeus will destroy you!’ she promised. ‘Hades will have your soul!’

“Are you sure you two aren’t working together?” Athena asked, her voice icy.

“As if we ever would.” Zeus grumbled.

‘Braccas meas vescimini!’ I yelled.


Percy shrugged. “Yancy flashbacks, I guess. Chiron did teach me Latin.”

I wasn’t sure where the Latin came from. I think it meant ‘Eat my pants!’

“It does.” Chiron confirmed, hiding a smile.

Thunder shook the bus.

Athena’s eyes widened. “Move. Now.”

The hair rose on the back of my neck.

Percy rubbed it. Why did he have to be so damn descriptive?

‘Get out!’ Annabeth yelled at me. ‘Now!’ I didn’t need any encouragement.

“Move.” Sally whispered. “Quickly.”

We rushed outside and found the other passengers wandering around in a daze … tourist with a camera snapped my photograph before I could recap my sword.

Lee grimaced. “That’s not good.”


“Yes, but people are looking for you.” Lee said gently. “That’s not going to help.”

‘Our bags!’ Grover realized. ‘We left our-’

BOOOOOM!

“And that is why you always keep your bags close.” Thalia said.

Athena glared at her father. “My daughter was on that bus.”

“She got out.” Zeus said.

“She might not have done!”

“Enough!” Hera said firmly. “We can talk about this later. We must be nearing the end of the chapter. Aphrodite?”

The windows of the bus exploded … an angry wail from inside told me Mrs Dodds was not yet
dead.

“Lightning can’t kill her.” *Nico* said grimly.

‘Run!’ *Annabeth* said. ‘She’s calling for reinforcements!

“How did you know?” *Malcolm* asked.

*Annabeth* shrugged. “You could just kind of tell.”

**We have to get out of here!’**

*We plunged into the woods as the rain poured down, the bus in flames behind us and nothing but darkness ahead.*

*Aphrodite* sighed, closing the book. “That’s the end of the chapter.”

“That’s not a cliff-hanger?” *Athena* asked her daughter.

*Annabeth* shrugged. “Not really. We’re all alive and relatively unharmed.”

“With no supplies, no money and no way of getting there.” *Athena* pointed out.

“So … a regular quest then.” *Annabeth* said. “Such is the life of a demigod. Besides, like I said, you’re better off reading the next chapter after a night’s sleep.”

“Well, then,” *Hestia* said, “I’m sure that there are discussions to be had before bed, so let us all turn in for the night.”

“Thalia,” *Artemis* said softly, “I’d like a word please.”

*Thalia* nodded. “Of course, Lady Artemis.”

“And, *Annabeth,*” *Athena* added, “I’d like to speak with you and *Percy,* if you don’t mind.”

*Annabeth* exchanged a glance with her boyfriend. “Yes, Mother.”

*Percy* swallowed hard, his heart thudding in his chest. Even after everything, his girlfriend’s mother was still the most terrifying thing he’d faced.

It didn’t take long for the throne room to empty, leaving *Percy* and *Annabeth* with *Athena* and *Poseidon,* who had joined her.

*Athena* hadn’t protested, much to their children’s surprise, but neither of them said anything.

They both had a feeling they knew what their parents wanted, but they weren’t going to start the conversation in case they were wrong.

“Now,” *Athena* said, crossing her arms. “I want to know what exactly is going on between you two.”

*Percy* took a deep breath. “Well …”

“Percy, take a moment to think before you speak.” *Annabeth* said, looking nervous.

*Percy* smiled at her. “Annabeth, I’m not a great speaker, you know that. I’m just going to tell your mom the truth.” He looked back at *Athena.* “The truth is, ma’am, I’m head over heels in love with
your daughter.”
Whatever Athena had been expecting, it had not been that. Her arms dropped to her sides and her gaze moved to Annabeth, who was gaping at Percy in astonishment. “You didn’t know that, Annabeth?”

“No, I … I knew.” Annabeth said softly, because she did. Of course she did. How could she not, when Percy gave up immortality for her? “I just … wasn’t expecting him to say it.”

Percy rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. “Not really how I was planning on telling you, to be honest.” He admitted. “Look, we both understand that you two have … issues.”

“And we understand that this isn’t really what you were hoping for.” Annabeth added.

“But I love her.” Percy said, taking her hand.

Annabeth smiled at him, lacing their fingers together. “And I love him.”

“And we’re happy.” Percy finished. “Can’t that be enough?”

For a second, the two gods stared at their children, then Athena sighed, pursing her lips. “Annabeth, outside. Now.”

Annabeth nodded slowly, squeezing Percy’s hand before releasing it and following her mother out of the throne room towards the gardens.

Athena didn’t speak and Annabeth waited patiently until they reached a small flower garden, taking a seat among the raised beds.

“Are you happy?”

Annabeth blinked at the sudden question. “Yes. I know you …”

“Forget me.” Athena interrupted. “Forget his father. Are you happy?”

Annabeth nodded. “Very happy.”

“He treats you well?” Athena asked.

Annabeth smiled. “Yes. Don’t get me wrong – he puts his foot in his mouth sometimes, and he can do some pretty stupid things, but he loves me.”

Athena sighed. “I know he does.”

Annabeth chewed on her lower lip, before asking the question she really didn’t want to ask. “Are you … upset?”
Athena was quiet for a few moments, pondering her response. “Yes.” She said finally. “But only because this will force me to interact with Poseidon at least a little.”

Annabeth’s surprise must have shown on her face, because her mother smiled.

“You are my daughter, Annabeth, and I want you to be happy. It would be very unwise of me to dismiss that purely because I can’t stand his father.”

“Dad!”

Annabeth looked up to see Poseidon striding towards them, Percy hurrying along behind them. “Oh, boy.”

Athena squeezed her arm. “Don’t worry, dear.” She raised her voice so that Poseidon could hear them. “I’m sure your boyfriend was talking sense.”

This pulled the Sea God up short and he stared at her for a few minutes. “What?”

“Percy thought I would be rational, didn’t he?” Athena guessed.

“I knew you would be.” Percy admitted, looking nervous. “You’re not hugely fond of me in our time – or rather, what I represent – but that’s passed. And you love your daughter far more than you hate my father.”

Athena gave him a stern look that didn’t quite hide the smile that lurked in her eyes. “I have to give your mother credit, Perseus. It has been a long time since a son of Poseidon has actually possessed a brain.”

Poseidon frowned. “For our children’s sake, Athena, I’m going to pretend that wasn’t an insult. You are actually alright with this?”

Athena raised an eyebrow. “Are you not?”

“I am.” Poseidon said. “Annabeth seems a perfectly lovely girl and I’m glad Percy has someone who can keep him out of trouble.”

Annabeth blushed and Percy heaved a sigh. “Why does everyone think I need someone to keep me out of trouble?” He asked no one in particular.

His girlfriend gave him a fond smile. “Because you do, Seaweed Brain.” She tucked herself under the arm he held out, leaning into him as he pressed a kiss to her forehead.

Athena couldn’t help smiling. No one could deny the way Annabeth lit up or the love in Percy’s eyes when he looked at her. “My daughter is happy, Poseidon. For her sake, I am willing to accept this.”

***

While Percy and Annabeth were potentially giving their parents heart attacks (that is, if gods could have heart attacks), Thalia followed Artemis to a small private sitting room. She wasn’t sure what Artemis wanted to speak about, since it was almost certainly not Zoe, and anyone with eyes could see that Percy and Nico were like her brothers so her oath was not under threat.

To her great surprise, Aphrodite was waiting for them, greeting Thalia with a bright smile that she could not help but return, albeit nervously.
“Relax, Thalia.” Artemis said kindly. “I know the two of us are an odd combination.”

“To say the least.” Thalia agreed, taking the seat Artemis gestured to. “I would have thought you two hated each other.”

Aphrodite laughed. “Thalia, Artemis and I disagree over several things – obviously – but we do not hate each other.”

“Aphrodite stays away from the hunters.” Artemis elaborated. “And I do not force young women to take the oath if they do not wish to do so, nor do I punish them for not taking the oath.”

Thalia nodded thoughtfully. “So you agree to disagree?”

“Precisely.” Artemis said with a smile.

“So … what is it that you both want to talk to me about?” Thalia asked.

Artemis glanced at Aphrodite and sat back a little, silently yielding the floor.

“Thalia, why do you think the Hunters never break their oaths?” Aphrodite asked.

The question made little sense to Thalia, but she considered it anyway. “I … had never really thought about it, to be honest. I just assumed that some did and paid for it.”

“Some Hunters do come to me and confess they want to leave.” Artemis agreed. “As long as they do so before breaking their oath, I free them from it without punishment. But they can never return. And there are very few that do so.”

“Oh.” Thalia said, thinking some more. There was only really one answer she could think of, which sounded too easy, but she knew by now that Artemis didn’t make a habit of asking ‘trick questions’. “Because none of us want to.”

“But some would say it was a natural progression.” Aphrodite said. “That all young women grow up, and they begin to form attractions, and they eventually want relationships.”

Now that sounded like a trick.

“Maybe.” Thalia agreed cautiously. “But a lot of the Hunters take their oaths young and then stop aging, before the hormones kick in. I’m definitely one of the oldest. Obviously, some women just aren’t attracted to men … does the oath still count?” She asked Artemis, distracted.

Artemis smiled. “A maiden is a maiden, Thalia. But there are a lot more loopholes in those cases, obviously.”

Thalia nodded and turned back to Aphrodite. “So maybe they’re too young or … or some people just don’t feel sexual or romantic attraction to other people.” She thought about herself and Zoe. “And I suppose some of us have been hurt so badly in the past that they don’t trust men enough to form any more attractions.”

Aphrodite beamed at her. “Thalia, you are exactly right. When you meet people – and I mean the general ‘you’, not necessarily you – you form a … let’s call it a bond with everyone you could potentially fall in love with.”

“Potentially.” Thalia repeated. “So I suppose some people form a bond with everyone they meet, some people only form ones with a few select people, and some people never form them.”
“Are we sure she’s not Athena’s?” Aphrodite asked.

Artemis smiled proudly. “Definitely not. She would make an excellent addition to our ranks though.”

Thalia blushed a little, but couldn’t help frowning. “Erm … Lady Artemis, don’t you mean ‘will’?”

“Thalia,” Aphrodite said gently, “how many hunters do you think have a bond?”

“That depends,” Thalia said slowly. “I’m guessing the bond disappears if you don’t fall in love and gets stronger if you do. What happens if you fall in love and they hurt you?”


“Then none of them, in that case.” Thalia said with certainty. “Either they never formed them or they were shattered.”

Aphrodite nodded. “And normally, Thalia, you would be right.”

“Normally?” Thalia asked, something heavy settling in her chest.

Aphrodite smiled softly. “You have a bond, my sweet.”

Thalia stared at her, waiting for her to laugh. When she didn’t, she shook her head firmly. “No I don’t.”

“I’m afraid you do,” Artemis said softly. “I saw the bond with my own two eyes.”

“But that’s not possible.” Thalia insisted. “There’s only one person it could possibly be – you said the bond shatters if someone hurts you and he hurt me – he …” her voice broke and she cleared her throat, almost angrily. “How is that possible?”

“Easy.” Aphrodite said. “You’re still in love with him.”

“I’m not.” Thalia said, but the words sounded weak to her own ears. “I can’t be.”

“I know, Thalia.” Artemis said, rubbing her shoulder. “But it seems that you are, however much you don’t want to be. The question is, what are you going to do about it.”

“I will not break my oath, Lady Artemis.” Thalia said firmly. “Unlike some people, whose names I won’t mention, my word means something.”

Aphrodite choked back a giggle and Artemis hid a smile. “I appreciate that.” The hunter goddess said. “But …”

There was a knock at the door, interrupting her, but it opened immediately without waiting for either goddess to respond.


Thalia expected Artemis to refuse, to scold the messenger god for his rudeness, but she didn’t. Maybe it was the fact that Hermes hadn’t made a joke about the two goddesses getting along, maybe it was the fact that Hermes looked worried, but Artemis merely nodded, looking concerned herself. “Of course. Go on, Thalia; we’ll talk later.”

Thalia nodded, jumping to her feet, urgency filling her as she followed Hermes out of the sitting room. She wasn’t sure why, but she just knew something was wrong. “What can I do for you, Lord
“Hermes?”

“Do you know where my son is?” Hermes asked.

“Which one?” Thalia responded.


“Which one?”

Hermes sighed. “The younger.”

“Ah.” Thalia said, jogging to keep up as he strode down the hallway. “No, I would have assumed he was with you. Weren’t you and our Luke going to talk to him?”

“We were.” Hermes agreed. “But he wasn’t with Chiron. And he’s not with his future self. So where is he?”

“I don’t know …” Thalia began, but trailed off, Rachel’s second prophecy coming to the forefront of her memory. “We need to go to my father.”


Thalia sighed. “Because Luke was the one who took the Master Bolt and the Helm of Darkness. And I think he’s decided to spill his guts.”
I have no excuses. I'm sorry.
Actually, I have two excuses - the Civil War trailer and Steggy smut.
I'm not that sorry.
In any case, here's chapter fourteen, alternatively titled 'In Which Hera Decides It's Easier to Join Them Than Beat Them'.

For a second, Hermes merely stared at her, his face bypassing white and turning grey. “Luke did … It was Luke?”

_Thalia_ nodded grimly. “You didn’t figure that out from the conversation at lunch?”

“No, I didn’t hear most of it.” Hermes said quietly, running a distracted hand through his hair. “Just … _Luke?_”

“Look, I need you to focus here.” _Thalia_ said urgently, throwing all protocol out of the window. “I might be able to help him …”

“How?!” Hermes demanded. “Our father will vaporize him!”

“Trust me.” _Thalia_ said softly.

Hermes did not look convinced, but he nodded anyway, following her to the large double doors that led to her father’s quarters.

With a deep breath, _Thalia_ knocked firmly and they swung open immediately.

Zeus wasn’t alone. Aside from Hera, Poseidon was there as well, and Hades and Persephone, all of them staring at the boy kneeling before them.

“Thalia,” Zeus greeted. “I was just about to send for you.”

His anger was palpable and _Thalia_ pasted a smile on her face. “Excellent timing then. Lord Hermes seems to be missing a son, but I think we found him.”

“You were expecting him to come to us.” Hera concluded. “That is why you spoke to your father earlier.”

“I was hoping.” _Thalia_ admitted, stepping up to stand beside Luke. His head was bowed, his entire body tense, trembling, and she fought the urge to put a comforting hand on his shoulder. “I had hoped that he’d come to one of us first but … Wait, why were you going to send for me?”

“The discussion we had earlier.” Poseidon said, when her father didn’t. “Hades and I felt that you might be able to help explain some things.”

“Such as why he felt this was a good idea in the first place.” Hades added sharply.

_Thalia_ glanced down at Luke. “You didn’t tell them?”
Luke shook his head, his gaze fixed on the floor. “It doesn’t matter now.”

“Di immortales.” Thalia muttered, rubbing her temples. “Luke, just tell them – or I will.”

Luke took a shuddering breath. “After I returned from the quest, I began having dreams. Darkness and a voice. The voice told me that …”

“Go on.” Thalia prompted, giving in and resting a gentle hand on the back of his neck.

Her touch seemed to fill him with new courage. “He told me that what happened to Thalia was Olympus’s fault and that you … you could have saved her … told me that I was right to be upset because you only acknowledge your children when you want something and …”

“Basically,” Thalia interrupted, when his voice began to break, “that you’re crappy parents and we should be mad at you. In fact, tearing down Olympus is probably a really good idea.”

Now Luke looked up, startled. “How did you …?”

Thalia rolled her eyes, but when she spoke, her voice was gentle. “You don’t think he spoke to me too? He spoke to all the demigods. You were just the first to listen, because he could use your grief and your guilt to get to you.” She looked at the assembled gods. “Kronos – because let’s not pretend we don’t know who he is – Kronos is very, very good. I think, and correct me if I’m wrong, Luke, but I think that by the time Luke realised he was being manipulated, it was a little bit too late.”


Persephone put a hand on her husband’s arm. “The boy speaks well.”

“He does.” Hades agreed reluctantly. “Where are the items now?”

Thalia smiled. “Safe, Lord Hades, I can assure you of that. I said there were two people – should we wait and see if the other has the decency to come forward as well?”

“You are certain they are safe?” Zeus asked.

“I am.” Thalia said. “In fact, they may even still be on Olympus.”

Zeus nodded. “Then we will wait, Thalia. I, too, am curious to see if they do.”

“I don’t think they will.” Thalia admitted. “But we should find out tomorrow in any case. We should finish the book by then. In the meantime … what are you going to do about Luke?”

It was the last question she wanted to ask, but someone had to do it. She took an unconscious step forward, putting herself between him and the gods.

“We gave you our word we would not kill him.” Zeus said, rather to her surprise (her father wasn’t exactly known for keeping his word, after all). “So that is a very good question. Do you have any other suggestions?”

Thalia’s mind raced, but she forced herself to stay calm. Whether her father’s request was genuine or he was testing her, she didn’t know, but a measured response was vital either way.

“Well,” she said slowly, “maybe he could make it up to you somehow. What if …?” An idea popped into her head, an idea so brilliant (if she did say so herself) that she almost laughed out loud. “The Golden Fleece!”
The assembled gods, Hermes included, all stared at her, completely taken aback. Of all the things they had considered her saying, that definitely hadn’t been one of them.

“Why would your father want the Golden Fleece?” Hera asked finally.

*Thalia* smiled. “Because it will resurrect me.”

Luke looked up at this, hope blooming in his eyes like she had just handed him all his hopes and dreams on a silver platter.

“You could send Luke to retrieve it.” *Thalia* continued. “Lord Hades, I realise that doesn’t really do anything for you, but the prophecy is obsolete now – you could send Luke to get Bianca and Nico from the Lotus Casino, or have him watch over them when they get to camp.” She thought about it for a second. “Alternatively, *you could* just ground him. That might actually be a worse punishment.”

Zeus nodded thoughtfully. “We must discuss this. Thalia, remain here with Luke. Hermes …”

“I know.” Hermes said, almost sullenly. “Stay.” He scowled. “Just know, Father, that if you harm my son, there will be war.”

Surprisingly, Zeus did not rise to the threat, and he and the others disappeared, leaving her with Hermes and Luke.

*Thalia* let out a breath she hadn’t realised she’d been holding. “Well, that went better than I expected.”


“No.” *Thalia* said, turning to face him. “It needed to be a dangerous quest, or it wouldn’t count as punishment.”

“I failed the last one.” Luke said.

*Thalia* smiled at him. “And, as always, I have a lot more faith in you than you have in yourself. Besides, your heart wasn’t in that one. It will be in this one.”

Their eyes met and something heavy passed between them, the understanding that, yes, his heart was dependent on it.

It broke in the next second when his gaze dropped once more. “I summoned that hell-hound, didn’t I?” Luke asked. “And I did something to those shoes, I know I did. How can you even look at me?”


Luke stared at his knees. “I’m sorry, Father.”

Hermes heaved a sigh and knelt beside his son. “I’m sorry too, Luke. I’m sorry I left you to deal with your mother’s condition by yourself. I’m sorry I made you think I didn’t care. I really was trying to protect you.”

Luke nodded, wiping at his eyes. “Do you hate me now?”

“Luke,” Hermes said firmly, tipping his son’s chin up to meet his eyes, “listen to me. I am
disappointed. Of course I am. But you are my son, and I love you, and nothing could ever change that.” He pressed a kiss to Luke’s forehead, tugging the boy into his arms as he began to sob.

_Thalia_ fixed her gaze on the opposite wall, hugging her knees to her chest. She wondered how long it would have been, before Luke was completely hardened to his father’s words. So much of the war could have been avoided, if the gods just _talked_ to their children.

A hand touched her arm and she glanced over to see Luke looking at her through red-rimmed eyes. She caught his hand and squeezed it gently.

“How can I make it up to you?” He whispered.

“You haven’t done anything yet.” _Thalia_ said tiredly. “At least, not the things I’m mad at you for.”

“Thalia, please …”

_Thalia_ sighed. “Be there when I wake up.” She said simply.

“That’s it?” Luke asked, sounding a little incredulous.

_Thalia_ smiled sadly. “That would be everything.”

The words were a little _too_ raw and it was with relief that she scrambled to her feet as her father and uncles reappeared with Hera and Persephone.

The two goddesses looked rather smug, even though Hera’s smile faltered when she met her stepdaughter’s eyes.

“It is agreed.” Zeus announced. “When our time here is through and plans have been made, Luke will make the journey to retrieve the Golden Fleece.”


_Thalia_ bowed to her father. “Thank you.” She repeated, turning to follow them.

“Thalia,” Hera said suddenly, “could you stay please? I want to speak with you.”

_Thalia_ looked to her father, but he was deep in conversation with Poseidon (and it seemed to be amicable for once), so she nodded, playing with her charm bracelet automatically.

Hera’s sharp eyes spotted the movement and she smiled. “I mean you no harm, Thalia. You can relax.”

_Thalia_ let out a shaky breath, letting her hand drop from Aegis. “No offence, Lady Hera, but when you ask to speak with one of your stepchildren alone, it’s not an unreasonable assumption to make.”

Hera nodded. “I know that. Come, walk with me.”

_Thalia_ would rather have gone and had another awkward conversation with Luke – either of them – but the other gods had disappeared and she was alone with her stepmother now, so she fell into step beside her.

“Jason is not a son of Zeus.” Hera said, after a few minutes of silence.

_Thalia_ closed her eyes briefly, wishing that she had never mentioned her brother earlier. “How can
he not be? I remember Father coming back.”

“He did.” Hera said, her mouth twisting into a bitter smile. “But he was not Zeus when he returned. He was Jupiter.”

Thalia frowned. “But … the Roman names were just that, weren’t they? Different names for the same gods?”

“Not exactly.” Hera said. “When the West moved to Rome, as did we, we changed. Juno and I share a body, but we are not the same.”

“Split personalities.” Thalia concluded.

“Exactly.” Hera agreed.

“So Jason is a son of Jupiter, not a son of Zeus.” Thalia said. “But then why have I never met any Roman demigods?”

“Because we keep you apart.” Hera said grimly. “As we are different from our Roman counterparts, so are our children. Romans and Greeks do not get along, Thalia. The last straw was in 1864, when there was such an awful civil war that many demigods died. We forced you apart, the Greeks to the East, the Romans to the West. The Mist keeps both groups from learning about the other.”

“And that’s why you took him.” Thalia said softly. “Because we were never meant to meet.”

Hera sighed. “Your father should never have done what he did, Thalia, but he loves you. I think he was hoping that maybe Jupiter could … handle your mother better.”

Thalia smiled bitterly. “Well, I can’t blame him for that. She didn’t want to name him Jason, you know. That was Father’s choice; he insisted on it.”

“Yes, to ‘appease’ me.” Hera said, rolling her eyes. “As if that made it any better.”

Thalia dropped her gaze to the floor. “I’m sorry. Really. It’s not right that Father treats you the way he does.”

“Thank you, Thalia.” Hera said, her voice measured. “But I wanted to apologise to you.”

Thalia looked up at that, startled to see Hera’s eyes shining. “W-What?”

“Thalia, there is only one thing I have ever wanted.” Hera said. “I want my family, together and happy. I’m the goddess of marriage and families — it’s what I do. But I have been so focused on making that happen that I completely lost sight of what family means — that sometimes it’s messy, and it’s not perfect, and it includes people that maybe you don’t always get along with. Over the years, I have come to accept Hermes and Apollo and Artemis and Athena and even Dionysus as part of my family, even though they are not my children, and I fear they do not think of me as their mother.”

There were a lot of things Thalia could say to that.

She decided against all of them.

Hera stopped, turning to face her stepdaughter, holding out a hand. “And I know that I will never be your mother. But is it too late for us to be family?”

Thalia thought about Jason, apparently safe at the Roman Camp Half-Blood, contrary to her many
nightmares, soothed only when she met Luke on the streets.

She thought about Nico, angrily (not) coping with his sister’s death all alone, who would have been abandoned to Geryon’s tender mercies if Percy wasn’t the way he was, just because he didn’t fit Hera’s ‘perfect family’.

She thought about the statue of her stepmother that had just about shattered both of her legs, but that probably would have killed Annabeth had she let it hit her.

Then she thought about what would happen when they returned to their own time, to prevent whatever was coming their way.

Would the Olympians even remember all of this?

Either way, she didn’t have to trust Hera to give her a chance.

“If there’s anything I learned when I died,” Thalia said, hesitantly slipping her hand into her stepmother’s, “it’s that it’s never too late.”

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When Thalia returned to their quarters half an hour later, the others were waiting for her.

“What happened?” Percy demanded, before the door was even closed. “Dad was talking to us, and then he suddenly got called away. And then we passed Artemis, and she said that Hermes had come to get you. And …”

“Breathe, Kelp-Head.” Thalia said. “To summarise, Artemis and Aphrodite get along surprisingly well; Luke’s past self just confessed to stealing the Master Bolt and the helm of darkness; I am a genius; and my stepmother suddenly wants us to play Happy Families.”

Nico frowned at Luke. “Why is he still here then? Surely if his past self dies, he dies too, right?”

Thalia definitely did not flinch. “Father didn’t vaporise him. I convinced them earlier not to kill him if he came forward before the book outed him, and then they agreed that his … er … reparations, if you like, will be to retrieve the Golden Fleece so I can be woken. My idea, hence the genius.”

Luke looked like he was about to pass out. “It would have been quicker for your father to kill me.”

“Aside from anything else, by tomorrow, we should be reading a step-by-step guide to finding the Golden Fleece.” Thalia pointed out, smiling sweetly. “That is, if anyone’s paying attention over whatever your poison is going to do to me.”

“Goodnight!” Percy said hastily, bolting for the boys’ door, Nico close behind him.

Annabeth shook her head. “I’d ask about Hera, but … I get the feeling you two need to talk. So … night.”

“Hera’s being genuine.” Rachel said. “Whatever that means.”

Thalia smiled at the Oracle, who looked exhausted. “Go and get some sleep, Rachel. You look dead on your feet.”

“Two prophecies.” Rachel muttered, following Annabeth. “I should get hazard pay.”

The silence that followed was rather uncomfortable.
“I’m sorry.” *Thalia* said finally. “That was harsh.”

“No.” *Luke* said, staring at the ground. “No, it wasn’t. You’re right.”

*Thalia* heaved a frustrated sigh. “Luke, I can’t say that I want to forgive you, and then turn around and say stuff like that. It’s not fair.”

“Yes, it is.” *Luke* said. “You can be mad at me and want to forgive me. I don’t think you *should* forgive me, personally, but that’s not my choice to make.” He looked at her sadly. “Believe me, Thalia, you cannot hate me more than I hate myself.”

*Thalia* said nothing, and he took the opportunity to follow Percy and Nico’s example, leaving her alone with Artemis and Aphrodite’s words floating in her head. “I don’t hate you, Luke.” She whispered after him. “That’s the problem.”
I Thought Garden Gnomes Were Supposed To Be Fun

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the delay boys and girls (and everyone else), I took some time off over Christmas. I have also finally worked out a writing schedule (hooray!), which should keep all my stories on track. Thursday, as you may have guessed, is my Percy Jackson Day.

Also to the anonymous reviewer who was less than pleased about Luke getting 'Percy's quest'. First of all, I seem to recall that Percy technically stole Clarisse's quest. Second of all, Percy and Annabeth will be going on that quest with Luke. The reason for the quest has changed - I'm also taking Percy's first quest away from him as well, because they're changing things.

This story, as I may have mentioned, will involve Luke's redemption. If you don't like Luke, this may not be the right story for you.

Actually, let's just make it a general request - please keep bashing out of the reviews. The only characters I genuinely can't stand are Gabe, Drew and Ares. And probably Octavian, I still haven't got to him yet.

The second morning dawned earlier than the first.

In fact, Hestia took one look at the time and declared it too early for breakfast. “We shall read a chapter first.”

Percy and Annabeth exchanged worried looks. “You might want it on full stomachs.” The latter suggested.

“Annabeth, I’m sure we’ll be alright.” Athena said, picking up the book. “Now, let’s see …”

Annabeth bit her lip and Percy shrugged. “They’ll get over it.” He said, his brow creasing with concern. “I hope.”

Chapter Eleven

We Visit the Garden Gnome Emporium

Athena paused. “Annabeth, what has you so worried about garden gnomes?”

Annabeth sighed. “Oh, you’ll see.”

Persephone looked worried. She had a feeling she knew which emporium it was – she had never had it confirmed who was running it, but she definitely had her suspicions.

In a way, it’s nice to know there are Greek gods out there …

“Really?” Thalia asked sceptically.

… because you have somebody to blame when things go wrong.

For instance, when you’re walking away from a bus … you understand that some divine force really is trying to mess up your day.

Athena and Poseidon glared at Zeus, reminded once again of the danger he put their children in.

So there we were … the smell of the Hudson reeking in our noses.

Annabeth gagged. “You just had to mention it, didn’t you?”

“Sorry.” Percy said with a grimace.

Grover was shivering … ‘All three at once.’

Katie patted Grover’s arm kindly. No satyr was helpless, but they certainly weren’t a match for one Fury, let alone three.

I was pretty much in shock myself. The explosion of bus windows still rang in my ears.

Percy pulled a face. “Dammit.”

But Annabeth kept pulling us along, saying: ‘Come on! The further away we get, the better.’

Athena nodded approvingly.

‘All our money was back there,’ I reminded her. … ‘Well, maybe if you hadn’t decided to jump into the fight-’

“Annabeth!” Malcolm protested. “He couldn’t have just left you!”

‘What did you want me to do? Let you get killed?’

Thalia sighed. “I swear, Annie, you are going to give me a heart attack at some point.” She was trying to keep an eye on Luke, since he was understandably withdrawn that morning, but the gods had once again arranged themselves so they were (mostly) with their children, so Hermes was on hand if he needed someone.

‘You didn’t need to protect me, Percy. I would’ve been fine.’


‘Sliced like sandwich bread,’ Grover put in, ‘but fine.’

Annabeth huffed, but her future self shook her head. “He was right. I was being stupid.”

“Pride has its place.” Athena told her children.

“My fatal flaw.” Annabeth said softly. “I try to watch out for it, but it sometimes sneaks up on me.”

‘Shut up, goat boy,’ said Annabeth. … ‘… a perfectly good bag of tin cans.’

Grover sighed and Percy patted him on the shoulder. “I’m sure we’ll find some more.”

We sloshed across mushy ground … that smelled like sour laundry.

“Maybe we should read this through face masks.” Annabeth suggested, pulling a face.
Apollo smiled. “That wouldn’t work, Annabeth; the scent isn’t really here.”

After a few minutes, Annabeth fell into line next to me. ‘… That was really brave.’

“It was.” Sally said softly.

‘We’re a team, right?’ … ‘It’s just that if you died … aside from the fact that it would really suck for you, it would mean the quest was over.

“Annabeth!” Thalia protested.

Percy rolled his eyes. “Right, me dying is the secondary there.”

Annabeth blushed. “Sorry.”

This may be my only chance to see the real world.’

Chiron sighed. He wished he could take the children out for longer, but it simply wasn’t safe.

The thunderstorm had finally let up. … ‘You haven’t left Camp Half-Blood since you were seven?’ I asked her.

“Only for short trips.” Annabeth said.

Sally frowned. “Can’t they …?”

“It’s too dangerous.” Chiron said sadly. “We’d have to take them out one at a time, and it’s just not feasible.”

‘No … only short field trips. My dad-’

Annabeth winced.

‘The history professor.’

‘Yeah. It didn’t work out for me living at home.

Athena and Sally both frowned and Annabeth dropped her gaze, remembering the reunion with her father and stepmother after the Battle of Manhattan. Unbeknown to her, Sally had called them, and they had flown to New York. Susan had grabbed her as soon as she’d seen her, sobbing into her hair, beating Frederick to it by seconds.

I mean, Camp Half-Blood is my home.’

Several of the demigods nodded.

She was rushing her words out now … ‘At camp you train and train … but the real world is … where you learn whether you’re any good or not.’

Percy sighed. “Annabeth, you’re very good. Don’t doubt yourself.”

If I didn’t know better, I’d swear I heard doubt in her voice.

“Good thing you know better then.” Annabeth said.
Percy smiled fondly. “Absolutely.”

“You’re pretty good with that knife,’ I said.

‘You think so?’

‘Anybody who can piggyback-ride a Fury is okay by me.’

Aphrodite cooed. “Your parents are going to hate me for this, but if you two don’t get together soon, I’m going to have to do something.”

“Stay out of it.” Athena warned her.

“Besides,” Annabeth said with a smile, “what makes you think we’re not together?”

There was a small moment of silence, before Clarisse said, “Your parents hate each other.”

“And we don’t.” Percy said, grinning.

“You said that Rachel was your girlfriend.” Katie said.

“I said I was kind of his ex-girlfriend.” Rachel corrected.

“You’re not.” Malcolm said with certainty.

“Yes, they are.” Silena said, grinning at them.

“No, they’re trying to mess with us.” Travis said. “If they were actually dating, Lady Athena would have killed him by now.”

“Mom values my happiness over an old rivalry.” Annabeth informed him, tilting her head back to let Percy give her a chaste kiss.

“On saying that,” Nico said, miraculously keeping his voice steady, “it was only three weeks ago that they got their act together, so be patient with them.”

Athena shook her head and found her place again.

I couldn’t really see, but I thought she might’ve smiled.

‘You know … Something funny back on the bus …’

“Oh, that’s right.” Malcolm remembered. “The Kindly Ones were asking about ‘it’, not ‘him’.”

Whatever she wanted to say was interrupted by … the sound of an owl being tortured.

“It was not an owl being tortured.” Percy said hastily.

‘Hey, my reed pipes still work!’ Grover cried.

Grover turned red.

‘If I could just remember a “find path” song, we could get out of these woods!’ … Instead of finding a path, I immediately slammed into a tree and got a nice-size knot on my head.

“Ow!” Percy groaned, rubbing his head.
Annabeth sniggered.

“You know, I think it’s a girlfriend’s job to be sympathetic.” Percy informed her.

“I don’t know why you think I’m going to start now.” Annabeth said, but the hand she brushed against his head was gentle.

**Add to the list of superpowers I did not have: infrared vision.**

Everyone laughed. They didn’t know what Percy and Annabeth were so worried about – it was shaping up to be a pretty good chapter.

**After tripping and cursing and generally feeling miserable for another mile or so … I could smell food. Fried, greasy, excellent food.**

“Ugh!” Demeter said, pulling a face. “That’s disgusting.”

I realized I hadn’t eaten anything unhealthy since I’d arrived at Camp Half-Blood … This boy needed a double cheeseburger.

Nico’s stomach growled and he turned red.

Demeter gave her daughter a scolding look. “What are you feeding that boy?”

“Nothing.” Persephone said, a touch coldly. “He’s trapped in the Lotus Casino at the moment, remember?”

We kept walking until I saw … one open business, which was the source of the neon light and the good smell.

“I don’t like the sound of that.” Sally said immediately.

“Why not?” Hermes asked. “It’s got food, they need food. I’m sure someone will take pity on them.”

“The road’s deserted.” Sally said. “What business stays open on a deserted road?”

It wasn’t a fast-food restaurant like I’d hoped. It was one of those weird roadside curio shops that sell lawn flamingos and wooden Indians and cement grizzly bears and stuff like that.

“I really don’t like this.” Sally repeated. “Those businesses struggle enough anyway, let alone in low-traffic areas.”

The main building was a long, low warehouse … The neon sign above the gate was impossible for me to read … red cursive neon English.

Athena stared at the book. “Is that even English?”

Annabeth peered at it. “It all looks the same to me.”

Athena gave her children sympathetic looks. “I had no idea it was so difficult for you.”

**To me, it looked like: ATNYU MES GDERAN GONEM MEPROIUM.**

“Translation?” Sally asked.
“Grover read it for us.” Percy said, looking a little sheepish.

‘What the heck does that say?’ … Grover translated: ‘Aunty Em’s Garden Gnome Emporium.’

“Where are you, Kansas?” Connor asked.

“Oh, we were definitely not in Kansas.” Percy said with a weak smile.

Persephone closed her eyes, her suspicions confirmed.

Flanking the entrance, as advertised, were two cement garden gnomes … as if they were about to get their picture taken.

Annabeth slipped her hand into Percy’s.

I crossed the street, following the smell of the hamburgers.

‘Hey …’ Grover warned.

“Alright, turn around.” Apollo said. “The satyr says no.”

Poseidon sighed. “You didn’t listen though, did you?”

“No,” Annabeth admitted. “But in our defence, we were twelve and we didn’t have a roomful of gods with us.”

“And we were hungry.” Percy added. “That too.”

‘The lights are on inside,’ Annabeth said. ‘Maybe it’s open.’ … ‘Are you two crazy?’ Grover said. ‘This place is weird.’

“Listen to him.” Sally whispered. She knew he wouldn’t. But there was no harm wishing.

We ignored him. The front garden was a forest of statues … even a cement satyr … which gave Grover the creeps. … ‘Looks like my Uncle Ferdinand!’

Percy’s eyes widened and he glanced over at his mother, nodding slightly to Grover. She looked confused, but nodded back, moving to sit between her son and the satyr.

We stopped at the warehouse door.

‘Don’t knock,’ Grover pleaded. ‘I smell monsters.’

Chiron frowned. “Annabeth, I know I’ve taught you better than to ignore a direct warning like that.”

“You did.” Annabeth said, frowning. “I don’t know why I didn’t listen.”


Annabeth blinked. “Now you mention it, I do feel a little strange.” Her face cleared. “She was already affecting us, wasn’t she?”

“Who?” Will asked.
“Oh, I wouldn’t want to ruin the surprise.” Annabeth said, resting her head on Percy’s shoulder.

‘Your nose is clogged up from the Furies,’ Annabeth told him. ‘All I smell is burgers. Aren’t you hungry?’

Hermes hid a smile. “Satyrs don’t eat meat, Annabeth. I’m sure you know that.”

“What kind of monster does that?” Annabeth asked, sounding worried.

“It’s hard to say right now,” Athena said. “I would assume it’s some kind of hypnotism, so it could be anything.”

“It could be one of the minor gods.” Poseidon said a little hopefully.

“Unlikely.” Athena said. “But I suppose it could be.”

‘Meat!’ he said scornfully. ‘I’m a vegetarian.’

‘You eat cheese enchiladas and aluminium cans,’ I reminded him.

“Neither of which are meat.” Thalia said.

‘Those are vegetables. Come on. Let’s leave. Those statues are … looking at me.’

“Yes they were.” Percy muttered.

Then the door creaked open, and standing in front of us was a tall Middle Eastern woman …

‘Children, it is too late to be out all alone. Where are your parents?’

“Well, there’s a story.” Nico said.

Athena was frowning at the book. “I feel like I should know this woman. Do I know her?”

“Yes, Mom, you know her.” Annabeth said, her words overly enunciated, as though she was having to make an effort not to slur them.

‘They’re …’ ‘We’re orphans.’ I said. … ‘We got separated from our … circus caravan … Is that food I smell?’

“Your circus caravan?” Apollo repeated. “I gotta hand it to you, kid, that’s a lie so awful, it might just work.”

‘Oh, my dears,’ the woman said. ‘You must come in, poor children.

Sally shifted in her seat. She wanted to be glad that someone was helping her son, but it was obvious that something wasn’t right.

I am Aunty Em. Go straight through to the back of the warehouse, please. There is a dining area.’

“Food.” Travis said with a sigh. “At least you won’t starve.”

We thanked her … ‘Your head is full of kelp.’

“Hey, that’s my line!” Thalia protested.
The warehouse was filled with more statues … you’d have to have a pretty huge garden to fit even one of these statues, because they were all life-size.

“Life-size?” Poseidon repeated sharply. “Is that an exaggeration?”

“No, Dad.” Percy said, a little sleepily.

But mostly, I was thinking about food.

Go ahead, call me an idiot … but I do impulsive stuff sometimes.

“You’re an idiot.” Rachel and Thalia said together, with similar notes of affection.

Plus, you’ve never smelled Aunty Em’s burgers. The aroma was like laughing gas in the dentist’s chair – it made everything else go away.

Percy’s head dropped on to Annabeth’s, humming in soft agreement. “They did smell amazing.”

Thalia waved her hand in front of their faces, frowning. “Their eyes are glazed over; should we be worried?”

“No, it’s only the symptoms.” Apollo said. “I’m keeping an eye on them.”

I barely noticed Grover’s nervous whimpers … or the fact that Aunty Em had locked the door behind us.

Sally let out her own little whimper, grabbing the hands of the boys either side of her.

All I cared about was finding the dining area. … ‘Um,’ Grover said reluctantly, ‘we don’t have any money, ma’am.’

“If she’s a monster, she won’t care.” Hera said.

“Then again, if she’s genuinely nice, she won’t care either.” Hestia added.

Before I could jab him in the ribs, Aunty Em said, ‘… It is my treat …’

‘Thank you, ma’am,’ Annabeth said.

Aunty Em stiffened, as if Annabeth had done something wrong …

Athena paused, but kept going.

… but then the old woman relaxed … so I figured it must’ve been my imagination.

“I don’t think it was.” Malcolm said slowly.

‘Quite all right, Annabeth,’ she said.

“Should’ve noticed that.” Annabeth said. “Never introduced ourselves.”

‘You have such beautiful grey eyes, child.’

Athena stiffened. “No …”
“Mother?” Annabeth asked. “Who is it?”

“Not who I think, I hope.” Athena said.

“Would …” Annabeth hesitated. “Would you like me to read?”

“No.” Athena answered. “No, your brother can, if he doesn’t mind.”

Malcolm shook his head, taking the book from their mother.

*Only later did I wonder how she knew Annabeth’s name, even though we had never introduced ourselves.*

“Yeah, that should have been a flashing light.” Luke said.

*Our hostess disappeared behind the snack counter and started cooking … I was halfway through my burger before I remembered to breathe.*

Sally managed a small smile. Her boy did like his food.

Annabeth slurped her shake. Grover picked at the fries … but he still looked too nervous to eat.

“Probably was.” Grover muttered.

‘What’s that hissing noise?’ he asked.

Poseidon’s eyes widened.

I listened, but didn’t hear anything … ‘Perhaps you hear the deep-fryer oil. You have keen ears, Grover.’

“And she knows my name too.” Grover said, slightly high-pitched. “Wonderful!”

*Aunty Em ate nothing … I was feeling satisfied after the burger, and a little sleepy, and I figured the least I could do was try to make small talk with our hostess.*

“You know,” Annabeth mumbled, “I think that food was poisoned with something.”

“Sedatives by the look of it.” Thalia said, nudging them both. “How did you get out of there in this state?”

“Adrenaline.” Percy muttered.

’S, you sell gnomes,’ I said, trying to sound interested.

“You failed.” Annabeth said.

‘Oh, yes,’ Aunty Em said. ‘… Custom orders. Statuary is very popular, you know.’

“That’s true.” Hades said slowly. “Persephone has some in her garden, don’t you, darling?”

“I do.” Persephone said. “I’m starting to think it was a bad idea.”

‘A lot of business on this road?’
“Doubtful.” Sally said.

‘Not so much, no. … I must cherish every customer I get.’

“Oh, she cherished them alright.” Percy muttered.

My neck tingled, as if somebody else was looking at me … it was just a statue of a young girl … The detail was incredible … It looked as if she were startled, or even terrified.

“Why would you make a statue that looked terrified?” Annabeth asked.

“You wouldn’t.” Poseidon answered grimly. “I know who this is.”

‘Ah,’ Aunty Em said sadly. … ‘Once upon a time, I had two sisters to help me … but they have passed on, and Aunty Em is all alone.

“Two sisters?” Annabeth asked, sucking in a breath.

“Good girl.” Athena said, putting a hand on her daughter’s shoulder.

I have only my statues …’ Annabeth had stopped eating … ‘Two sisters?’

“Come on.” Thalia murmured. “Think.” She knew she should have paid more attention to Annabeth’s stories when she woke up, but her attention had been completely on Luke and why he wasn’t there with her.

‘It’s a terrible story,’ Aunty Em said. ‘... You see, Annabeth, a bad woman was jealous of me, long ago, when I was young.

Athena huffed. “I was not jealous of her! She dishonoured my temple!”

Sally gasped. “You mean that’s … that’s her?!”

Poseidon sighed. “Yes, Sally, I’m afraid that is her.”

“Who?” Chris asked.

Hermes grimaced. “You’ll find out, kiddo.”

I had a … a boyfriend … She caused a terrible accident …’ My eyelids kept getting heavier, my full stomach making me sleepy.

As Annabeth began to stir a little, Percy got more and more drowsy.

“Seriously?” Thalia muttered. “You fought her like this?”

Poor old lady. Who would want to hurt someone so nice?

“That’s powerful stuff.” Lee said grimly.

‘Percy?’ Annabeth was shaking me … ‘My, yes, it has been a long time since I’ve seen grey eyes like those.’

Athena gritted her teeth.
She reached out as if to stroke Annabeth’s cheek, but Annabeth stood up abruptly.

“Good girl.” Athena said again. “I don’t want her touching you.”

‘We really should go.’ … I didn’t want to leave … I wanted to stay with her a while.

“And that’s how she gets you.” Thalia said sadly.

“He’ll snap out of it.” Annabeth said, her eyes clearing. “Whoa, that was so weird. I’d forgotten how bad it was.”

“You probably didn’t notice the first time round.” Thalia said.

‘Please dears … won’t you at least sit for a pose?’

“No!” Poseidon and Athena protested.

‘A pose?’ … ‘A photograph … Everyone loves children.’

“Run.” Sally whispered, gripping Percy and Grover’s hands. “Run, run, run.”

Annabeth shifted her weight … I was irritated with Annabeth … so rude to an old lady who’d just fed us for free.

“Well, if she was just an old lady, you’d have a point.” Annabeth said, nudging her boyfriend.

‘It’s just a photo, Annabeth. What’s the harm?’

“An eternity as a statue.” Annabeth said tartly. “Percy, wake up.”

“’M awake.” He mumbled.

“Annie, it’s alright.” Thalia said. “It’s just the effects of the book, remember? She’s not really here, you’re safe.”

Annabeth took a deep breath. “Right. Sorry, apparently we’re going to get panic as well.”

“Wonderful.” Thalia said with a sigh. “Just what we need.”

‘Yes, Annabeth’, the woman purred. ‘No harm.’

I could tell Annabeth didn’t like it, but she allowed Aunty Em to lead us … into the garden of statues.

Athena took Annabeth’s hand, shaking a little.

Aunty Em directed us to a park bench next to the stone satyr … ‘Not much light for a photo,’ I remarked.

“She’s not taking a photo.” Poseidon growled. He couldn’t decide who he was angrier with – Medusa, for doing this to his son, or Athena, for creating Medusa in the first place.

‘Oh, enough,’ Aunty Em said. … Grover glanced at the cement satyr … ‘That sure does look like Uncle Ferdinand.’
“That’s the second time now.” Silena said nervously. “Maybe he sat for a pose too.”

“Or maybe,” Grover said, his voice shaking. “that really is Uncle Ferdinand.”

Sally’s eyes widened and she released his hand in favour of wrapping an arm around his shoulders.

‘Grover,’ Aunty Em chastised, ‘look this way, dear.’

“Don’t.” Katie mumbled.

She still had no camera … I was fighting the sleepy feeling, the comfortable lull that came from the food and the old lady’s voice.

“Come on.” Nico muttered.

‘I will be just a moment,’ Aunty Em said … ‘That is Uncle Ferdinand!’ Grover gasped.

Grover let out a distressed bleat and Sally hugged him closer.

‘Look away from her!’ Annabeth shouted. She whipped her Yankees cap on to her head and … pushed Grover and me both off the bench.

Percy let out a grunt at the phantom impact.

I was on the ground … too dazed to move.

Everyone was quiet now, staring at the book in Malcolm’s hands.

Then I heard a strange, rasping sound above me. My eyes rose to Aunty Em’s hands, which had turned gnarled and warty, with sharp bronze talons for fingernails.

Silena gasped, turning pale. “She’s a Gorgon … she’s the Gorgon – Medusa!”

Michael cursed. “How are they going to get out of this one?”

Luke was hugging his legs to his chest, paler than a ghost. He had caused this quest. Whatever happened was his fault.

I almost looked higher, but somewhere off to my left Annabeth screamed, ‘No! Don’t!’

Sally breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank Olympus for that!”

More rasping – the sound of tiny snakes … ‘Run!’ Grover bleated. I heard him racing across the gravel, yelling, ‘Maia!’ to kick-start his flying sneakers.

Luke stiffened. What had he done to them?

His father’s hand rested on his shoulder and squeezed.

I couldn’t move. I … tried to fight the groggy trance the old woman had put me in.

Percy stirred, blinking rapidly. “I’m sure it wasn’t this bad last time.”

“He speaks!” Thalia said. “How was the trip?”

“Trippy.” Percy said, rubbing his head.
‘Such a pity to destroy a handsome young face,’ she told me soothingly. ‘Stay with me, Percy. All you have to do is look up.’

“Sounds like she still carries a torch for you, Uncle P.” Apollo said.

Poseidon didn’t bother responding.

I fought the urge to obey … I could see Aunty Em’s dark reflection … Her hair was moving, writhing like serpents.

“That’s because they were.” Rachel said helpfully.

“Thanks Rach.” Percy said. “Knew we could count on you.”

Aunty Em. Aunty ‘M’. How could I have been so stupid?

“Oh, Percy.” Thalia said. “No, you know what? That’s too easy. I am not rising to it.”

Think, I told myself.

“Don’t hurt yourself.” Thalia said.

“What happened to not rising to it?” Annabeth asked.

Thalia shrugged with a grin. “I just couldn’t help myself.”

How did Medusa die in the myth?

“Her head was cut off.” Sally said. “By Perseus, ironically enough.”

But I couldn’t think. Something told me that in the myth Medusa had been asleep when she was attacked by my namesake, Perseus.

“She was.” Athena said, thinking hard.

She wasn’t anywhere near asleep now. … ‘Annabeth’s mother, the cursed Athena, turned me from a beautiful woman into this.’

“She deserved it.” Athena muttered.

‘Don’t listen to her!’ … ‘Run, Percy!’

“Listen to Annabeth.” Sally said. “I’m going to say that a lot, aren’t I?”

“Oh yeah.” Percy said. “In fact, I think we should make it a rule. Always listen to Annabeth.”

‘Silence!’ Medusa snarled … ‘You see why I must destroy the girl, Percy.

“Touch my daughter, and I will make my last curse look like a harmless joke.” Athena snapped.

She is my enemy’s daughter. … ‘Do you really want to help the gods?’ … ‘Do you understand what awaits you on this foolish quest, Percy? … You would be better off as a statue. Less pain. Less pain.’

“Well,” Thalia said with a grimace, “she might just have a point there.”
“We do not see you as pawns.” Apollo said.

“It feels like it sometimes.” Percy said bluntly.

Annabeth sighed. “No filter.” She muttered.

‘Percy!’ Behind me, I heard a buzzing sound, like a ninety-kilogram hummingbird in a nosedive.

Hermes chuckled. “Interesting description. But that will be the shoes.”

I turned, and there he was … Grover, holding a tree branch the size of a baseball bat.

The campers cheered.

His eyes were shut tight … navigating by ears and nose alone.

Sally winced. “Is that safe?”

“I wouldn’t recommend it for a mortal or a demigod.” Hermes said. “But satyr senses are impeccable. He should be alright.”

‘Duck!’ he yelled again. ‘I’ll get her!’

“Go Grover!” Travis cheered.

That finally jolted me into action. Knowing Grover, I was sure he’d miss Medusa and nail me. I dove to one side.

Several people laughed, and Grover yelled, “Thanks, Percy!” He was grinning though.

Thwack!

At first I figured it was the sound of Grover hitting a tree. Then Medusa roared with rage.

The Stolls whistled.

‘You miserable satyr,’ … ‘That was for Uncle Ferdinand!’ Grover yelled back.

Grover’s smile faded a little and Sally gave him a little squeeze.

I scrambled away and hid in the statuary … ‘Percy!’ I jumped so high my feet nearly cleared a garden gnome.

Thalia laughed. “Surprised?”

“Girl’s going to give me a heart attack one day.” Percy grumbled. “Still, I don’t feel like I’m half-asleep now.”

“You seemed more than half-asleep.” Nico said.

Percy gave him an easy smile. “I’m fine.”

Annabeth took off her Yankees cap and became visible. ‘... I’d kill her myself but … But you’ve got the better weapon.
“He does.” Luke said quietly. “You’d need to get in too close with the dagger.”

Besides, I’d never get close to her … do you want her turning more innocent people into statues?”

“That’ll get him.” Thalia said confidently. “Percy’s a sucker for helping people.”

“I thought monsters didn’t attack mortals.” Percy said.

“Generally they don’t.” Poseidon said. “But Medusa was mortal before she was a monster; they tend to behave differently.”

Athena snorted. “Yeah, and she was always a …”

“Athena!” Hestia scolded. “Not in front of the children!”

She pointed to a pair of statue lovers, a man and a woman with their arms around each other, turned to stone by the monster.

Aphrodite sniffled. “That’s so sad.”

Silena patted her mother’s hand. “At least they’re together, I guess.”

Aphrodite gave her a watery smile. “True, sweetheart. That’s true.”

Annabeth grabbed a green gazing ball … ‘A polished shield would be better.’

“Maybe, but that should still work.” Athena said.

She studied the sphere critically. ‘The convexity will cause some distortion. The reflection’s size should be off by a factor of-’

‘Would you speak English?’

“I am.” Annabeth said, frowning.

“We aren’t all geniuses.” Connor reminded her. “What does all that mean?”

Annabeth sighed. “The surface is curved, so her reflection will look a little larger and closer than it actually is.”

‘I am!’ She tossed me the glass ball. … ‘Grover’s got a great nose, but he’ll eventually crash.’

“Yes, please hurry.” Grover said.

I took out my pen and … kept my eyes locked on the gazing ball … Then … I saw her.

Percy shuddered.

“Are you alright?” Sally asked.

Percy gave her a weak smile. “I’m fine, Mom. That was just a memory. She was hideous.”

Grover was coming in … and crashed into the arms of a stone grizzly bear with a painful ‘Ummphh!’
“Quickly.” Persephone whispered.

Medusa was about to lunge … If she charged, I’d have a hard time defending myself.

“She won’t charge, hopefully.” Poseidon said. “You look too much like me.”

But she let me approach – ten metres, five metres.

“Don’t get too cocky.” Hera warned. “She could be luring you into a trap.”

I could see the reflection of her face now. Surely it wasn’t really that ugly.

“Oh, no.” Athena said with a smirk. “She really is.”

“Would you stop being so smug about it?” Poseidon demanded. “If you hadn’t cursed her, our kids wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“Well, if you hadn’t had the indecency to have it off with her in my temple,” Athena snapped, “I wouldn’t have cursed her.”

Annabeth sighed. “That truce didn’t last long.”

“Be fair,” Percy said, “it wasn’t a truce.” He raised his voice. “Keep reading, Malcolm. Trust me, they can keep going for hours.”

Malcolm looked nervous, but did as he was told. Sure enough, the two gods fell silent to listen.

The green swirls of the gazing ball must be distorting it, making it look worse.

“Not really how distortion works.” Annabeth said.

‘You wouldn’t harm an old woman, Percy,’ she crooned. ‘I know you wouldn’t.’

“Normally I’d agree with her.” Artemis said coldly. “But don’t listen to her.”

I hesitated, fascinated by the face I saw reflected … making my arms go weak.

“Not again.” Percy grumbled.

From the cement grizzly, Grover moaned, ‘Percy, don’t listen to her!’

Medusa cackled. ‘Too late.’

There was a collective intake of breath.

She lunged at me with her talons.

Sally closed her eyes.

I slashed up with my sword, heard … the sound of a monster disintegrating.

Athena, Poseidon and Sally let out sighs of relief that were drowned out by the shouts and cheers of the campers.

Something fell to the ground next to my foot.
“That’d be her head.” Thalia said.

“Why didn’t that disintegrate?” Chris asked.

“It’s a spoil of war.” Thalia explained. “That’s why the Minotaur horn didn’t either.”

It took all my willpower not to look. I could feel warm ooze soaking into my sock, little dying snake heads tugging at my shoelaces.

Percy grimaced, flexing his foot. “Oh, that’s nasty.”

‘Oh, yuck,’ Grover said … Annabeth came up next to me … holding Medusa’s black veil.

“Oh, good idea.” Katie said.

She said, ‘Don’t move.’

Very, very carefully … she knelt and draped the monster’s head in black cloth … It was still dripping green juice.

Annabeth looked a little green herself.

‘Are you okay?’ she asked me, her voice trembling.

‘Yeah,’ I decided, though I felt like throwing up my double cheeseburger.

Demeter looked smug. “Cereal, that’s what you need. All that junk food, of course you feel sick.”

Persephone rolled her eyes. “He nearly died, Mother. I should think that’s the more likely explanation.”

‘Why didn’t … why didn’t the head evaporate?’

‘Once you sever it, it becomes a spoil of war,’ she said … Grover moaned as he climbed down … ‘The Red Baron,’ I said. ‘Good job, man.’

“Oh, that’s where that nickname came from.” Thalia said. “I had wondered. Since, you know, he is neither red nor a baron.”

He managed a bashful grin ‘… crashing into a concrete bear? Not fun.’

“You did really well.” Sally said. “An excellent Keeper.”

Grover blushed.

He snatched his shoes out of the air … Together, the three of us … double-wrapped Medusa’s head.

“Good.” Athena said. “Better safe than sorry.”

We plopped it on the table where we’d eaten dinner and sat around it, too exhausted to speak.

Annabeth sighed, feeling tired all of a sudden. “Maybe we should have read this last night.”

Finally I said, ‘So we have Athena to thank for this monster?’
Percy flinched. “Sorry.”

Annabeth flashed me an irritated look. ‘Your dad, actually.

Annabeth flinched as well. “Sorry too.”

“You know they’re both right.” Hestia said.

Don’t you remember? … You probably reminded her of him.’

“You do look a lot like your father.” Demeter remarked.

My face was burning.

Percy patted his cheeks. “That wasn’t literal either!”

‘Oh, so now it’s my fault we met Medusa.’

Annabeth straightened. In a bad imitation of my voice, she said: “It’s just a photo, Annabeth. What’s the harm?”

“I’m sorry.” Annabeth said, before anyone could say anything. “I hadn’t realised she’d charmed us. I walked in there with you.”

‘Forget it,’ I said. ‘You’re impossible.’

‘You’re insufferable.’

“Grover, stop them.” Thalia said wearily. “They’ll go on for hours. And you don’t have time to wait for them to realise they’re flirting and get suitably embarrassed.”

“We weren’t flirting.” Annabeth said.

“Didn’t you say you’re dating?” Silena asked.

“We are.” Annabeth said. “But back then? We definitely weren’t flirting.”

‘You’re –’

‘Hey!’ Grover interrupted.

“Thank you.” Thalia mouthed at him.

‘You two are giving me a migraine, and satyrs don’t even get migraines. What are we going to do with the head?’

“Excellent question.” Nico said.

“Something very stupid.” Annabeth said.

Thalia sighed. “Oh, Percy, what did you do now?!”

I stared at the thing …. At this rate, we’d never make it to L.A. alive, much less before the summer solstice.
“Oh, don’t say that.” Sally whispered.

Most of the gods stared at the floor. They had all heard these sorts of complaints before, but had always brushed it off as children being overdramatic.

But they had just heard first-hand that it really wasn’t.

**What had Medusa said?**

“Don’t listen to her.” Luke said. “She’s trying to manipulate you. Don’t let her.”

Hermes squeezed his son’s shoulder.

*Do not be a pawn of the Olympians, my dear. You would be better off as a statue.*

Thalia sighed. “Percy … I’m not even going to bother.”

I got up. ‘I’ll be back.’ … I searched the back of the warehouse until I found Medusa’s office.

“Good idea.” Athena said. “There might be some money back there.”

**Her account book showed … shipments to the Underworld to decorate Hades and Persephone’s garden.**

“I didn’t know it was her.” Persephone said quickly.

“You had a suspicion though.” Athena said.

Persephone sighed. “Yes, but what was the point in saying anything? We can’t interfere. All I would be doing is sending a hero on a potentially fatal quest. I certainly won’t use it anymore.”

**According to one freight bill, the Underworld’s billing address was DOA Recording Studios, West Hollywood, California.**

“Seriously?” Hades asked his wife.

Persephone shrugged. “Where else should I get them shipped?”

**I folded up the bill … In the cash register I found twenty dollars, a few golden drachmas …**

“I was hoping for more than that.” Athena murmured.

**… and some packing slips for Hermes Overnight Express, each with a little leather bag attached for coins.**

Hermes held a hand up. “I just deliver. I don’t ask questions.”

“Maybe you should.” Zeus said.

Hermes scowled. “Why? Persephone’s right – you’d just have sent one of our kids to dispatch her. Forgive me if I want my kids to stay safe.”

**I rummaged around … until I found the right-size box.**

“Oh Percy …” Sally said. “What did you do?”
I went back to the picnic table, packed up Medusa’s head, and filled out a delivery slip:

Poseidon sighed. “Tell me you sent it back to Camp.”

“That would have been the smart thing to do.” Annabeth said with a sigh.

The Gods

Mount Olympus

600th Floor

Empire State Building

New York, NY

With best wishes,

PERCY JACKSON

“I can’t decide if I’m insulted or amused.” Hera said.

“Go with amused.” Apollo advised. “I am. Father won’t like it.”

Zeus was glaring at Percy. “No I do not.”

‘They’re not going to like that,’ Grover warned. ‘They’ll think you’re impertinent.’ … The package … disappeared with a pop! ‘I am impertinent.’ I said.

“He’s not wrong.” Thalia muttered, rubbing her temples. “You are an idiot, Kelp-Head, and I don’t know how you’ve lived this long.”

“That makes three of us.” Nico said. “Do you think we have enough for t-shirts yet?”

I looked at Annabeth, daring her to criticize.

“I kind of got it.” Annabeth said softly. “Besides, look me in the eye and tell me that some of that wasn’t showing off to your dad.”

Percy blushed a little. “Yeah, it kind of was. Maybe.”

She didn’t. She seemed resigned to the fact that I had a major talent for ticking off the gods.

“That’s putting it mildly.” Annabeth said.

‘Come on,’ she muttered. ‘We need a new plan.’

Malcolm closed the book. “That’s the end of the chapter.” He announced, his stomach punctuating it with a loud growl.

Athena smiled at her son as he blushed. “Breakfast time, I think.”
Chapter Notes

Right this is the end of the pre-written chapters, so please bear with me. Thursday is my PJ day, but I do have work and the gym to contend with, so please be patient. Also, I make an absolutely hideous pun in this chapter. It's so bad I may never forgive myself (even if Katie forgives Travis).

Hestia took care of breakfast this morning and, aside from a few bowls to keep Demeter happy, there wasn’t a grain of cereal in sight.

Nico caught the hearth goddess’s eye and she tipped him a tiny wink; apparently the gods were getting a little tired of Demeter’s obsession as well.

It was, however, Aphrodite who spotted Sally’s almost wistful look. “I suppose with a growing son, making food appear would be helpful.”

The question surprised a laugh out of the mortal mother. “Well, yes, but honestly, I enjoy cooking. At least when Gabe’s not involved.”

Aphrodite wrinkled her nose. “Well, anything would be enjoyable if that man isn’t involved.” She smiled. “Still, if you really enjoy it, I’m sure Hestia and Demeter wouldn’t mind handing the kitchen over to you for a while.

“I’d like that.” Sally admitted. “Even if it’s just to bake some cookies. I think if the book mentions them anymore, we won’t be able to hear over Percy’s stomach.”

Aphrodite laughed, a tinkling sound that lifted the spirits of everyone nearby. “Then we’ll certainly look into it.”

When breakfast began to wind down, Artemis picked up the book and turned to the next chapter, while everyone else finished eating quietly.

**Chapter Twelve**

**We Get Advice from a Poodle**

“Do poodles give good advice?” Silena asked.

“All animals can give good advice.” Grover answered. “It’s just a question of whether they want to.”

**We were pretty miserable that night.**

Any good mood that might have formed with Medusa’s defeat was dampened pretty instantly.

**We camped out in the woods … The ground was littered with flattened soda cans and fast-food wrappers.**

Grover scowled and Demeter huffed. “Well, really!”
We’d taken some food and blankets from Aunty Em’s …

“Good.” Athena murmured.

… but we didn’t dare light a fire to dry our damp clothes.

Thalia sighed. “Percy …”

Percy grimaced. “I know.”

“Know what?” Annabeth asked.

“I could have dried us off.” Percy said with a sigh. “I just didn’t know that at the time.”

“You know,” Thalia said, looking at the ceiling, “this is the time when it would be helpful to speak to our godly parents, because sometimes we get abilities that only they’re aware of.”

No one answered her.

The Furies and Medusa had provided enough excitement for one day.

“I should think so.” Sally said.

We didn’t want to attract anything else … I volunteered to take first watch.

“Thank goodness you did.” Annabeth said. “I was exhausted.”

Annabeth curled up on the blankets and was snoring as soon as her head hit the ground.

Annabeth’s jaw dropped. “I do not snore!”

Malcolm pointedly didn’t answer her, and neither did Luke, but Thalia sniggered. “Yes, you do, sweets. Like a freight train. Always amazed us, how that noise could come out of such a tiny little thing, didn’t it, Luke?”

Luke’s smile didn’t quite reach his eyes, his mind still preoccupied by the fight with Medusa, but the affection in his voice was clear. “Always. We used to draw straws over who was going to roll her over in case we woke her up.”

Annabeth turned slightly pink, but she gave a sheepish smile anyway, letting the subject drop.

Grover fluttered with his flying shoes to the lowest bough of a tree … ‘It makes me sad, Percy … You can’t even see the stars. They’ve polluted the sky.’

“It is awful.” Persephone said softly.

This is a terrible time to a satyr … At the rate things are going, I’ll never find Pan.’

Sally made a soft noise of understanding. “That’s who you’re searching for.”

‘Pam? Like the cooking spray?’

“Percy!” Annabeth protested.

“I misheard him!” Percy insisted.
‘Pan’ … A strange breeze rustled though the clearing, temporarily overpowering the stink of trash and muck.

Annabeth leaned into Percy’s side. “Think that was him?” She murmured.

“Maybe.” Percy said softly.

It brought the smell of berries and wildflowers … ‘Tell me about the search,’ I said.

Hermes sighed, his gaze sweeping over the children he had present, reassuring himself they were there.

Grover looked at me cautiously, as if he were afraid I was just making fun.

“I wouldn’t.” Percy said. “It’s important to you.”

‘The God of Wild Places disappeared two thousand years ago,’ he told me. ‘A sailor off the coast of Ephesos heard a mysterious voice crying out from the shore, “Tell them that the great god Pan has died!”’

Hermes made a small noise in the back of his throat. “Has he been found?”

Percy looked a little confused, but Thalia gave him a surprisingly gentle smile. “In a way, Lord Hermes. Everything got cleared up, at any rate.”

Hermes nodded, apparently understanding her cryptic words. “So it was a choice.” He murmured.

“Pan was a son of Hermes.” Annabeth reminded her boyfriend in an undertone.

When humans heard the news, they believed it … We refuse to believe he died.

Percy sighed, lacing his fingers with Annabeth’s, catching Rachel’s eye over the top of his girlfriend’s head.

In every generation, the bravest satyrs pledge their lives to finding Pan … My father was a searcher. And my Uncle Ferdinand …

Sally patted Grover’s hand.

… the statue you saw back there … But I’ll succeed. I’ll be the first searched to return alive.’

“The first?” Sally repeated, startled.

“It’s a dangerous job.” Hermes said, his voice sombre.

Grover took his reed pipes out of his pocket. ‘No searcher has ever come back …’

‘Not once in two thousand years?’

‘No.’

‘And your dad? You have no idea what happened to him?’

Grover sniffled a little, resting his head on Sally’s shoulder when she wrapped an arm around him.
‘None.’

‘But you still want to go,’ I said, amazed.

“Devotion is a powerful thing.” Athena said softly.

Percy looked at Annabeth, tried to think of something he wouldn’t do for her – for any of his friends, for that matter. “I’m beginning to understand that.”

‘I mean, you really think you’ll be the one to find Pan?’

“Our faith is all we really have.” Grover muttered.

‘I have to believe that, Percy … It’s the only thing that keeps us from despair … I have to believe Pan can be awakened.’

I stared at the orange haze of the sky and tried to understand how Grover could pursue a dream that seemed so hopeless.

“You’re one to talk.” Thalia said.

Percy smiled sheepishly. “Yeah, I know.”

Then again, was I any better?

‘How are we going to get into the Underworld?’ I asked him. ‘I mean, what chance do we have against a god?’

‘None whatsoever.” Clarisse said, a little gleefully.

Ares smirked, but Aphrodite gave her a scolding look that had more effect that the girl would have liked to admit.

‘I don’t know,’ he admitted. ‘But … Annabeth was telling me –’

‘Oh, I forgot. Annabeth will have a plan all figured out.’

Annabeth raised an eyebrow. “That sounded a little catty.”

“And thank goodness she will.” Percy finished. “Because we’d be lost without her and she’s amazing.”

“Nice save.” Annabeth said, more than a little smugly.

‘Don’t be so hard on her, Percy … she’s a good person. After all, she forgave me …’ His voice faltered.

“Grover,” Annabeth sighed. “There’s nothing to forgive you for. There wasn’t then and there isn’t now.”

‘What do you mean?’ I asked. ‘Forgave you for what? … Wait a minute … Your first keeper job was five years ago … I mean, your first assignment that went wrong –’

“It wasn’t Annabeth.” Thalia said quietly.

‘I can’t talk about it,’ Grover said … ‘But as I was saying … Annabeth and I agreed there’s
something strange going on … Something isn’t what it seems.’

Athena gave her daughter a proud smile.

‘Well, duh. I’m getting blamed for stealing a thunderbolt that Hades took.’

_Thalia_ cracked a smile. “Somehow, I don’t think that’s what they mean.”

‘That’s not what I mean,’ Grover said. ‘The Fu- The Kindly Ones were sort of holding back … they just weren’t as aggressive as they could’ve been.’

“Well,” Sally said faintly, “they were quite enough for me, thanks.”

‘They seemed plenty aggressive to me.’

Grover shook his head. ‘They were screeching at us: “Where is it? Where?” … They seemed to be asking about an object.’

_Annabeth_ shook her head. “I should have realised.”

“How?” Percy asked. “You’re good, Wise Girl, but you’re not _that_ good.”

‘That doesn’t make sense.’

‘I know. But if we’ve misunderstood something about this quest, and we only have nine days to find the master bolt …’

“They’re screwed.” Michael said quietly.

“Not necessarily.” Lee said, glancing at Luke with a worried frown. He considered the son of Hermes his best friend and he knew there was something going on – he didn’t think adding extra worry about Annabeth was a good idea.

He looked at me like he was hoping for answers, but I didn’t have any.

“When do you ever?” Thalia asked fondly, ruffling Percy’s hair.

_I thought about what Medusa had said: I was being used by the gods._

_Thalia_ sighed. “Percy, you’ll drive yourself crazy thinking like that.”

“It’s not untrue.” Nico said.

_Thalia_ shrugged. “I know.”

Aphrodite grimaced. “Would you stop referring to it like that? We do not ‘use’ our children. If we had other options, we would take them.”

“I know that, Lady Aphrodite.” Thalia said. “But it’s difficult to see it as anything else when the only time your parent appears is when they want something from you. And I know you don’t have a choice,” she added, “but that’s what it feels like.”

“We will discuss it later.” Zeus repeated.

What lay ahead of me was worse than petrification. ‘I haven’t been straight with you … I
agreed to go to the Underworld so I could bring back my mother.’

Grover smiled softly. ‘I think I already knew that, Percy. You’re not exactly subtle.’

Grover blew a soft note on his pipes. ‘I know that, Percy. But are you sure that’s the only reason?’

‘I hate it when he does that.” Percy muttered.

‘I’m not going it to help my father.

Thalia and Annabeth developed mysterious coughing fits that sounded mysteriously like the word ‘liar’.

He doesn’t care about me. I don’t care about him.’

‘Keep telling yourself that.” Thalia said with a sigh. ‘Deep down, we all care. That’s kind of why we put up with it. The hope that one day, maybe …” She trailed off, shaking her head.

Several of the gods looked guilty, none more so than Aphrodite, who wrapped her arms around Silena. “I love you, darling.” She whispered. “All of you. You know that, don’t you?”

“I do now.” Silena whispered back. “I love you too.”

Grover gazed down from his tree branch. ‘Look, Percy, I’m not as smart as Annabeth. I’m not as brave as you.

“You took on Medusa with flying shoes and a tree branch!” Will protested. “That’s pretty brave!”

But I’m pretty good at reading emotions … You wanted him to notice what you’d done.’

Poseidon hid a smile. “Well, I doubt I could miss it.”

‘Yeah? Well maybe satyr emotions work differently … I don’t care what he thinks.’

“Yes I do.” Percy muttered.

Grover pulled his feet up onto the branch. ‘Okay, Percy. Whatever.’

‘Besides, I haven’t done anything worth bragging about.

“Aside from kill the Minotaur, fight three Furies and kill Medusa.” Annabeth said, ticking them off on her fingers. “That’s rather impressive.”

We barely got out of New York and we’re stuck here with no money and no way west.’

Okay, that just makes it sound worse than it was.” Annabeth said.

“Technically, that makes it sound exactly the way it was.” Thalia said with a smile.

Grover looked at the night sky … ‘How about I take first watch, huh? You get some sleep.’

“Do you have a plan?” Lee asked.

“How should I know?” Grover responded. “I haven’t done this yet.”
I wanted to protest, but he started to play Mozart … After a few bars … I was asleep.

“I thought Mozart didn’t sound good on reed pipes.” Chris said.

“Normally it doesn’t.” Percy admitted with a yawn. “But when you’re exhausted, it’s magic.”

In my dreams …

“Oh, not again!” Athena groaned.

Artemis rolled her eyes and started again.

In my dreams, I stood in a dark cavern before a gaping pit.

Persephone sucked in a breath. “Darling, is that …?”

“Yes.” Hades said grimly. “Yes, it is. The entrance to Tartarus.”

Apollo shuddered, instinctively tugging his sons closer. None of the gods liked the idea of Tartarus, especially since that was where Kronos resided, but as the Sun God, the very thought of it terrified him.

Grey mist creatures churned all around me … that I somehow knew were the spirits of the dead.

Sally’s breath caught, but Persephone smiled at her. “It’s alright. They won’t harm him.”

They tugged at my clothes, trying to pull me back …

“See?” Persephone asked, but Artemis looked worried.

… but I felt compelled to walk forward to the very edge of the chasm.

Luke shuddered, his entire body trembling, and Hermes tightened a hand on his shoulder, leaning closer to him.

“Is this what you saw?”

Luke nodded, hugging his knees to his chest, leaning into the arm his father wrapped around him.

Looking down made me dizzy.

The pit yawned so wide … I had a feeling that something was trying to rise from the abyss, something huge and evil.

Athena paled. “Kronos.”

To her surprise, Zeus did not snap at her. Instead, he looked grim. “It appears so, although I am loathed to admit it.”

The little hero … Too weak, too young, but perhaps you will do.

“Do for what?” Sally asked.

Percy didn’t answer her but leaned past Thalia and Nico towards Luke. “I was his first choice, wasn’t I?”
Luke nodded, answering just as quietly. “Until he realised you were smarter than I was. Then he just wanted to kill you.”


The voice felt ancient – cold and heavy.

It wrapped around me like sheets of lead.

Percy took a shaky breath, the residual feeling washing over him. Annabeth leaned into his side, his shudder travelling through her as well.

They have misled you, boy, it said. Barter with me. I will give you what you want.

“How many?” Athena asked suddenly.

“How many what?” Apollo asked, but his sister had figured it out.

“How many half-bloods did Kronos recruit just through that?” Artemis asked. “Not even bribing them, just by exploiting the resentment of feeling abandoned by us.”

Thalia sighed. “A lot. And those of us that weren’t taken in by him … I won’t lie and say I wasn’t tempted. I stayed because of Annie.”

“Percy.” Annabeth admitted, staring at her lap.

“Annabeth.” Percy added.

Thalia pouted. “Didn’t anyone stay for me?”

“You were a tree.” Percy reminded her.

Thalia rolled her eyes. “Thanks, Kelp-Head.”

“How many is a lot?” Athena asked, trying to ignore the twinge of guilt that her daughter had felt so abandoned.

“I didn’t count.” Thalia said. “I could only tell you how many died. And that was about thirty.”

“That’s not entirely accurate.” Percy disagreed. “We found thirty bodies that weren’t with us, so we’re assuming they were with him. But we also know that we lost people on our side and we never found the bodies, so we can’t actually be certain how many died on his side.”

No one really knew how to respond to that. Three of the demigods brought back in time – apparently to prevent Kronos from rising – had just admitted that it was only their love for each other that kept them from joining in, and had finally confessed the one thing that many of the gods had been afraid of – some of their children were going to die.

Some of them had become immune to this over the millennia – being immortal meant watching mortal children come and go like goldfish – but many felt the pain of each and every passing just as freshly as the last.

Artemis let her gaze travel across the room, gauging the mood. Luke caught her eye, curled up beside his father, his eyes locked on the ground.
Her Hunter’s question echoed in her mind.

“Didn’t anyone stay for me?”

Thalia had been teasing Percy and Annabeth, but little interactions fell into place like pieces of a jigsaw.

Of course, it was possible that Luke had stayed for Annabeth as well, but she doubted it.

Thalia hadn’t been enough to keep Luke from joining Kronos – and that had broken her heart.

Artemis looked back at her future lieutenant who, sensing her gaze, caught her eye.

As if reading the goddess’s conclusion, Thalia nodded, her eyes begging her not to say anything.

With a sigh, Artemis glanced back at Hermes and his children, specifically the oldest, and reluctantly conceded. The truth would come out sooner or later and, as Thalia had said a few days ago, the boy hadn’t done anything – yet.

With a quiet cough, she caught the room’s attention and began reading once more.

A shimmering image hovered over the void: my mother, frozen at the moment she’d dissolved in a shower of gold.

Sally scowled. “How dare he?!”

“Kronos has no boundaries.” Thalia said flatly. “He’ll use anything and anyone to get what he wants.”

Her face was distorted with pain … Cold laughter echoed from the chasm.

Percy shuddered again, wrapping his arms around Annabeth and burying his face in her neck, absorbing her warmth.

An invisible force pulled me forward. It would drag me into the pit unless I stood firm.

Everyone’s gaze was fixed on the book, silently willing Percy on.

Help me rise, boy … Bring me the bolt.

Annabeth sighed, playing with the hair at the nape of Percy’s neck. “In hindsight, that should’ve been our clue that either Hades didn’t take the bolt or it was someone else talking to you. He wouldn’t need you to bring the bolt if he already had it.”

Strike a blow against the treacherous gods!

The spirits of the dead whispered around me, No! Wake!

“Wouldn’t those spirits be from the Fields of Punishment?” Hera asked.

“Even the worst of spirits fear Kronos.” Persephone answered.

The image of my mother began to fade. The thing in the pit tightened its unseen grip around me.

Luke swallowed hard, remembering the fear that had gripped him when the dreams began. But
Thalia was there, floating in front of him night after night, her body broken and bleeding as she gasped for air, and it was so easy to let hatred and anger conquer his fear, anything to make them pay for what they did to her.

Hermes held his son tightly with one arm, even as he gathered his other sons closer with the other.

I realised it wasn’t interested in pulling me in. It was using me to pull itself out.


Good, it murmured. Good.

“Is that because it’s working?” Annabeth asked shakily. “Or because you’re realising it?”

“I don’t know.” Her future self answered for her boyfriend. “It’s more likely to be the first. Once you know you’re being manipulated, it’s easier to escape it.”

Wake! The dead whispered. Wake!

Someone was shaking me.

My eyes opened, and it was daylight.

Percy chuckled ruefully, lifting his head. “So much for taking watch.”

“Demigod dreams.” Annabeth said. “You were dead to the world, it’s fine. You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m alright.” Percy said, kissing the side of her head. “I’d just forgotten how … how bad the dreams felt. Did you ever get them?”

Annabeth thought for a moment. “I don’t think so. I don’t remember them.”

“Then you didn’t.” Thalia said darkly. “Trust me, you’d remember.”

‘Well,’ Annabeth said, ‘the zombie lives.’

Percy batted his eyes at her. “My hero.”

Annabeth rolled her eyes and swatted him over the head.

I was trembling from the dream. I could still feel the grip of the chasm monster around my chest.

Percy sucked in a breath as the tightness returned. “Damn it.”

“How long was I asleep?”

‘Long enough for me to cook breakfast.’

“Really?” Malcolm asked sceptically.

Annabeth shrugged, not bothering to act offended. “Well … in a manner of speaking.”

Annabeth tossed me a bag of nacho-flavoured corn chips from Auntie Em’s snack bar.

“That makes more sense.” Malcolm said. “Why are you still calling her ‘Auntie Em’?”

Percy shrugged, rubbing his chest. “I didn’t write this.”
‘And Grover went exploring. Look, he found a friend.’

“Ah.” Grover said. “That’s where the poodle comes in.”

My eyes had trouble focusing.

Grover was sitting … with something fuzzy in his lap, a dirty, unnaturally pink stuffed animal.

Grover frowned. “Or maybe not.”

No. It wasn’t a stuffed animal. It was a pink poodle.

Aphrodite and Silena both cooed, but Grover looked horrified. “That poor animal.”

“Well, to be fair,” Annabeth said with a grimace, “there are dyes that are perfectly safe to use on animals. But that poor poodle.”

The poodle yapped at me suspiciously. Grover said, ‘No, he’s not.’

“I never have figured out what he said.” Percy commented.

Ares looked even more horrified than Grover did. “That’s a male poodle?”

“So?” Aphrodite asked. “Pink has not always been a feminine colour, you know.”

“No, but it is now.” Ares said. “And before you say that real men can wear pink, whatever – that’s not a man, that’s a poodle.”

Aphrodite pouted, but conceded his point.

I blinked. ‘Are you … talking to that thing?’

Grover sighed. “Yes, Percy, satyrs can talk to animals.”

“That would be so useful.” Katie remarked. “We have a dog back home that absolutely refuses to turn left. I’ve always wanted to be able to ask him why.”

Travis leaned over to pat her on the shoulder, his face solemn. “Don’t worry, Katie. I’m sure he’s all right.”

While his brother cracked up, Katie simply stared at him. “That was awful.” She informed him finally, her mouth twitching. “That was really, really bad.”

The poodle growled.

‘This thing,’ Grover warned, ‘is our ticket west.

“How’s a poodle going to take them to LA?” Apollo asked in bewilderment.

Artemis rolled her eyes. “I don’t know, but I’m sure Grover will tell us.”

Be nice to him.’

‘You can talk to animals?’

“Did no one teach him about satyrs at camp?” Thalia asked.
Annabeth shrugged. “I assumed Luke would have told you.”

Luke flushed under the attention. “I was … a little bit distracted. Some of the details escaped me. Besides, that is also in the induction film.”

Grover ignored the question. ‘Percy, meet Gladiola. Gladiola, Percy.’

“And they called him Gladiola.” Ares said. “That’s just animal abuse.”

I stared at Annabeth … ‘I’m not saying hello to a pink poodle,’ I said. ‘Forget it.’

‘Percy,’ Annabeth said. ‘I said hello to the poodle. You say hello to the poodle.’

The poodle growled.

I said hello to the poodle.

Several people laughed, breaking the tension that had settled since Percy’s nightmare.

Grover explained that … The poodle had run away from a rich local family, who’d posted a $200 reward for his return.

“Oh.” Apollo said. “That’s how.”

“$200 isn’t going to go very far.” Athena said, frowning. “It won’t get them to L.A.”

“We were kids.” Percy said. “And naïve.”

Gladiola didn’t really want to go back to his family, but he was willing to if it meant helping Grover.

Aphrodite cooed. “Oh, how sweet.”
Ares snorted. “Like he won’t just run away again.”

‘How does Gladiola know about the reward?’ I asked.

‘He read the signs,’ Grover said. ‘Duh.’

“Animals can …” Sally paused. “Actually, never mind. Of course they can.”

‘Of course,’ I said. ‘Silly me.’

Thalia smiled fondly. “Like mother, like son.”

‘So we turn in Gladiola,’ Annabeth explained in her best strategy voice, ‘we get money and we buy tickets to Los Angeles. Simple.’

Annabeth sighed. “I can’t believe I thought we could buy tickets to Los Angeles for that much.”

I thought about my dream … All that might be waiting for me in the West.

“It is.” Percy said grimly. “But we don’t have a choice.”

‘Not another bus,’ I said warily.

‘No,’ Annabeth agreed.
She pointed downhill … ‘There’s an Amtrack station … the westbound train leaves at noon.’

“Oh good.” Apollo said. “Now all you need is to get the reward quickly. You can probably get about halfway there. Maybe a bit more.”

“Well, you can tell us.” Artemis said, tossing the book to her brother. He caught it automatically. “That’s the end of the chapter.”

“As you wish, sister.” Apollo said, turning to the next page. He paused. “Boys, one of you may need to take over.”

“Okay.” Lee agreed immediately. “Why’s that?”

“Chapter Thirteen,” Apollo read in answer. “I Plunge to my Death.”
Bungee Jumping (Without the Bungee)

Chapter Notes

In which a new reader joins because several people asked. And in which I'm still planning a Luke-Redemption Arc.

Sally turned a shade of white no one had seen before and *Percy* released his girlfriend in favour of darting across the room to hold her up.

“Mom, I’m fine.” He said urgently. “I’m fine!” He looked over at his father, who looked similarly worried. “I’m fine.”

Poseidon’s worry swiftly turned to anger and he rounded on his brother. “Hades!”

“I haven’t done anything yet!” Hades protested.

The situation probably would have escalated, were it not for the sudden knock on the door.

Everyone fell silent in anticipation, but rather than the three demigods Rachel had predicted, it was a beautiful woman who entered, her dark hair pinned back by a silk net held in place by what looked like pearls.

*Percy* rose swiftly, only to kneel almost immediately. “Lady Amphitrite.”

The other demigods were quick to follow suit, bowing to the queen of the sea, and Poseidon rose from his throne. “My dear, what brings you to Olympus?”

“We were concerned.” Amphitrite said, curtseying to the Olympians. “The summons was unexpected, and you did not return. Given the recent events …”

“No need to worry.” Hera assured her with a smile. “The Fates have decided to step in and prevent a war.”

Amphitrite sighed in obvious relief. “Oh, thank goodness. What prompted them to do that?”

“Evidently, this is bigger than we thought.” Poseidon explained. “In fact, we believe it to be Kronos behind it.”

Amphitrite’s eyes widened in shock and fear. “How … Who …?”

“The Fates have provided us with a series of books chronicling the events of the next few years.” Her husband continued. “As well as some demigods from 2009 to help explain things. We are expecting two more people to join us …”

“Three.” Rachel said. Her pale skin darkened in embarrassment when everyone stared at her and she dipped a curtsy. “Rachel Dare, Lady Amphitrite, I’m the new Oracle of Delphi. I had a prophecy yesterday that said we would get three more readers who will … How was it worded?”

“‘Bridge the empires once divided.’” *Thalia* said.
“Right.” Rachel nodded. “But I don’t believe you’re one of them. I think they’re coming from our time. Unless you’re from 2009, my Lady?”

Amphitrite smiled at her. “No, 2006. So we are still expecting three more. May I stay anyway?”

“Of course, my dear.” Poseidon said, a second throne appearing beside his. “But first …”

“You are finally going to introduce me to my newest stepchild?” Amphitrite asked knowingly. “I’ve only been asking since he was born.”

Some of the gods – Hera, in particular – were taken aback by the fondness in her voice, but Poseidon merely chuckled. “Well, there are two of him now.”

Her gaze fell first upon Percy standing beside Annabeth now, and she smiled, reading his comfort around her. “I see we would have met eventually then?”

Percy nodded. “Yes, my Lady. Although our first meeting wasn’t exactly Dad’s doing.”

Amphitrite laughed, clasping his hands. “That doesn’t surprise me, Percy. It doesn’t matter how many times I tell him I don’t resent my stepchildren, he never quite believes me.”

“I do believe you.” Poseidon said. “I just don’t want to rub your face in it.”

“And I thank you for that.” Amphitrite said with a soft smile. “But it’s different when I ask.”

Now she turned to the younger version of her stepson, standing almost frozen beside his mother, who was still an unhealthy shade of white.

“Do not look so worried, Percy.” She told him quietly. “I don’t know how much your future self has told you – or even how much he knows – but I consider all of my stepchildren part of my family. You are as welcome in my home as my own sons. And Sally,” she added, touching the mortal woman’s shoulder gently, “you are as well.”

Sally managed a weak smile. “Thank you, Lady Amphitrite.”

“That’s not what she’s worried about.” Aphrodite said. “Apollo was just about to begin the next chapter and the title is rather troublesome.”

“Well, then.” Amphitrite said, sitting beside her husband. “Let us begin again.”

Apollo nodded, giving his aunt a friendly smile, before reading the chapter title again, just to fill her in.

**Chapter Thirteen**

**I Plunge to my Death**

Amphitrite gasped, before giving her husband a scolding look. “And you’re sitting over here? Honestly.”

And with those words, she moved to sit beside Sally, Grover shifting over to make a space for her.

*We spent two days on the Amtrak train … We weren’t attacked once, but I didn’t relax.*

“None of us did.” Annabeth said.
I felt that ... something was waiting for the right opportunity.

“Was I being paranoid?” Percy asked.

“If you were, I was.” Annabeth said.

I tried to keep a low profile because my name and picture were splattered over the front page of several East Coast newspapers.

Sally sighed, scowling. “I am going to kill that man.”

“What happened?” Amphitrite asked.

“We were attacked by Pasiphae’s son on the way into camp.” Sally explained. “And I was taken. Apparently, the mortals have decided that Percy had something to do with it. And rather than defending him, my asshole of a soon-to-be-ex-husband has decided to go along with it.”

The Trenton Register-News showed a photo ... My sword was a metallic blur in my hands. It might’ve been a baseball bat or a lacrosse stick.

“Who uses lacrosse sticks?” Clarisse asked with a sneer.

“Lacrosse players.” Connor said.

“I meant as a weapon.” Clarisse said, rolling her eyes.

Connor shrugged. “Lacrosse players who’ve been unexpectedly attacked.”

The picture’s caption read:

Twelve-year-old Percy Jackson, wanted for questioning in the Long Island disappearance of his mother two weeks ago ...

Amphitrite tutted, her expression darkening.

... is shown here fleeing from the bus where he accosted several elderly female passengers.

Nico snorted. “Yeah, they were terrified, Percy, how could you?”

The bus exploded ... His stepfather, Gabe Ugliano, has offered a cash reward for information leading to his capture.

“Which tells you exactly how much he hates me.” Percy said. “He wouldn’t normally give up his money for anything.”

‘Don’t worry,’ Annabeth told me. ‘Mortal police could never find us.’

Thalia grimaced. “I’m not convinced, Annie.”

But she didn’t sound so sure.

“I wasn’t.” Annabeth said. “I was hoping saying it might make it true.”

The rest of the day I spent alternately pacing the length of the train (because I had a really hard time sitting still) ...
“You still haven’t quite got the hang of the ADHD, have you?” Annabeth asked.

“You were pacing too.” Percy said.

“Yes,” Annabeth agreed, “but I wasn’t surprised by it.”

… or looking out of the windows.

Once, I spotted a family of centaurs … nobody else had noticed.

“That would be the Mist.” Chiron said. “But I am very surprised that you saw them. Very few people – even demigods – would ever see a young centaur. They are guarded quite fiercely.”

“Maybe they don’t expect demigods to be on the train.” Lee said.

The adult riders all had their faces buried in laptop computers or magazines.

“Okay, maybe it isn’t just the Mist.” Chiron said with a sigh. “Then again, if most mortals weren’t so utterly determined not to see magic, the Mist wouldn’t be nearly as effective.”

Another time … I saw something huge moving through the woods. I could’ve sworn it was a lion … the size of a tank.

Apollo paused. “Was that the Nemean Lion?”

“I think so.” Percy said. “I mean, I’ve seen it since then, and I think that was it.”

“You’ve seen the Nemean Lion?” Poseidon asked.

“Technically …” Percy began, but Thalia swatted him over the head.

“Spoilers.”

“Oh, and our little discussion about dead bodies wasn’t?” Percy asked.

“We didn’t mention any names.” Thalia said. “They know Kronos is going to rise, the fact that people are going to die should hardly be a shock.”

Percy rolled his eyes. “Fine, you win. Yes, I’ve seen the Nemean Lion.”

Its fur glinted gold in the evening light. Then it leaped through the trees and was gone.

Artemis nodded. “Yes, that was the Lion. I wouldn’t be surprised if we had been close by.”

Our reward money … had only been enough to purchase tickets as far as Denver.

“So I wasn’t far off.” Apollo said. “That’s just over halfway.”

We couldn’t get berths in the sleeper car, so we dozed in our seats … I tried not to drool … since Annabeth was sitting right next to me.

Annabeth smirked. “You failed.”

Grover kept snoring … Once, he shuffled around and his fake foot fell off.

“Uh oh.” Hermes murmured. “Better get it back on.”
Annabeth and I had to stick it back on before any of the other passengers noticed.

“They wouldn’t have noticed anyway.” Chiron said, patting an embarrassed Grover on the shoulder.

“So,” Annabeth asked me ... “... Who were you dreaming about?”

“Thank goodness you talk in your sleep.” Annabeth sighed.

I was reluctant … It was the second time I’d dreamed about the evil voice … I finally told her.

“Finally.” Thalia muttered.

“I was going to tell her.” Percy insisted. “I just didn’t want to tell her in the middle of the night.”

Annabeth was quiet for a long time. ‘That doesn’t sound like Hades.

“No, it doesn’t.” Persephone agreed, giving the girl a grateful smile.

He always appears on a black throne, and he never laughs ... I guess ... if he meant, “Help me rise from the Underworld ...” But why ask you to bring him the master bolt if he already has it?’

“Thank you.” Hades said.

I shook my head … I thought about what Grover had told me, that the Furies … seemed to have been looking for something.

Amphitrite frowned. “What are they looking for? The Bolt?”

“The Helm.” Sally said. “That’s been taken too.”

Amphitrite sighed. “We miss everything down in Atlantis.”

“No one knew.” Sally said. “Until today.”

Where is it? ... ‘Percy, you can’t barter with Hades. You know that, right? He’s deceitful, heartless and greedy.

Persephone’s smile faded and she glanced at her husband, who looked more resigned than angry. “I would be careful speaking about any god in that way, Annabeth.”

“Thalia was my sister.” Annabeth said flatly. “And he killed her. In front of me. And Luke kept me from seeing it, but I can still hear her scream every time I close my eyes.”

Percy tugged her onto his lap, enfolding her in his arms, and Thalia kissed her head, before leaving them to sit beside Athena, pulling the younger Annabeth into her arms.

Annabeth clung to her just as tightly as she had two nights ago, just without tears, and Thalia stroked her hair, gently disentangling some of the knots in her curls.

I don’t care if his Kindly Ones weren’t as aggressive this time –’

“I thought they were a bit easy to take care of.” Nico commented, taking Thalia’s vacated seat and patting Annabeth on the shoulder.
‘This time?’ I asked. ‘You mean you’ve run into them before?’

“Didn’t Grover tell you that?” Will asked.

“No.” Percy said. ‘He told me what happened to Thalia, but he never told me who the other half-bloods were, just that there were two of them.”

Her hand crept up to her necklace … ‘Let’s just say I’ve got no love for the Lord of the Dead. You can’t be tempted to make a deal for your mom.’

“Yes, he can.” Annabeth said. “Now I’ve met Sally, I can understand it.”

‘What would you do if it was your dad?’

‘That’s easy,’ she said. ‘I’d leave him to rot.’

“Annabeth!” Athena protested.

“Mom, he doesn’t want me.” Annabeth pointed out, her head resting on Thalia’s shoulder. “Why should I care?”

‘You’re not serious?’

Annabeth’s grey eyes fixed on me. She wore the same expression she’d worn … the moment she drew her sword against the hellhound.

‘My dad’s resented me since the day I was born, Percy,’ she said. ‘He never wanted a baby. When he got me, he asked Athena to take me back …

Athena sighed. “Annabeth, that’s not what happened. He was worried – of course he was. But he never wanted me to just take you back. He just wanted help. Unfortunately, I wasn’t allowed to help him.”

… She told him heroes had to be raised by their mortal parent.’

‘But how … I mean, I guess you weren’t born in a hospital …’

“Um, Lady Athena?” Sally asked. “I mean no offence but … aren’t you one of the maiden goddesses?”

Athena smiled at Sally. “No offence taken, Sally – yes, I am. My children are born of intellect. They are brain children – literally.”

“Ah.” Sally said, nodding. “Then no wonder he was surprised.”

‘I appeared on my father’s doorstep, in a golden cradle, carried down from Olympus by Zephyr the West Wind … When I was five he got married and totally forgot about Athena.

“Also not true, my dear.” Athena said gently. “Your father introduced me to Susan and invited me to the wedding. I couldn’t attend, unfortunately, but he certainly didn’t forget.”

Thalia rubbed Annabeth’s shoulder, feeling the tension in her body rise. “They’re not taking his side, sweetheart. Just stating facts.”

He got a “regular” mortal wife, and had two “regular” mortal kids, and tried to pretend I
Sally frowned. “That’s awful.”

“Looking back,” Annabeth said quietly, “I wonder how much of that was my own paranoia.”

“I am *not* paranoid.” Her younger self protested.

“No, you’re not.” Thalia agreed. “But sometimes, Annie, our emotions can twist what we see.”

I stared out the train window … I wanted to make Annabeth feel better, but I didn’t know how.

“Listen.” Annabeth said.

‘My mom married a really awful guy,’ I told her. ‘Grover said she did it to protect me … Maybe that’s what your dad was thinking.’

Sally smiled weakly. “Unless Annabeth’s stepmother stinks, I doubt it.”

“She doesn’t.” Annabeth said.

Annabeth kept worrying at her necklace … It occurred to me that the ring must be her father’s. I wondered why she wore it if she hated him so much.

“Because you don’t hate him.” Thalia said knowingly. “No,” she said, when Annabeth opened her mouth to protest. “I know what you’re going to say. It’s the same reason so many of us put up with being used and cast aside. It’s like I said – deep down, we all want them to turn around and tell us they love us and they’re proud of us, just once.”

‘He doesn’t care about me,’ she said. ‘His wife – my stepmom – treated me like a freak … Finally, I took the hint. I wasn’t wanted. I ran away.’

“I wasn’t imagining that.” Annabeth said firmly.

Percy sighed. “Look, I don’t know what happened when you were a kid. But I do know that the first time I met your dad, you weren’t there. We were looking for you, actually, and your stepmom, before we left, told me to remind you that you always had a home with them, whatever happened.”

Annabeth paused. “She said that?”

Percy nodded. “Almost word for word.”

‘How old were you?’

‘Same age as when I started camp. Seven.’

Sally sucked in a breath, but said nothing.

‘But … you couldn’t have got all the way to Half-Blood Hill by yourself.’

‘Not alone, no … I made a couple of unexpected friends who took care of me, for a short time, anyway.’

*Thalia* tightened her arms around her for a second. “Will you be alright?” She whispered.
Annabeth nodded. “Thanks.”

“All right.” Thalia murmured. “Just yell.” Leaving Annabeth with her mother and brother, she returned to her seat, but, even as Nico scooted back to make some room for her, she passed him and leaned down to speak quietly to Luke.

“I left her in your care.”


Thalia gave him a stern look. “It sounds messed up, but I’m madder about that then the other thing.”

“I know.” Luke repeated, unable to look at her.

Thalia sighed and slipped back into her seat beside Percy.

I wanted to ask what happened, but Annabeth seemed lost in sad memories.

Malcolm pressed his sister’s hand and was rewarded with a small smile.

So I listened to the sound of Grover snoring … Towards the end of our second day … we passed … over the Mississippi River into St Louis.

Annabeth craned her neck to see the Gateway Arch …

Annabeth’s smile grew. “I’ve always wanted to see that.”

… which looked to me like a huge shopping-bag handle stuck on the city.

“Percy!” Both versions of Annabeth protested.

Percy laughed. “Sorry, but that’s what it looked like!”

‘I want to do that … Build something like that … Something that’ll last a thousand years.’

“You will.” Percy said confidently.

Annabeth sniffed, crossing her arms. “You didn’t seem to think so then. You thought it was funny.”

Percy laughed. “Wise Girl, that was not what I found funny.”

I laughed. ‘You? An architect?’ … Just the idea of Annabeth trying to sit quietly and draw all day.

“Oh.” Annabeth said meekly. “I guess my reaction was even more out of line then.”

“I forgive you.” Percy said, kissing her cheek. “I still have yet to see you sit still and work for more than an hour.”

Her cheeks flushed. ‘Yes, an architect. Athena expects her children to create things, not just tear them down … Sorry … that was mean.’

“Yes, it was.” Thalia agreed.

‘Can’t we work together a little?’ I pleaded. ‘I mean, didn’t Athena and Poseidon ever
“No.” The two answered, but Amphitrite looked thoughtful.

“I don’t think that’s true.” She said. “The chariot wouldn’t exist without both of you.”

Annabeth had to think about it. ‘I guess … the chariot … My mom invented it, but Poseidon created horses … So they had to work together to make it complete.’

Amphitrite nodded.

‘Then we can cooperate, too. Right?’

“Yes, you can.” Thalia said cheerfully. “Very well.”

We rode into the city … ‘I suppose,’ she said at last.

“Translation: you just ‘out-logic’d me.” Thalia said.

“Don’t get used to it.” Annabeth repeated.

We pulled into the Amtrak station … we’d have a three-hour stopover before departing for Denver.

“What are you going to do for three hours?” Connor asked.

Percy sighed. “Well, let’s see. I’m with Annabeth and we’re blocks away from an architectural landmark. What do you think?”

Annabeth looked at her knees. It had been her idea – and Percy had nearly died because of it.

His hand found hers and squeezed it gently.

Grover stretched. Before he was even fully awake, he said, ‘Food.’

Grover turned a little pink.

‘Come on, goat boy,’ Annabeth said … ‘The Gateway Arch … Are you coming or not?’

“Not.” Grover said nervously.

“We can hardly let Annabeth go by herself.” Percy said fairly.

Grover and I exchanged looks … Grover shrugged. ‘As long as there’s a snack bar without monsters.’

Annabeth winced and Percy grimaced.

Thalia didn’t miss either movement and closed her eyes with a resigned sigh.

The Arch was about a mile from the train station … It wasn’t all that thrilling …

“Percy!” Annabeth protested.

… but Annabeth kept telling us interesting facts about how the Arch was built …
“Oh.” Annabeth muttered.

… and Grover kept passing me jelly beans, so I was okay.

Silena rolled her eyes. “Boys.”

I kept looking around, though … ‘You smell anything?’ I murmured to Grover.

“He won’t.” Hermes said, frowning. “Not there.”

He took his nose out of the jelly-bean bag long enough to sniff. ‘Underground … Underground air always smells like monsters.

“Does it?” Sally asked,

Grover nodded mournfully. “That’s why satyrs hate being underground.”

Probably doesn’t mean anything.’

“Not a presumption you ever want to make.” Athena muttered.

But something felt wrong to me. I had a feeling we shouldn’t be here.

“Listen to it.” Thalia said immediately.

‘Guys,’ I said. ‘You know the gods’ symbols of power? … Well, Hade –’

Grover cleared his throat. ‘… You mean, our friend downstairs?’

Persephone giggled at her husband’s mildly affronted expression. “They could have said worse.”

‘Um, right,’ I said. ‘Our friend way downstairs. Doesn’t he have a hat like Annabeth’s?’


“Not long now.” Persephone said soothingly. “You’ll get it back.”

‘You mean the Helm of Darkness,’ Annabeth said. ‘Yeah, that’s his symbol of power. I saw it … during the winter solstice council meeting.’

‘He was there?’ I asked.

“The only time they allow me to visit home.” Hades grumbled. “Despite doing nothing to any of them.”

She nodded. ‘It’s the only time he’s allowed to visit Olympus … But his helmet is a lot more powerful than my invisibility hat …’

‘It allows him to become darkness … Why do you think all rational creatures fear the dark?’

“That is terrifying.” Silena said softly.

‘But then … how do we know he’s not here right now, watching us?’ I asked.

“Well, I suppose at least we know he’s not.” Athena said fairly. “Even if they don’t.”
Annabeth and Grover exchanged looks.

‘We don’t,’ Grover said.

“Well, that’s comforting.” Percy muttered.

‘Thanks, that makes me feel a lot better,’ I said. ‘Got any blue jelly beans left?’

Despite the worry weighing on her heart, Sally couldn’t help smiling at her son’s predictability.

I’d almost mastered my jumpy nerves when I saw the tiny little elevator car … I hate confined spaces. They make me nuts.

Not even Clarisse laughed at that – all demigods were the same.

We got shoehorned into the car with this big fat lady and her dog, a Chihuahua with a rhinestone collar.

Annabeth frowned. “I wouldn’t have thought they allow dogs in there.”

“They don’t.” Percy said darkly.

I figured maybe the dog was a seeing-eye Chihuahua …

Thalia snorted. “I’m not an expert, but I’m fairly sure they don’t do ‘seeing-eye Chihuahuas’.”

“They don’t.” Percy repeated.

… because none of the guards said a word about it.

And just like that, any humour in the room vanished.

“Because they didn’t see it.” Athena said, glaring at Hades.

“Don’t look at me.” He insisted. “I don’t know who that is.”

We started going up … my stomach wasn’t too happy about it.

Percy grimaced as the nausea returned. “Great.”

‘No parents?’ the fat lady asked us.

She had beady eyes … and a denim dress that bulged so much she looked like a blue-jean blimp.

“Uh oh.” Zeus muttered, just loud enough for Hera to hear him. She narrowed her eyes but said nothing.

‘They’re below,’ Annabeth told her. ‘Scared of heights.’

Nico cracked a smile. “Better than Percy’s ‘circus caravan’ story.”

“Oh shut up.” Percy muttered with a strained smile.

‘Oh, the poor darlings.’
The Chihuahua growled. The woman said, ‘Now, now, sonny.’ The dog had beady eyes like its owner, intelligent and vicious.

“Zeus.” Hera growled. “If you did what I think you did …”

Athena’s glare switched to her father. “If my daughter gets hurt …”

Neither finished their threat, but the look in their eyes made their intentions clear.

I said, ‘Sonny. Is that his name?’

‘No,’ the lady told me.

She smiled, as if that cleared everything up.

“You did.” Hera sighed. “Of all the ways you could have handled this, but no. You had to send her.”

At the top of the Arch, the observation deck reminded me of a tin can with carpeting.

“Percy!” Annabeth protested.

“Come on, you know that’s your thing more than mine.” Percy said. The nausea had gone again now, but he wasn’t looking forward to the next part. “Can we just … get it over with?”

Annabeth’s eyes softened and she took his hand.

Rows of tiny windows looked out … The view was okay, but if there’s anything I like less than a confined space, it’s a confined space two hundred metres in the air.

Sally gasped, suddenly turning grey. “I plunge to my death.” She whispered. “No, no, no …”

Amphitrite grasped her hands. “Sally, he’ll be alright.” She said gently. “He’s sitting in front of you. The book said the windows looked out over the river – if he falls in the water, he’ll be absolutely fine.”

I was ready to go pretty quick.

Annabeth kept talking about structural supports … She probably could’ve stayed up there for hours …

Annabeth shrugged. “Guilty.”

… but luckily for me the park ranger announced that the observation deck would be closing in a few minutes.

“Good.” Grover said nervously. “Let’s get down to the ground again.”

I steered Grover and Annabeth towards the exit, loaded them into the elevator … there were already two other tourists inside. No room for me.

“Wait together.” Poseidon said anxiously.

The park ranger said, ‘Next car, sir.’ … Grover and Annabeth both looked nervous, but they let the elevator door slide shut.
Athena let out a sigh of relief, but said nothing.

Now the only people left on the observation deck were me, a little boy with his parents …

“Oh no …” Sally whispered.

…the park ranger and the fat lady with her Chihuahua.

I smiled uneasily at the fat lady. She smiled back, her forked tongue flickering between her teeth.

“ZEUS!” Poseidon roared.

“I told you it wasn’t me.” Hades said, a little smugly.

Persephone patted his hand. “Now may not be the best time, darling.”

“Dad!” Percy called. “I get that you’re mad, but … could we maybe get the chapter over with first? It’s just this is gonna hurt, and I’d rather get it over with sooner rather than later.”

Sally’s face lost a little more blood and Poseidon sank reluctantly back into his seat.

Wait a minute.

Forked tongue?


Before I could decide if I’d really seen that, her Chihuahua jumped down and started yapping at me … foam dripping from his black lips.

‘Well, son,’ the fat lady sighed. ‘If you insist.’

Apollo glanced at Percy and handed the book to Lee. “You’d better take over. I don’t think he’ll get more than the symptoms, but I’d rather not risk it.”

Lee nodded, finding his father’s place.

Ice started forming in my stomach. ‘Um, did you just call that Chihuahua your son?”

‘Chimera, dear,’ the fat lady corrected.

Silena gave a little gasp that sounded like a scream. “Isn’t Chimera venom poisonous?”

“That’ll be why Dad’s worried, yes.” Will said, not really doing anything to help Sally’s state of anxiety.

‘Not a Chihuahua. It’s an easy mistake to make.’

“Not really.” Travis said, but Luke hushed him, his face pale.

She rolled up her denim sleeves, revealing that the skin of her arms was scaly and green … The Chihuahua barked louder, and with each bark it grew … The little boy screamed.

“Oh that poor child.” Aphrodite whispered. “Please tell me he was alright.”
“He was fine.” Annabeth said, rubbing Percy's back soothingly.

His parents pulled him back towards the exit … The Chimera was now so tall its back rubbed against the roof … I realised I hadn’t even uncapped my sword.

“Do something!” Clarisse shouted.

“What?!” Percy asked shakily. “I’m not exactly a master swordsman here!”

My hands were numb. I was three metres away from the Chimera’s bloody maw, and I knew that as soon as I moved, the creature would lunge.

Sally’s breathing was becoming a little erratic. Amphitrite caught Will’s eye and beckoned him over, and he came with a respectful bow, standing behind Sally to lay a hand on the back of her neck, murmuring a soft prayer.

The snake lady made a hissing noise that might’ve been laughter. ‘Be honoured, Percy Jackson. Lord Zeus rarely allows me to test a hero with one of my brood.

“You shouldn’t be testing any of them!” Hera snapped. “They are children!”

Thalia raised an eyebrow. “Wow,” she murmured to Annabeth. “She’s really taking this family thing to heart.”

For I am the Mother of Monsters, the terrible Echidna!’

Percy frowned. “Isn’t that …?”

“Don’t say it!” His future self said hastily. “Do not say it.”

Thalia closed her eyes. “Percy, you didn’t.”

I stared at her. All I could think to say was: ‘Isn’t that a kind of anteater?’

“Oh, but you did.” Thalia sighed, over the nervous laughter of some of the younger demigods.

She howled, her reptilian face turning brown and green with rage. ‘I hate it … For that, Percy Jackson, my son shall destroy you!’

… I managed to leap aside and dodge the bite.

There was a collective sigh of relief, but nobody relaxed.

I ended up next to the family and the park ranger … I couldn’t let them get hurt.

“Of course you couldn’t.” Thalia murmured, gnawing on her lower lip.

I uncapped my sword, ran to the other side of the deck, and yelled … Before I could swing my sword, it opened its mouth … and shot a column of flame straight at me.

I dived through the explosion.

Percy gritted his teeth against the searing heat that seemed to wash over him, curling into Annabeth’s arms.
The carpet burst into flames … Where I had been standing a moment before was a ragged hole in the side of the Arch, with melted metal steaming around the edges.

Annabeth made a small pained noise, but said nothing, staring at the book in Lee’s hands in horror.

**Great, I thought. We just blowtorched a national monument.**

“Wasn’t your fault.” *Nico* muttered.

*Thalia* hushed him.

*Riptide* was now a shining bronze blade in my hands, and as the Chimera turned, I slashed at its neck.

*Thalia* winced. “Bad idea. That dog collar’s metal.”

**That was my fatal mistake.**

Sally let out a choked sob and Will changed prayers, trying to keep her panic at a minimum.

The blade sparked harmlessly off the dog collar. I tried to regain my balance … I completely forgot about the serpent tail until it whipped around and sank its fangs into my calf.

*Percy* cried out, the ghost of the poison spreading through his leg like a red-hot poker. *Annabeth* tightened her arms around him and *Nico* jumped to his feet, racing to the small kitchenette and returning with a bucket of cold water and some cloths.

The wet cloths seemed to help a little, but it was hard to tell when his face hidden in *Annabeth*’s neck.

**My whole leg was on fire.**

*Percy* whimpered, and *Thalia* ran a hand down his back, gently tugging his legs into her lap. “Which one?”

“Left.” *Annabeth* whispered.

*Thalia* nodded, rolling up that pant leg to press a wet cloth against his calf. He twitched in his girlfriend’s grip.

“It won’t do much good.” Apollo said softly. “He’s getting the symptoms. The root cause isn’t really there.” His eyes were glowing though, and no one doubted that he was trying everything he could think of anyway.

I tried to jab *Riptide* into the Chimera’s mouth, but … my blade flew out of my hand … down towards the Mississippi River.

“Jump.” Amphitrite whispered. “Just jump. She’ll leave the mortals be.”

I managed to get to my feet, but … I could feel deadly poison racing up to my chest.

*Percy* sucked in a harsh breath and *Annabeth* released him hastily, still letting him cling to her, but trying not to make breathing any harder.

I remembered Chiron saying that Anaklusmos would always return to me …
Chiron looked grim. “It will take time. Time you do not have.”

… but there was no pen in my pocket … I wasn’t going to live long enough to figure it out.

Sally gave a little sob into Percy’s hair. She seemed calmer though; Will’s song seemed to be working.

I backed into the hole in the wall. The Chimera advanced … ‘They don’t make heroes like they used to, eh, son?’

Percy flinched, but Amphitrite gave him a smile. “For your age and experience, you are doing an excellent job.”

The monster growled. It seemed in no hurry to finish me off now that I was beaten.

“Yeah, most of them are like that.” Thalia said darkly. “They like to play with their food.”

“Can we just get on with it?!” Annabeth asked, a little shrilly. “The sooner he gets into water, the better.”

I glanced at the park ranger and the family … I had to protect these people.

“They’ll be alright.” Thalia soothed, running a hand along Percy’s brow-line. “Lord Apollo, if he’s conscious in the book, why is he so much worse here?”

“I don’t think he is.” Apollo said grimly. “The first time, he was dealing with adrenaline and the fear of protecting those people. Here, he just has the pain.”

I couldn’t just … die. I tried to think, but my whole body was on fire.

Percy shuddered again, his entire body shaking with the pain. Annabeth murmured something in his ear, too quiet for anyone else to catch, and he seemed to relax against her.

My head was dizzy … And I was scared.

“I don’t blame you.” Chris announced, white-faced.

“Who would?” Silena asked faintly. As one, most of the past demigods turned to glare at Clarisse, but she too was staring at the book in horror.

There was no place else to go, so I stepped to the edge of the hole … ‘If you are the son of Poseidon,’ Echidna hissed …

“If.” Hermes snorted. “You seen the kid?”

… ‘you would not fear water. Jump, Percy Jackson … Prove your bloodline.”

Amphitrite sniffed. “He doesn’t have to prove a thing. Though jumping is a good idea, sweetheart.” She added to her stepson. “Just for future reference.”

Yeah, right, I thought. I’d read somewhere that jumping into water from a couple of storeys up was like jumping onto solid tar. From here, I’d splatter on impact.

Sally gave a little whimper and Amphitrite patted her shoulder. “Not for a Child of the Sea.”
The Chimera’s mouth glowed red … ‘You have no faith,’ Echidna told me. ‘You do not trust the gods … The gods are faithless. The poison is in your heart.’

“How dare she?” Zeus growled.

“Oh, that’s what you’re upset about?!” Hera cried.

“Lady Hera!” Thalia called. “Thank you, really, but we really need to get this over with.”

Hera glanced over at her stepdaughter, taking in Percy’s worsening condition. She gave her husband a glare, but settled down.

She was right; I was dying. I could feel my breath slowing down. No one could save me, not even the gods.

Percy’s breath was coming in wheezing, rattling spurts now. Apollo left his sons to sit with him, Nico scrambling out of the way to allow the God of Medicine to get to work.

“Come on, Seaweed Brain.” Annabeth whispered, her hand ghosting against the Achilles’ spot on his back. “Don’t leave me now.”

I backed up and looked down at the water. I remembered the warm glow of my father’s smile … He must have visited me when I was in my cradle.

“I did.” Poseidon said quietly.

I remembered the swirling green trident that had appeared above my head … But this wasn’t the sea. This was the Mississippi, dead centre of the USA. There was no sea god here.

“He has a point.” Sally managed to say through her tears.

“The rivers may be out of Lord Poseidon’s jurisdiction but those who live there respect him enough that it can only help.” Annabeth said firmly. “Lee, please!”

‘Die, faithless one,’ Echidna rasped, and the Chimera sent a column of flame towards my face.

Percy gave another agonised cry as a second blast of heat seared through his skin.

‘Father, help me,’ I prayed.

I turned and jumped. My clothes on fire, poison coursing through my veins, I plummeted towards the river.

Lee looked up, but before he could thrust the book at someone else to read the next chapter, Percy’s eyes shot open and he sucked in a much needed, wheeze-less breath.

Despite his assertions that Percy would be alright, because he was only reliving the symptoms, Apollo breathed a sigh of relief. “Tell me that’s the worst thing you lot are going to relive.”

Annabeth shook her head sadly. “Not even close.”
A Nationwide Manhunt For Me

Chapter Notes

Sorry about the wait, boys and girls (and everyone else) - but this was a really hard chapter as nothing much happened. My muse keeps wanting to jump to more eventful scenes.

“Percy?” Sally asked. “Are you alright?”

Percy struggled to sit up, but managed a genuine smile. “I’m alright, Mom. Just … that wasn’t fun.”

“Understatement of the century.” Annabeth muttered, her voice oddly muffled.

Percy watched her for a second, then cupped her face and kissed her, less chastely than he would normally have dared to in front of their parents. “I’m alright.” He repeated, touching his forehead to hers.

Apollo rested a hand on the back of his neck, shaking his head in disbelief. “He’s fine.” He announced. “Not even a trace of it.”

The rest of the tension flowed out of Sally at his words. “Thank goodness.”

Lee looked around. “Do you want me to keep reading the next chapter?”

Apollo nodded, returning to his children. “Go ahead.”

Chapter Fourteen

I Become a Known Fugitive

Sally sighed. “Well, I suppose it does just look like you’ve blown up a national monument.”

I’d love to tell you I had some deep revelation on my way down, that I came to terms with my own mortality, laughed in the face of death, et cetera.

Annabeth laughed weakly, drying the rest of her tears. “Of course you did.”

The truth? My only thought was: Aaaaggghhhhh!

Several people laughed, relieved that the tone of the book seemed to have turned back to a lighter note, even if Percy was plummeting over six hundred feet.

The river raced towards me at the speed of a truck … And then: Flaa-booom!

Sally winced and looked anxiously at her son, but he hadn’t even flinched.

A whiteout of bubbles … But my impact with the water hadn’t hurt.

Amphitrite smiled. “Of course it didn’t.”
I was falling slowly now, bubbles trickling up through my fingers … At that point, I realized a few things: first, I had not been flattened into a pancake … I was alive, which was good.

Thalia snorted. “Talk about stating the obvious.”

Second realization: I wasn’t wet.

“Just like in the bathroom.” Annabeth murmured.

I mean, I could feel the coolness of the water. I could see where the fire on my clothes had been quenched. But when I touched my own shirt, it felt perfectly dry.

“That is awesome.” Connor said, his eyes glowing.

I looked at the garbage floating by and snatched an old cigarette lighter.

“No way …” Charles whispered.

No way, I thought … A tiny flame appeared, right there at the bottom of the Mississippi.

“Dude, that is awesome.” Travis added.

I grabbed a soggy hamburger wrapper … I lit it with no problem. As soon as I let it go, the flames sputtered out. The wrapper turned back into a slimy rag.

“So you can affect everything around you?” Thalia asked.

Percy nodded. “Anything I want to.” He caught Annabeth’s eye and they shared a smile, remembering their underwater embrace.

Weird.

“Very.” Nico agreed fervently.

But the strangest thought occurred to me only last: I was breathing. I was underwater, and I was breathing normally.

Rachel rolled her eyes. “Sure, that’s the last thing you noticed.”

I stood up, thigh-deep in mud … I imagined a woman’s voice, a voice that sounded a bit like my mother: Percy, what do you say?

Amphitrite giggled. “It might not be your imagination. One of my sisters might have travelled upstream.”

‘Um … thanks.’ Underwater, I sounded like I did on recordings, like a much older kid. ‘Thank you … Father.’

“I won’t answer.” Poseidon predicted glumly.

No response … Why had Poseidon saved me?

Amphitrite frowned. “I’d ask why you have to ask, but I’ve seen how easy it is for demigods to feel abandoned.”
The more I thought about it, the more ashamed I felt.

Annabeth frowned, but didn’t say anything. Percy seemed to be deflating in his seat.

So I'd gotten lucky a few times before … Those poor people in the Arch were probably toast.

“They’ll be fine.” Amphitrite repeated.

I couldn’t protect them. I was no hero. Maybe I should just stay down here with the catfish, join the bottom feeders.

“You are so overdramatic.” Thalia said, but her voice was gentle.

Annabeth rested her head on her boyfriend’s shoulder.

_Fump-fump-fump._ A riverboat’s paddlewheel churned above me, swirling the silt around.

There, not five feet in front of me, was my sword, its gleaming bronze hilt sticking up in the mud.

Sally breathed a sigh of relief. Danger or not, she felt much better with her son armed.

I heard that woman's voice again: _Percy, take the sword. Your father believes in you._

Amphitrite smiled. “Definitely one of my sisters.”

“Poseidon …” Zeus began.

“I’m not breaking any rules.” Poseidon said, a glint in his eye. “I’m not allowed to help Percy. There’s nothing that says I can’t send someone in my stead.”

This time, I knew the voice wasn't in my head … Then, through the gloom, I saw her – ‘Mom?’

Poseidon winced. “Possibly not the best choice.”

Sally smiled sadly. “He’s more likely to listen at least.”

_No, child, only a messenger, though your mother's fate is not as hopeless as you believe. Go to the beach in Santa Monica._

“Poseidon …”

“Oh, give it a rest.” Hera sighed.

‘What?’

_It is your father's will. Before you descend into the Underworld, you must go to Santa Monica._

“What did I want?” Poseidon asked curiously.

_Percy_ thought for a second. “I met another messenger.” He didn’t elaborate any further.

_Please, Percy, I cannot stay long. The river here is too foul for my presence._
‘But …’ I was sure this woman was my mother, or a vision of her, anyway. ‘Who-how did you-’

“Oh, just listen to her.” Nico said tiredly.

There was so much I wanted to ask, the words jammed up in my throat.

*I cannot stay, brave one,* the woman said. She reached out, and I felt the current brush my face like a caress.

Amphitrite nodded.

*You must go to Santa Monica! And, Percy, do not trust the gifts …*

“What gifts?” Athena asked sharply.

“Oh, any of them.” Annabeth answered. “I know they say you shouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth, but we need to start taking some kind of dentist with us on quests.”

Her voice faded.

‘Gifts?’ I asked. ‘What gifts? Wait!’

“She won’t be able to stay.” Amphitrite said sadly. “There was a time my sisters and I could happily visit any body of water in the world, but the pollution of many of the world’s rivers has become too great.”

She made one more attempt to speak, but the sound was gone. Her image melted away. If it was my mother, I had lost her again.

Sally smiled sadly and squeezed Percy’s hand.

I felt like drowning myself. The only problem: I was immune to drowning.

“I suppose that does make it difficult.” Thalia said dryly, catching a glimmer of a smile on Percy’s face.

*Your father believes in you,* she had said.

“Of course I do.” Poseidon said softly.

She’d also called me brave … unless she was talking to the catfish.

A few people sniggered.

“Well, they are very brave.” Percy said solemnly, but his dark mood, triggered by the book, seemed to be lifting.

I waded toward Riptide and grabbed it by the hilt … the mortal police would be arriving … they’d have some questions.

“Some?” Annabeth repeated.

I capped my sword, stuck the ballpoint pen in my pocket … I came ashore next to a floating McDonald’s.
Nico gave a little moan of longing, but Thalia shook her head. “Of all the things to invent.”

A block away, every emergency vehicle in St. Louis was surrounding the Arch. Police helicopters circled overhead.


The crowd of onlookers reminded me of Times Square on New Year's Eve.

A little girl said, ‘Mama! That boy walked out of the river.’

“Uh oh.” Will muttered, but Michael shook his head.

“Adults never listen to children.” He said.

‘That's nice, dear,’ her mother said, craning her neck to watch the ambulances.

“See?”

‘But he's dry!’

‘That's nice, dear.’

Hera huffed.

A news lady was talking for the camera: ‘… probably not a terrorist attack … We're trying to get to some of the survivors, to question them about eyewitness reports of someone falling from the Arch.’

Survivors. I felt a surge of relief. Maybe the park ranger and that family made it out safely.

“They did.” Annabeth said.

I hoped Annabeth and Grover were okay.

“We were.” She added.

I tried to push through the crowd to see what was going on inside the police line.

‘... an adolescent boy,’ another reporter was saying. ‘Channel Five has learned that surveillance cameras show an adolescent boy going wild on the observation deck, somehow setting off this freak explosion.

Percy sighed. “Why is it always me?”

Thalia hid a smile. “You got through it.”

Hard to believe, John, but that's what we're hearing. Again, no confirmed fatalities …

“There were none.” Percy said, as if trying to remind himself of that fact.

I backed away, trying to keep my head down. I had to go a long way around … when a familiar voice bleated, ‘Perrr-cy’!

Athena let out a relieved sigh. “Thank Olympus.”
I turned and got tackled by Grover's bear hug – or goat hug. He said, ‘We thought you'd gone to Hades the hard way!’

Percy looked thoughtful. “I suppose that would have been quicker.” He promptly ducked before Annabeth could react.

Annabeth stood behind him, trying to look angry, but even she seemed relieved to see me.

Annabeth frowned. “Well, of course I was relieved to see you.”

‘We can't leave you alone for five minutes! What happened?’

Thalia put her hand on her heart. “You’re right, Annie. I feel the love.”

‘I sort of fell.’

‘Percy! Six hundred and thirty feet?’

“Why, is that a bad thing?” Percy asked.

Behind us, a cop shouted, "Gangway!" The crowd parted, and a couple of paramedics hustled out, rolling a woman on a stretcher. I recognized her immediately as the mother of the little boy who'd been on the observation deck.

Sally frowned. “Poor woman.”

She was saying, ‘And then this huge dog, this huge fire-breathing Chihuahua …’

“Clear-sighted as well.” Rachel said with a sigh. “That’s not going to be fun for her.”

‘Okay, ma'am,’ the paramedic said. ‘Just calm down. Your family is fine. The medication is starting to kick in.’

“Surely giving people medication they don’t need is dangerous.” Thalia said. “I mean, I know they would think she was crazy, but …”

“Half of my children have ended up as doctors in psych hospitals for that reason, Thalia.” Apollo reassured her. “They keep an eye out for clear-sighted mortals and make sure they get cleared quickly.”

‘I'm not crazy! This boy jumped out of the hole and the monster disappeared.’ Then she saw me.

“Move.” Thalia said.

"There he is! That's the boy!"

I turned quickly and pulled Annabeth and Grover after me. We disappeared into the crowd.

Thalia relaxed.

"What's going on?” Annabeth demanded. "Was she talking about the Chihuahua on the elevator?"
“Of course.” Annabeth said. “We won’t know what happened up there.”

“We must have been terrified.” Grover bleated.

“We were.” Annabeth whispered.

I told them the whole story of the Chimera, Echidna, my high-dive act, and the underwater lady's message.

“Be honest.” Rachel said. “How much did he skip over?”

“Pretty much everything important.” Annabeth said. “I knew he’d been hurt, but I didn’t know it was that bad.”

Percy squeezed her hand. “Even then, I didn’t want to scare you.”

“Then stop doing it.” Annabeth muttered under her breath.

"Whoa," said Grover. "We've got to get you to Santa Monica! You can't ignore a summons from your dad."

“You shouldn’t ignore a summons from any god.” Zeus said.

Before Annabeth could respond, we passed another reporter doing a news break, and I almost froze in my tracks when he said, "Percy Jackson.

“Don’t freeze.” Hermes said. “Keep walking.”

That's right, Dan. Channel Twelve has learned that the boy who may have caused this explosion fits the description of a young man wanted by authorities for a serious New Jersey bus accident three days ago.

“Fits the description.” Sally grumbled. “Means they've decided it is him.”

“To be fair, it was.” Percy said.

And the boy is believed to be traveling west. For our viewers at home, here is a photo of Percy Jackson."

We ducked around the news van and slipped into an alley.

"First things first," I told Grover. "We've got to get out of town!"

“That’s easier said than done.” Hestia fretted.

Somehow, we made it back to the Amtrak station with-out getting spotted.

“How?” Lee asked.

“With difficulty.” Annabeth said. “It was a lot of ducking and diving.”

We got on board the train just before it pulled out for Denver. The train trundled west as darkness fell, police lights still pulsing against the St. Louis skyline behind us.

Lee shook his head. “That’s the end of the chapter.”
“Was it just me or was that a short one?” Michael asked, holding out his hand for the book.

“It certainly felt like it.” Chiron said. “Will you read next, Michael?”

Michael shrugged, turning to the next chapter. “I’m here. I might as well.”
Michael glanced at the chapter title and raised an eyebrow. Someone was going to get into trouble.

**Chapter Fifteen**

**A God Buys Us Cheeseburgers**

“Poseidon …” Zeus began.

Poseidon sighed. “Brother, don’t you think if I was going to interfere, I would have done so in the river?”

“And I doubt it’s me either.” Athena said, before her father could accuse her as well. “Or it would have said ‘goddess’.”

“Then who else would dare interfere on a quest?” Hera asked.

“Actually,” Thalia said thoughtfully, “I think between us, we’ve actually had interference from … all of you on a quest before. Right, Annie?”

Annabeth thought for a moment. “Technically, Lord Hades has never interfered on a quest. Neither has Lady Demeter or Queen Persephone. But, yes, I think the rest of them have at some point.”

“And who was it this time?” Athena asked, more than a little concerned. She had faith in her children, after all, the only reason she would directly interfere would be if one of them was in danger.

Annabeth smiled. “Well, Michael’s about to tell us.”

**The next afternoon, June 14 … our train rolled into Denver.**

“You don’t have long.” Amphitrite fretted.

**We hadn't eaten since the night before…**

Percy and Annabeth’s stomach’s growled loudly.

Aphrodite smiled and rose from her seat. “Time for lunch, I think. Sally, would you like to help?”

Sally’s face lit up in a smile and she nodded. “Yes please.”

The kitchenette appeared once more, closer than it had for previous meals, to allow the two to continue to listen.

… We hadn't taken a shower since Half-Blood Hill, and I was sure that was obvious.
Annabeth wrinkled her nose. “It was.”

“Hey!” Percy protested, but he was grimacing too.

“It’s not just you.” Annabeth said. “We both stink.”

‘Let’s try to contact Chiron,’ Annabeth said.

“How?” Percy asked. “We can’t use phones, can we?”


Percy nodded. “Oh, right.”

... Finally we found an empty do-it-yourself car wash.

“What do they need the car wash for?” Sally asked, stirring something in a bowl.

“Iris carries the messages through rainbows.” Aphrodite explained. “They need to make one.”

... We were three adolescents hanging out at a car wash without a car; any cop worth his doughnuts would figure we were up to no good.

Travis and Connor’s eyes lit up.


“We didn’t say anything!” Connor protested.

“You didn’t need to.” Luke said, a glimmer of a smile on his face, much to his father’s relief.

... Then I was looking through the mist at strawberry fields, and the Long Island Sound in the distance.

“That’s amazing.” Sally said. “Do connections ever fail?”

“I’ve never had one fail, I don’t think.” Percy said. “I guess they must sometimes.”

We seemed to be on the porch of the Big House. Standing with his back to us at the railing was a sandy-haired guy in shorts and an orange tank top.

“Luke!” Travis and Connor chorused, but their older brother seemed to shrink into himself again.

Annabeth had noticed his strange behaviour, and so had Lee, but a quick glance at Hermes convinced them not to bring it up.

He was holding a bronze sword and seemed to be staring intently at something down in the meadow.

“Oh oh.” Katie said. “What’s happened?”

Lee grimaced. “My guess is that something’s leaked about the Bolt – the gods will be taking sides, which means the cabins will too.”

He turned, eyes wide … ‘Percy!’ His scarred face broke into a grin. ‘Is that Annabeth, too? Thank the gods! Are you guys okay?’

Thalia allowed herself a slightly bitter smile. The thought that part of this was an act seemed to sit like acid in her stomach.

‘We're ... uh ... fine,’ Annabeth stammered. She was madly straightening her dirty T-shirt, trying to comb the loose hair out of her face.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake.” Annabeth muttered.

“Let me guess.” Thalia said, taking pity on her. “You looked awful and you didn’t want to worry him?”

Annabeth nodded, hugging her knees to her chest in a way that made her look much younger than she was. “And he always was able to tell when I was lying.”

‘We thought-Chiron-I mean-’

‘He's down at the cabins.’ Luke's smile faded. ‘We're having some issues with the campers.

Michael paused with a sigh. “I hate it when you’re right.”

Lee smiled humourlessly. “Yeah, I know.”

Listen, is everything cool with you? Is Grover all right?’

Grover beamed. He wasn’t stupid – he knew what Thalia meant to Luke – and Annabeth. It meant a lot to him that they didn’t blame him for her death.

… ‘Chiron had to-what's that noise?’ Luke yelled.

‘I'll take care of it.’ Annabeth yelled back, looking very relieved to have an excuse to get out of sight.

“Because he knew when I was lying.” Annabeth repeated. “If I stay, he’d ask me how I was, and I wouldn’t be able to lie to him.”

… ‘Chiron had to break up a fight,’ Luke shouted to me over the music. ‘Things are pretty tense here, Percy. Word leaked out about the Zeus-Poseidon standoff. We're still not sure how – probably the same scumbag who summoned the hellhound.

Luke flinched almost imperceptibly, relaxing only a tiny amount when his father rested a hand against his back. His gaze was fixed on Thalia, but she was watching his future self – no, glaring at his future self, ice in her eyes.

Luke was staring intently at the ground and, when he refused to meet her eyes, she looked away, catching sight of Luke’s vigil on the other side of the room.

The ice melted a little and she managed a smile.

… It's shaping up like the Trojan War all over again.

Ares looked positively gleeful.
Aphrodite, Ares, and Apollo are backing Poseidon, more or less. Athena is backing Zeus.’

Hera shook her head. “Athena, I thought you agreed that Poseidon didn’t take the bolt.”

“I did.” Athena said, looking bewildered. “So why my children …”

“You hate Poseidon.” Annabeth interrupted. “We all know that. If there’s a fight that he’s in, logic says you’re on the opposite side.”

“What about my cabin?” Hermes asked curiously.

“Yes, Luke.” Thalia asked, turning her gaze back on him, her voice deceptively casual. “What side was Cabin 11 on?”

Luke looked up and winced at the look in her eyes. “We’ve got all the unclaimed kids as well, and some of them are really young, so we tried to stay out of it.”

I shuddered to think that Clarisse's cabin would ever be on my dad's side for anything.

“It’s not that stupid.” Clarisse said, unexpectedly. “Besides, generally speaking, if Athena’s on one side, we’re on the other.”

… I told him pretty much everything, including my dreams.

Annabeth rolled her eyes and nudged Percy in the side in token protest, but said nothing. Luke was supposed to be a safe place, someone they could confide in.

It felt so good to see him, to feel like I was back at camp even for a few minutes …

Thalia’s eyes darkened, and Luke dropped his gaze again.

… that I didn't realize how long I had talked until the beeper went off on the spray machine…

‘I wish I could be there,’ Luke told me. ‘We can't help much from here, I'm afraid …

“I think you’ve done enough.” Thalia muttered.

… but listen ... it had to be Hades who took the master bolt. He was there at Olympus at the winter solstice. I was chaperoning a field trip and we saw him.

Percy tilted his head thoughtfully. Was Luke trying to give him a hint that he was involved? It seemed unlikely, but at the same time …

... Hades has the helm of darkness.

“Not anymore.” Hades muttered. Just a little bit longer, he consoled himself, and the rest of the plot would be unveiled.

How could anybody else sneak into the throne room and steal the master bolt? You'd have to be invisible.

“Oh, thanks!” Annabeth protested.

“Annabeth, I didn’t mean you!” Luke said hastily. “I wasn’t even implying that.”

“You’d better not have been.” Thalia whispered, just loudly enough for him to hear. Her skin was
beginning to crackle with withheld electricity.

… Listen, are you wearing the flying shoes? I'll feel better if I know they've done you some
good.’

“I’m sure you would.” Thalia said. Her casual tone had just a tiny hit of danger in it and Luke was
bracing himself for what was likely to be a big explosion.

‘Oh … uh, yeah!’ I tried not to sound like a guilty liar.

“You didn’t.” Luke said, trying to sound normal.

‘Yeah, they’ve come in handy.’

“Well, to be fair,” Grover said with a grin. “That’s not untrue.”

‘Really?’ He grinned. ‘They fit and everything? … Well, take care of yourself out there in
Denver,’ Luke called, his voice getting fainter. "And tell Grover it'll be better this time!
Nobody will get turned into a pine tree if he just …’


Grover waved it off. “It’s fine. I know what you meant.”

Thalia rose to her feet. “I’m sorry.” She said with a smile. “Something’s just occurred to me – would
anyone mind if I stepped outside for a few minutes?”

No one argued and she nudged Luke. “I need to pick your brain.”

“Is she upset?” Travis asked with a frown, as they stepped into a small antechamber.

“No.” Annabeth lied easily. “Like Grover said, Luke didn’t mean it the way he said it.”

The door closed, and Thalia turned to Luke, her smile disappearing. “If you ever,” she said in a low
voice, “use me like a weapon like that again, I will hurt you.”

“I know.” Luke said, staring at the floor.

“Look at me!”

His eyes snapped up to her face. Her jaw was set, her hair beginning to frizz with anger, but her eyes
… The ice was gone, thawed by unshed tears.

“Thalia …”

“Was it easy?” Thalia asked bluntly. “Just throwing me out there like that, like I never meant a thing,
just a convenient incident that might turn Percy against the only friends he had?”

“I …”

“I didn’t just get ‘turned into a pine tree’.” Thalia hissed. “I died, Luke, I was ripped apart by
hellhounds, and I still remember it, I can still feel them, every time I close my eyes, so don’t you dare
trivialise what happened to me like that.”

“I’m sorry!” Luke said, his hands twitching like he wanted to reach for her, but thought better of it. “I
know I was out of line, Thalia – way out of line. I think we can agree I did a lot of awful stuff, and I
regret each and every one of them and this …”
“… is nothing compared to them.” Thalia finished tiredly. “I know.”

“That wasn’t what I was going to say.” Luke said. “This was one of the hardest to justify in my own head. Everything else, I managed to convince myself that I was doing the right thing, but saying that … I felt awful, Thalia. Of course I remember what happened, you think I don’t remember? You think I don’t still hear it when I close my eyes? I know you died, Thalia, I watched it happen and I couldn’t do anything.”

Thalia nodded a little jerkily. “Come on.” She said quietly. “They’ll be wondering what we’re doing.” She pushed open the door and was immediately hit by the unmistakable smell of chocolate chip cookies.

The smile that lit her face was not faked. “Sally, you’re my new favourite.” Sally smiled a little shyly. “Not just yours, judging by some other reactions. They’ll be ready in a few minutes. Are you alright?”

“Fine.” Thalia answered, retaking her seat. “Everything’s squared away. Are we waiting for cookies or …?”

“Lunch first.” Demeter said firmly.

Aphrodite shook her head, but with a wave of her hand, a selection of fruit, meats and cheeses appeared among the readers. “Now, Michael, if you wouldn’t mind …?”


Thalia frowned, but didn’t say anything.

‘Not much,’ I lied, my stomach feeling as empty as a Big Three cabin. ‘Come on, let's find some dinner.’

“Probably a good idea.” Sally remarked, taking the cookies out of the oven.

“How were you going to pay for it?” Thalia asked.

Annabeth shrugged. “How did we ever pay for food on the streets?”

A few minutes later, we were sitting at a booth in a gleaming chrome diner.

Thalia winced. “Not the best choice, Annie – dining and dashing isn’t easy. Plus Percy’s face is all over the news.”

“Well, ours weren’t.” Annabeth said. “We were hoping for the best.”

… Grover's lower lip quivered. I was afraid he would start bleating, or worse, start eating the linoleum.

Grover blushed.

Annabeth looked ready to pass out from hunger.

Annabeth suddenly came over very pale and Thalia hastily shoved some food into her hands. “Eat!”

I was trying to think up a sob story for the waitress when a rumble shook the whole building; a motorcycle the size of a baby elephant had pulled up to the curb.
Aphrodite narrowed her eyes. “Wait a minute …”

… The seat was leather - but leather that looked like ... well, Caucasian human skin.

“That’s you.” Hephaestus said to Ares, who was gaping at the book in shock.

“Well, I wasn’t expecting that.” Athena admitted.

The guy on the bike would've made pro wrestlers run for Mama ... The weird thing was, I felt like I’d seen his face somewhere before.

“... You had.” Annabeth said. “All of his children look like him.”

“Ares, what possessed you to interfere in a quest?” Zeus asked.

“I dunno, do I?” Ares snapped, scowling.

Annabeth’s eyes widened. “Percy …”

“Yeah, I remember.” Percy said. He, like his girlfriend, had forgotten the events of the waterpark.

As he walked into the diner, a hot, dry wind blew through the place.

Aphrodite sighed, frowning. She had always disliked that habit of his.

All the people rose, as if they were hypnotized, but the biker waved his hand dismissively and they all sat down again.

“Ares,” Athena said icily, “we’ve talked about this.”

Ares didn’t answer, still scowling.

... ‘You kids have money to pay for it?’

The biker said, ‘It's on me.’

“Thank you.” Annabeth said, trying to keep things polite. “We were starving.”

... He looked up at the waitress, who was gaping at him, and said, ‘Are you still here?’

“Honestly.” Aphrodite said, returning to her seat between her husband and her boyfriend. “You could try for some manners.”

... I couldn’t see his eyes behind the red shades, but bad feelings started boiling in my stomach.

“Uh oh.” Percy said with a groan. “I’d forgotten how bad that was.”

“What’s going on?” Sally asked, sounding worried.

Athena gave Ares another nasty look. “Ares’ presence tends to rile people up – stir up the negative emotions until they’re ready to …”

“Start a war.” Aphrodite finished, still looking put out.

“Exactly.” Athena said. “He’s not supposed to do it; he can turn it off. But I would imagine there’s
enough negativity rolling around in Perseus at the moment that he’s an easy target.”

“You can say that again,” Annabeth said grimly. “Although that does explain why you were so difficult that day.”

“Just remember,” Thalia said, “if you feel the need to hit someone, Luke’s right there.”

“You’re still mad at him?” Annabeth asked, surprised.

Thalia sighed. “I’m sure you’ll find out why, honey.”

**Anger, resentment, bitterness.**

“Ah, the unholy trinity.” Nico said with false cheerfulness. “This’ll be fun.”

… **Who did this guy think he was?**

Ares began to rise, but Aphrodite pinned him to his seat with a glare.

“No.” She said sharply. “You do not get to use that against him and then throw a tantrum when he’s disrespectful.”

Ares might have argued with her, but the other gods seemed to agree with her.

He gave me a wicked grin. ‘So you’re old Seaweed’s kid, huh?’

Poseidon didn’t bother scolding him. He did exchange a weary glance with his wife though.

… **You know who I am, little cousin?**

“If he doesn’t, Annabeth does.” Athena said. “I’m more interested in why you’re there.”

… ‘You’re Clarisse’s dad,’ I said. ‘Ares, god of war.’

Sally winced. “I get the feeling you should have led with that.”

“Depends on the god.” Amphitrite answered, accepting one of the blue cookies she offered and passing the plate on to the campers. “Some of them are perfectly happy being recognised as their child’s parent first. And they’re quite right, these are delicious.”

Sally blushed a little.

… ‘That’s right, punk. I heard you broke Clarisse’s spear.’

Clarisse smirked.

‘She was asking for it.’

‘Probably.

The smirk promptly disappeared. Sure her father had said he wouldn’t fight his kids’ battles, but it hadn’t happened yet for him.

… I got a little proposition for you.’

“Seriously?” Aphrodite asked. “They’re on a tight enough schedule as it is – what are you up to?”
The waitress came back ... Ares handed her a few gold drachmas.

“Poor Hecate.” Hera muttered, pinching the bridge of her nose. “How the Mist holds up to this sort of thing …”

... Ares pulled out his huge knife ... ‘Problem, sweetheart?’

“What is wrong with you?” Aphrodite asked.

“It’ll work.” Ares said defensively.

Aphrodite shook her head.

... ‘You can’t just threaten people with a knife.’

“I think he just did.” Chris said a little nervously.

Ares laughed. ‘Are you kidding? I love this country. Best place since Sparta.

“You would think that.” Hephaestus muttered.

... I left my shield at an abandoned water park ... I was going on a little ... date with my girlfriend.

“At an abandoned water park?” Aphrodite asked dubiously.

Annabeth grimaced. “Erm, Percy’s not in the best mental state at the moment, Lady Aphrodite, so I’m going to apologise on his behalf in advance, because I think he may have ... inadvertently insulted you at some point.”

“Well, given how someone is acting,” Aphrodite said, giving Ares an icy look, “I’m not surprised.”

... ‘Why don’t you go back and get it yourself?’

The fire in his eye sockets glowed a little hotter.

“It’s a fair question.” Hera said sternly. “They are already on an exceptionally important quest.”

“I know.” Hephaestus said with a smirk.

Aphrodite glanced at her husband and groaned. “Oh, what did you do this time?”

“I really wouldn’t know, dear.” He said. “It hasn’t happened yet, but I’ll be sure to take notes.”

‘Why don’t I turn you into a prairie dog and run you over with my Harley?

“Because I’d hurt you.” Poseidon said warningly.

... Ares’s power was causing my anger ... I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction.

Annabeth traced circles on the back of Percy’s hand with her thumb, trying to soothe his anger. It seemed to be working, which was a relief – Percy angry was, even for her, even if she knew he would never, ever hurt her, a terrifying experience.

‘We’re not interested,’ I said. ‘We’ve already got a quest.’

“An important one.” Zeus scowled.
‘I know all about your quest, punk.

“I should think all of Olympus knows about it.” Athena said.

… If I couldn’t sniff out a weapon that powerful … you got no hope.

Hera’s eyes narrowed. Trapped in Tartarus, Kronos could not hope to conceal the master bolt, and Luke was certainly not capable of hiding it from their greatest trackers, which meant that one of them must have found it.

“It may even still be on Olympus.”

But which one?

Hermes was the obvious choice – he was the boy’s father, after all … were it not for the fact that his shock and horror was written all over his face when he and Thalia joined them.

Artemis was out – if Luke had been female, maybe, but in this case, definitely not.

Which left Hera with Apollo, Athena and Ares.

… I’m the one who told him my suspicions about old Corpse Breath.’

“I’ll remember that.” Hades said icily.

… Framing somebody to start a war. Oldest trick in the book.

And it wasn’t Apollo’s style. Or Athena’s.

“Thalia,” Hera said, “do you recall the discussion we had last night?”

“Yes.” Thalia answered slowly. “The first part or the second?”

“The first.” Hera said with a deceptively serene smile. “You mentioned something that might happen today, which we weren’t convinced about.”

Thalia’s brow creased. “I … Yes. I think so. Are you thinking what I think you’re thinking?” The only thing she could think of was her suggestion that the person with the bolt and the helm might come forward, and the only reason her stepmother would be saying this now, would be if she had realised who that person was.

“I think so.”

“In which case,” Thalia said slowly, “I think you might be right.”

Hera nodded and sat back, finally catching sight of her husband’s confused – and slightly afraid – expression. “Not to worry, dear.”

… I’ll arrange a ride west for you and your friends.’

Aphrodite frowned. “Why are you being so nice to them?”

“I can be nice.” Ares said.

“Yes, but you’re not.” Aphrodite said, flicking her hair. “You’re only nice when you want something. Unless it’s me.”

Hephaestus snorted, but didn’t say anything.
‘We’re doing fine on our own.’

Thalia hid her smile. “Percy, I hate to point this out, but you’re really not. You’re stranded.”

… ‘I’ll tell you something you need to know. Something about your mom.’

“You know she’s not dead.” Amphitrite said flatly, covering Sally’s hand with her own. “How did you know?”

Ares shrugged. “I don’t know – this hasn’t happened yet, has it?”

… Look for the Tunnel of Love ride.’

Hephaestus rolled his eyes. “You know, if you weren’t so predictable …”

‘What interrupted your date?’ I asked. ‘What scared you off?’

Aphrodite couldn’t help smiling. She probably shouldn’t find it amusing that Ares was frightened of her husband, or be so flattered that her husband fought so hard to get back at him.

Ares bared his teeth, but … There was something false about it, almost like he was nervous.

Hephaestus smirked.

‘You’re lucky you met me … They’re not as forgiving of rudeness as I am.

“You’re normally one of the worst.” Hermes said, frowning.

… when I opened my eyes again Ares was gone.

“And yet the mortals still didn’t notice anything strange.” Athena remarked, shaking her head.

… ‘Ares sought you out, Percy. This is not good.’

“No it’s not.” Grover said worriedly.

… Did Ares really know something about my mom, or was he just playing with me?

“It could be either.” Aphrodite said slowly. “But I don’t think he’d use your mother against you.”

Ares avoided her gaze – purely out of self-preservation.

Now that he was gone, all the anger had drained out of me.

Percy relaxed all at once, lifting Annabeth’s hand to press a kiss to her knuckles. “Thank you.”

… That was his power – cranking up the passions so badly, they clouded your ability to think.

“Yes,” Percy said, before Thalia could open her mouth. “I have the ability to think.”

Thalia pouted. “Spoilsport.”

‘It’s probably some kind of trick … Let’s just go.’

“You can’t.” Lee said. “If a god gives you a quest, you have to take it. Or bad things could happen.”
“In future,” Hera said to the demigods, “if you are already on a quest, and one of us turns up and gives you another one, you may turn it down. One at a time is quite enough.”

“Thank you.” Thalia said. “But that won’t stop them smiting us on the spot.”

‘We can’t,’ Annabeth said. ‘… He wasn’t kidding about turning you into a rodent.’

Ares smirked.

… ‘Maybe it’s a problem that requires brains … Even strength has to bow to wisdom sometimes.’

The smirk disappeared and Athena beamed.

‘But this water park … What would make a war god run away like that?’

Hephaestus chuckled to himself. He couldn’t wait to find out what he’d done.

… ‘I’m afraid we’ll have to find out.’

Poseidon looked concerned. “How bad was it?”

Percy hesitated. “We might get a little bit knocked around. We’re fine.” He squeezed his girlfriend’s hand tightly. This was going to be far harder on her than on him.

… The main gate was padlocked and topped with barbed wire.

Aphrodite grimaced. “Really? Out-of-the-way, fine, but what about that sounds like a good idea?”

… With night coming on, the place looked sad and creepy.

“Annabeth, be honest,” Aphrodite said, “is he exaggerating?”

Annabeth shook her head. “Definitely not. It was horrible.”

‘If Ares brings his girlfriend here for a date … I’d hate to see what she looks like.’

Ares growled, but Aphrodite waved him down. “As I said, given how you’re acting, I don’t blame him.”

… ‘I thought she was married to somebody,’ I said.

“She is.” Hephaestus said a little gloomily.

Aphrodite frowned, feeling a tiny pang of guilt. Okay, her husband had his share of affairs with mortals, but he was always very discrete.

And no matter how much she shunned him, insulted him, and rubbed her own affairs in his face, he never complained.

Sure he did everything he could to sabotage her dates with Ares, but he always treated her kindly and with love.

Far more love, she acknowledged, than Ares managed.

… He flew over the fence, did an unintended somersault in midair … dusted off his jeans, as if
he’d planned the whole thing.

“Well, I probably had.” Grover said modestly.

Percy grinned at him. “Of course.”

… Nothing made the slightest noise.

Aphrodite grimaced, but didn’t say anything.

… ‘Clothes,’ Annabeth said. ‘Fresh clothes.’

“Annabeth,” Athena said tiredly. “Please tell me you didn’t steal them?”

“Well, no one was there.” Annabeth said. “And it was obvious they weren’t coming back. Everything was just going to waste. Besides, I don’t think you realise just how awful we looked.”

“Or smelt.” Percy added.

… Soon, all three of us were decked out like walking advertisements for the defunct theme park.

“Oh dear.” Aphrodite said faintly. “Honey, please tell me you got yourself some better clothes as soon as you could.”

“I did.” Annabeth said hastily – anything to avoid one of her surprise makeovers.

… ‘That’s old gossip, Percy,’ Annabeth told me. ‘Three-thousand-year-old gossip.’

Hephaestus frowned, his expression tinged with sadness, and Aphrodite covered his hand with her own. He looked at her in surprise, but her eyes were sincere, an apologetic smile on her face. Maybe there was hope after all.

… ‘Hephaestus. The blacksmith. He was crippled when he was a baby, thrown off Mount Olympus by Zeus.

“Hera.” Hephaestus corrected. “Didn’t fit in, so she decided to get rid of the evidence.”

“I’m sorry.” Hera said – and for once, she didn’t sound defensive at all, but truly contrite.

… Aphrodite isn’t into brains and talent, you know?’

Silena gave Annabeth a dirty look, but her mother patted her shoulder with her free hand. “It’s alright, darling.”

“I’m sorry, Lady Aphrodite.” Annabeth said. “That was very rude of me.”

Aphrodite gave her a smile. “Thank you, Annabeth. But your observation was not without cause. I have not been setting the best example for my children.”

… He caught them together once.

Hermes grinned. “More than once. And it’s hilarious every single time.”

… That’s why they meet in out-of-the-way places, like … Like that.’
“Oh dear.” Aphrodite groaned. “How bad was it?”

_Annabeth_ shuddered, but _Percy_ looked thoughtful. “Be fair, Annabeth, we don’t know what it was like on a regular day.”

... THIS IS NOT YOUR PARENTS’ TUNNEL OF LOVE!

Aphrodite closed her eyes and took a deep breath to calm herself.

“Mom?” Silena asked, sounding mildly creeped out.

“That is not somewhere I would have picked.” Aphrodite assured her. “Far too tacky.”

... In the seat ... was Ares’s shield, a polished circle of bronze.

“Oh, that’s too easy.” Apollo said immediately.

... ‘There’s a Greek letter carved here,’ she said. ‘Eta. I wonder …’

Athena glared at Hephaestus. “If my daughter gets hurt …”

“I was fine, Mom.” _Annabeth_ assured her hastily. “I should have realised then, to be honest.”

‘Grover,’ I said, ‘you smell any monsters?’

He sniffed the wind. ‘Nothing.’

‘Nothing – like, in-the-Arch-and-you-didn’t-smell-Echidna nothing, or really nothing?’

Grover blushed. “Underground always smells of monsters.”

... ‘I’m going down there.’

“Of course you are.” Sally said with a sigh.

... You’re the Red Baron, remember? I’ll be counting on you as backup, in case something goes wrong.’

“And what are the chances of that?” Sally asked.

“High.” Hephaestus said honestly. “But given this hasn’t happened yet, I don’t know what I’ve left for them.”

... Annabeth, come with me –’

‘Are you kidding? ... What if somebody saw me?’

_Thalia_ sniggered. “Annie, who’s going to see you? The whole place is completely deserted.”

... But when I started down the side of the pool, she followed me, muttering about how boys always messed things up.

Artemis nodded approvingly.

... The shield was propped on one seat, and next to it was a lady’s silk scarf.
“I still don’t understand that.” Percy said to his girlfriend. “Was it set up after they left or did they just escape it the first time round?”

“Probably the latter.” Annabeth said.

… Then I noticed something I hadn’t seen from up top: mirrors all the way around the rim of the pool, facing this spot.

Aphrodite rolled her eyes, refusing to look at her boyfriend. “I’m all for vanity, but that’s going a bit too far, don’t you think?”

… they could look at their favourite people: themselves.

Hermes sniggered. “You have to admit, the boy’s got a point.”

… Annabeth ripped it out of my hand and stuffed it in her pocket.

“What happened to it?” Percy asked. “I don’t remember us giving it to Ares.”

“I hung onto it until we got back to camp and gave it to Silena.” Annabeth answered. “Figured she could get it back to her mother.”

… The moment I touched the shield, I knew we were in trouble.

“Good instincts.” Nico remarked. “Bad timing.”

Percy rolled his eyes. “Thanks.”

… ‘Wait … This is a trap.’

“Bit late for that.” Thalia said, frowning. “How are you going to get out of this one?”

“With difficulty.” Percy admitted, gripping Annabeth’s hand.

… Then smaller metallic threads started weaving together … making a net.

“And now they’re trapped.” Poseidon said, scowling.

… ‘Live to Olympus in one minute … Fifty-nine seconds, fifty-eight …’

Apollo grinned. “This oughta be good.”

… Annabeth screamed.

“What now?!” Thalia groaned, but Annabeth had gone rigid in Percy’s arms and he cursed under his breath, pulling her into his lap.

“It’s alright, Wise Girl.” He whispered. “Just breathe with me, it’s alright, they’re not here.”

… ‘Spiders!’

Athena flinched and her two children paled.

Annabeth was screaming and crying now, clinging to Percy with the ghost of that paralysing fear spreading through her.
… I’d never seen her like this before.

Percy and Thalia tried desperately to calm her, but they knew that it would do little good until the spiders were gone.

Percy’s efforts were hindered anyway, by the sensation of tiny metal spiders crawling over his legs.

… Then again, this was a trap meant for gods. And we weren’t gods.

“I’m sure they’ll be alright.” Hephaestus repeated, but he didn’t sound too sure.

… Water, I thought. Where does the ride’s water come from?

Poseidon breathed a sigh of relief and Amphitrite smiled. “Thank goodness.”

… I had to get us out of here.

Percy kissed Annabeth’s forehead and braced himself.

… Water exploded out of the pipes.

The Stolls cheered and whistled.

… the tidal wave slammed into our boat … dousing us completely, but not capsizing us.

Annabeth gasped, the sudden rush of cold breaking through her panic.

“At least they’re gone.” Thalia murmured, gripping Annabeth’s hand tightly.

… Then the boat’s nose turned towards the tunnel and we rocketed through into the darkness.

Percy and Annabeth sucked in a breath, pushed back in their seats by an unseen force.

… Then we were out of the tunnel … the boat barreled straight towards the exit.

“Wait a minute.” Athena said slowly. “If the theme park’s closed, then wouldn’t the exit of the ride be shut?”

“Yes, it would.” Percy agreed. “Hence the getting knocked around a bit.”

… The two boats that had been washed out of the tunnel before us were now piled against the barricade – one submerged, the other cracked in half.

“That sounds worse than ‘getting knocked around a bit’.” Amphitrite said.

“For once,” Annabeth said, her voice shaking a little, but sounding much calmer, “Percy had a plan.”

‘Unfasten your seat belt,’ I yelled to Annabeth.

“What kind of a plan is that?” Clarisse asked.

“A good one, actually.” Malcolm said, thinking it through. “If they jump when the boat makes contact, they’ll be catapulted over the gate.”

… With luck, we’d land in the pool.
“That might be a bit harder.” Malcolm admitted.

… ‘Simple physics!’ she yelled. ‘Force times the trajectory angle –’

“Not the time, sweetheart.” Thalia said worriedly.

“It’s fine.” Percy assured her. “I know better than to not listen to Annabeth at a time like that.”

… If we’d jumped when I thought we should’ve, we would’ve crashed into the gates. She got us maximum lift.

Athena winced. “That might be a bit too much lift.”

“It was.” Annabeth admitted.

… we were thrown into the air, straight over the gates, over the pool, and down towards solid tarmac.

Sally grabbed Percy’s hand, looking very pale.

Something grabbed me from behind.

Percy jolted with a grimace.

Annabeth yelled, ‘Ouch!’

Annabeth yelped as her arm was jerked backwards.

Grover!

Sally breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness you’re there.”

In midair, he … was trying to pull us out of a crash landing, but Annabeth and I had all the momentum.

Athena sighed. “Well, it’s better than nothing.”

… We smashed into a photo-board … Annabeth and I tumbled to the ground, banged up but alive.

There were a few muffled squeaks of pain, but Percy and Annabeth settled almost immediately, albeit rubbing a few sore parts of their bodies.

… The statues had swivelled so that their cameras were trained straight on us, the spotlights in our faces.

Apollo grinned. “Now we know they’re not hurt … I bet that was an interesting day in Olympus.”

‘Show’s over!’ I yelled. ‘Thank you! Goodnight!’

Poseidon shook his head with a fond smile.

… I wondered if Olympus had gone to a commercial break, or if our ratings had been any good.
Hermes sniggered. “Oh, I bet they were fantastic.”

… ‘We need to have a little talk with Ares.’

Aphrodite sighed. “That’s not going to go well.”

“No.” Apollo agreed. “Then again, he’s here – and alive – so it can’t go too badly.”

_Thalia_’s eyes cut to _Luke_ for a split-second, but she didn’t say anything.

“That’s the end of the chapter.” Michael said, looking up from the book. “Who wants to take the next one?”
This is a long chapter, so I'm cutting it in two. Also because my muse decided to hit halfway through it and it felt like a good place for a break.

Oh, and please check out my new story 'Their Father's Children' which will eventually tie into this - it's going to be really short but it's about the friendship that develops between Thalia and Apollo while she's his sister's lieutenant.

“I’ll take it.” Will offered. He turned to the next chapter and stared at it for a second. “Okay …”

Chapter Sixteen

We Take a Zebra to Vegas

Aphrodite sighed. “You couldn’t make it easy for them, could you?”

Ares smiled cruelly. “Now where would be the fun in that?”

Maybe he didn’t notice that she was slowly losing patience with him. Maybe he didn’t care.

The war god was waiting for us … ‘You didn’t get yourself killed.’

“No need to sound so disappointed.” Poseidon said frowning.

… ‘Bet that crippled blacksmith was surprised …’

Hephaestus flinched, only to be surprised when Aphrodite took his hand, squeezing it gently.

… ‘You’re a jerk.’

Annabeth flinched again. “No self-preservation.” She muttered under her breath.

Ares grabbed the shield … It changed form, melting into a bulletproof vest.

Sally hummed in understanding. “I had wondered how these things change with the times.”

… ‘See that truck over there? … Take you straight to LA, with one stop in Vegas.’

“That was … nice.” Hermes said, frowning. “Where’s the catch?”

“What makes you think there’s a catch?” Ares asked.

“It’s you.” Hermes said. “Of course there’s a catch. There’s always a catch.”

.... KINDNESS INTERNATIONAL: HUMANE ZOO TRANSPORT. WARNING: LIVE WILD ANIMALS.

Hermes sighed. “There it is.
I said, ‘You’re kidding.’

“Don’t.” Sally said, sighing. “Just take it, and go.”

… He slung a blue nylon backpack off his handlebars and tossed it at me.

Aphrodite narrowed her eyes. “Now you’re being too nice. What are you up to?”

Ares didn’t answer.

… I gritted my teeth.

Percy sighed, feeling the anger rise up in him again.

“Don’t.” This time it was Apollo who glared at Ares as he made to rise. “You’re provoking the kid and you know it. Leave it alone.”

… I was still itching to punch him in the nose.

Ares snorted. “I’d like to see you try.”

“At this point,” Aphrodite said icily, “I’d help him.”

He reminded me of every bully I’d ever faced …

“That’s because he is a bully.” Hephaestus muttered.

… I imagined the headline: TWELVE-YEAR-OLD OUTLAW BEATS UP DEFENCELESS BIKER

“Hardly defenceless, Percy!” Thalia protested.

“No, but knowing my luck, that’s what they’d run with.” Percy said through gritted teeth.

… ‘You promised me information about my mother.’

Sally tensed. She’d forgotten about that.

… ‘She’s not dead … She’s being kept.’

“How did you know about the gold?” Poseidon asked, frowning. “I didn’t know about the gold and I was keeping an eye on Percy.”

Ares shrugged. “I hear things. Maybe one of my kids told me.”

“I don’t think so.” Clarisse said, sounding uncharacteristically timid. “Prissy never talks about what happened. He definitely wouldn’t say anything where we could hear him.”

That got her a stern look from her father, but he didn’t say anything.

‘… You take somebody to control somebody else.’

‘Nobody’s controlling me.’

He laughed. ‘Oh, yeah? See you around, kid.’

Percy took a deep breath, trying to will his anger away. The glasses of water nearby were beginning
to shudder and Nico stood swiftly, moving them out of accident-range.

I balled up my fists. ‘You’re pretty smug, Lord Ares, for a guy who runs from Cupid statues.’

“Enough.” Zeus said, when Ares again made to rise.

Ares stared at him. “But …”

“You are intentionally riling the boy up and you interrupted a very important quest because you wanted to avoid a bit of embarrassment.” Zeus said sternly. “I do not approve of the boy’s disrespect but I cannot fault it.”

“When you’re back in your right mind,” Thalia said to Percy, “you are going to be so sorry you missed this.”

… ‘We’ll meet again, Percy Jackson. Next time you’re in a fight, watch your back.’

Clarisse smirked.

“Was that a curse?” Poseidon asked dangerously.

“Didn’t sound like it.” Ares answered, still looking incredibly put out. “Just a warning.”

… Annabeth said, ‘That was not smart, Percy.’

“Story of my life.” Percy grumbled, finally relaxing.

Annabeth squeezed his hand. “Feel better?”

“Much better.” Percy assured her.

… ‘Hey, guys,’ Grover said. ‘I hate to interrupt but … we need to hurry.’

Aphrodite wrinkled her nose. “I suppose animal transport is better than no transport.”

… The first thing that hit me was the smell.

“Oh no!” Annabeth groaned. “Percy!”

It was like the world’s biggest pan of kitty litter.

Percy grimaced. “That’s actually worse than I remember.”

The trailer was dark inside until I uncapped Anaklusmos.

Aphrodite frowned. “Maybe they’re coming back from a trip. Surely there should be light if there are animals in there.”

“There should be.” Annabeth said darkly. “Unless, of course, we’re dealing with the kind of person who likes to make easy money.”

The blade cast a faint bronze light over … a zebra, a male albino lion and some weird antelope thing I didn’t know the name for.

“It looked like a gazelle.” Annabeth said, her voice deceptively calm. “But it was hard to tell.”
Grover looked horrified. “Please tell me Percy’s exaggerating.”

“I’m not.” Percy said sadly. “That really is how bad it was.” He smirked suddenly. “When everything was over, I sent an anonymous letter to the New York Times complaining about the company and they got shut down.”

Someone had thrown the lion a sack of turnips … The zebra and the antelope had … hamburger meat.

“So they’re starving them as well,” Artemis said coldly. “I think my sisters and I may need to pay this company a visit.”

The zebra’s mane was matted with chewing gum …

Grover was just about vibrating with indignation, but no one seemed all that inclined to calm him down.

… The antelope had a stupid silver birthday balloon … that read OVER THE HILL!

Hermes scowled. Normally, Artemis would refuse any outsiders joining the Hunt, but he was certain that she would make an exception in this case.

Apparently, nobody had wanted to get close enough to the lion to mess with him …

“Oh, so they do have some brains,” Thalia muttered, her eyes flashing with anger. “Gutless bullies, the lot of them.”

… but the poor thing was pacing … his ribs showed through his white fur.

Grover whimpered and Sally squeezed his hand, her eyes flashing with anger.

‘This is kindness?’ Grover yelled. ‘Humane zoo transport?’

Hera looked as though she was on the verge of leaving to find these people.

He probably would’ve … beat up the truckers with his reed pipes …

“Do it!” The Stolls cheered.

… and I would’ve helped him … the trailer started shaking, and we were forced to sit down or fall down.

“Awww!” The Stolls chorused, lightening the mood a little.

We huddled in the corner … trying to ignore the smell and the heat and the flies.

Annabeth fanned her face, looking faintly sick.

Catching sight of her, Aphrodite blew a kiss in their direction, the scent of rose petals wafting over them.

Percy smiled weakly. “Thank you, Lady Aphrodite, but I think we’re going to have to stick it out.”

Grover talked to the animals … but they just stared at him sadly.
Hermes patted Grover on the shoulder. “Thanks for trying.”

**Annabeth** was in favour of breaking the cages and freeing them on the spot …

Sally winced. “Not a good idea. Especially if the lion is *that* hungry.”

… *but I pointed out it wouldn’t do much good until the truck stopped moving.*

“There goes Percy beating you with logic again,” *Thalia* said with a grin. “What happened to not getting used to it?”

*Annabeth* didn’t deign to give her an answer.

I found a water jug and refilled their bowls, then … gave the meat to the lion and the turnips to the zebra and the antelope.

Sally smiled proudly at her son.

**Grover** calmed the antelope down … We told Grover to promise the animals we’d help them more in the morning, then we settled in for the night.

Sally frowned. “I’m sure that can’t have been comfortable.”

**Percy** heaved a sigh. “It wasn’t, really.” He chanced a glance at **Annabeth**. They were about to have another, very personal discussion, one which he was sure neither of them really wanted broadcast.

… I tried to cheer myself up … we were halfway to Los Angeles.

“I’m not sure that’s a cheerful thought,” *Thalia* said. “You’re getting closer to danger.”

“Oh, like it wouldn’t cheer you up,” **Percy** said.

… It was only June fourteenth … We could make it in plenty of time.

*Annabeth* groaned. “Why? Why would you say that?”

“It’s a week,” her younger self said. “It won’t take a week. Not if that truck goes straight to LA.”

“It’s stopping in Vegas,” Malcolm pointed out. “Something might happen.”

On the other hand … The gods kept toying with me. At least Hephaestus had the decency to be honest about it …

“I wasn’t aiming it at you either,” Hephaestus said.

… I had a feeling my quest was being watched.

The gods exchanged looks.

“I’d be keeping an eye out,” Athena admitted finally.

“So would I,” Poseidon agreed.

Amphitrite looked worried. “I have a feeling it’s not you two.”

… ‘Hey,’ **Annabeth** said, ‘I’m sorry for freaking out back at the water park, Percy.’
“You don’t need to apologise for that,” Percy said immediately.

… ‘Arachne’s children have been taking revenge on the children of Athena ever since.

Athena frowned. “It isn’t that bad … is it?”

“They used to come in the middle of the night,” Annabeth whispered. “I’d scream and cry but no one could hear me. And they were always gone by morning and they never left a mark, so no one believed me.”

“We try to keep camp clear of them,” Chiron said grimly. “But we can only do so much.”

“Actually,” Malcolm said thoughtfully, “I haven’t seen a real spider at camp for about … five years.”

Annabeth cracked a smile. “Luke used to tell me that Thalia was keeping them out.”

“I don’t remember it,” Thalia said. “But if I had any control over what I was doing, I’m sure I was.”

… Anyway, I owe you.’

“Don’t start counting,” Thalia warned. “You’ll never get anywhere.”

“Percy and I stopped counting years ago,” Annabeth said. “We’re a team.”

‘We’re a team, remember?’ I said. ‘Besides, Grover did the fancy flying.’

“And that,” Percy added.

I thought he was asleep, but he mumbled from the corner, ‘I was pretty amazing, wasn’t I?’

Grover blushed, but grinned proudly when several of the campers cheered in agreement.

… ‘In the Iris message … did Luke really say nothing?’

Thalia scowled, but said nothing.

… ‘Luke said you and he go way back … Nobody would turn into a pine tree.’


… Grover let out a mournful bray.

Sally patted his arm kindly.

… ‘I thought if you knew what a failure I was, you wouldn’t want me along.’

“You’re not a failure!” Thalia and Percy protested fiercely.

… ‘Like you said, Percy, a seven-year-old half-blood wouldn’t have made it very far alone.

“You wouldn’t have made it very far at all,” Thalia muttered.

Athena guided me towards help … We travelled north from Virginia without any real training, fending off monsters for about two weeks before Grover found us.’

“Two weeks?” Thalia repeated. “It was longer than two weeks.”
Luke nodded. “It was closer to two months.”

‘I was supposed to escort Thalia to camp,’ he said, sniffing. ‘Only Thalia.

Hermes frowned. “Hang on! What about our kids?”

Chiron sighed. “We knew that Thalia was in immediate, greater danger. More so than monsters just happening upon her.”

… We knew Hades was after her, see, but I couldn’t just leave Luke and Annabeth by themselves.

“I wouldn’t have let you,” Thalia said. “Although in hindsight, they were probably better off without me.”

“Don’t say that,” Annabeth said quietly.

… It was my fault the Kindly Ones caught up with us.

Persephone gave her husband a dark look, then smiled comforting at Grover. “You couldn’t have outrun them forever.”

… ‘Her death was my fault. The Council of Cloven Elders said so.’

“Yeah?” Thalia scowled. “Well they can go and …”

“Thalia!” Hera interrupted. “There are younger children in the room.”

Thalia pulled a face, but acquiesced.

‘Because you wouldn’t leave two other half-bloods behind?’ I said. ‘That’s not fair.’

“No, it’s not,” Sally said, frowning.

… ‘I wouldn’t be here today if it weren’t for you, Grover. Neither would Luke. I don’t care what the council says.’

“Me neither,” Thalia and Percy chorused.

… ‘It’s just my luck. I’m the lamest satyr ever, and I find the two most powerful half-bloods of the century, Thalia and Percy.’

“You’re not …” Thalia began, but Will read over her.

‘You’re not lame,’ Annabeth insisted.

Thalia stopped glowering at Will for interrupting her and shrugged. “Oh, okay then.”

‘You’ve got more courage than any satyr I’ve ever met. Name one other who would dare go to the Underworld.

“There aren’t any,” Hermes said, typing something into his phone. “Remind me to have a word with the council.”

“Got it.”
“Thank you, Martha.”

“Suck up.”

Hermes sighed. “Shut up, George.”

I bet Percy is really glad you’re here right now.’

She kicked me in the shin.

Percy yelped. “What was that for?”

‘Yeah,’ I said, which I would have done even without the kick.

“Oh,” Annabeth said, blushing

“Always be certain,” Thalia said. “Especially when your friends’ feelings are involved.

Percy threw his hands up. “Whose side are you on?”

… You’re a natural searcher. That’s why you’ll be the one who finds Pan.’

Grover blushed. “That’s nice of you to say, Percy. I hope you’re right.”

The demigods from the future exchanged a knowing look but said nothing.

I heard a deep, satisfied sigh … When the sound turned to snoring, I realised he’d fallen asleep.

A few people giggled.

We rode in silence for a few miles … Annabeth rubbed her necklace like she was thinking deep, strategic thoughts.

Annabeth smirked. “When am I not?”

… ‘Every August, the counsellors pick the most important events of the summer … Thalia’s pine tree …

Thalia rolled her eyes. “Nice to know they have that constant reminder with them.”

“It wasn’t like that,” Luke said quietly. “It gave us something to remember you by.”

… a Greek trireme on fire …

“Don’t ask,” Annabeth said tiredly.


… a centaur in a prom dress – now that was a weird summer …’

Sally gaped at the book. “What on earth …?”

“Party ponies?” Percy asked with a grin.

Chiron sighed. “Unfortunately.”
‘And the college ring is your father’s?’

Annabeth’s gaze dropped to her feet and Malcolm put an arm around her.

… ‘My dad sent it to me … two summers ago … He apologised … said he loved me and missed me. He wanted me to come home and live with him.’

Sally twitched with the urge to comfort the young girl, but her own mother was there now, resting a hand on Annabeth’s shoulder, beside her son’s.

Athena may not have been as outwardly emotional as Aphrodite (she never would be), but her brand of affection suited her children just fine.

… I believed him. I tried to go home for that school year, but my stepmom was the same as ever.

Annabeth seemed to shrink into herself.

Percy squeezed his girlfriend’s hand. “I still can’t match the two up. Your description of Susan and my experience of Susan.”

“I know,” Annabeth said. “I don’t get it myself.”

“What do you mean?” Malcolm asked.

“A few weeks ago,” Annabeth said, “the whole thing ended. It was … terrifying, to say the least. Sally called Dad to tell him what had happened. Mother had asked to speak to me about something and I was just leaving the Empire State Building, when I saw them. Susan … She …”

Percy kissed her forehead. “I think her exact words were, ‘Annabeth, thank the gods you’re alright!’ And then she hugged you. And cried. It was very uncomfortable.”

“I don’t understand,” Annabeth said.

“Have you asked?” Athena asked gently.


Athena smiled at her daughter. “Maybe you should.”

… I didn’t even make it through winter break.

“Please tell me you called Chiron and went back sensibly,” Thalia said sharply.

“I did,” Annabeth said, reaching across to take her hand. “I was sensible about it.”

… ‘You think you’ll ever try living with your dad again?’

“Why would I do that?” Annabeth asked.

“Because he’s your dad,” Percy said quietly. “And my mom was dead – or so I thought.”

Annabeth thought for a second. “Okay, that makes sense.”

She wouldn’t meet my eyes. ‘Please. I’m not into self-inflicted pain.’
“It’s not that bad,” Annabeth said reluctantly. “I think it was about to get better, so I hope it doesn’t regress. It was nice to get to know Matthew and Bobby.”

Percy shuddered. “They remind me of the Stolls.”

“You like Connor and Travis!” Annabeth reminded him.

“I do,” Percy said. “But the world should only have one of them.”

… ‘You should write him a letter or something.’

“Maybe I should,” Annabeth said thoughtfully. “Then he wouldn’t be able to read it.”

‘Thanks for the advice … my father’s made his choice about who he wants to live with.’

No one said anything. Thalia might have told her ‘little sister’ that maybe it wasn’t an ‘either-or’ situation, but she knew Annabeth well enough to know that she didn’t need to hear that right now.

… ‘So if the gods fight … Will it be Athena versus Poseidon?’

The two gods looked at each other.

“Usually,” Athena conceded slowly. “In this case, however, I did not believe that Poseidon had taken the bolt, so I would have to … take his side … in this particular instance.”

She put her head against the backpack … ‘I don’t know … I just know I’ll fight next to you.’

Athena sighed, torn between pride in her daughter’s loyalty and disappointment that she would side with someone else (especially a son of Poseidon) over her.

She could hardly fault her though. Even if she had believed that Poseidon took the bolt, Annabeth had spent enough time with Percy to know that he was innocent, so how could she possibly side against him?

‘Why?’

‘Because you’re my friend, Seaweed Brain. Any more stupid questions?’

Thalia clutched her heart. “Annie, that was beautiful.”

“Shut up,” Annabeth muttered.

I couldn’t think of an answer for that … I eventually closed my eyes.

Percy frowned. “Did I dream that night?”

“Well, you didn’t wake me up,” Annabeth said. “But it was quite a job to wake you in the morning.”

My nightmare started out as something I’d dreamed a million times before …

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Percy muttered, trying to remember what he’d dreamed.

I was being forced to take a standardized test while wearing a straitjacket.

A murmur of understanding rippled through the campers.
“Have you all had that dream?” Apollo asked, looking at his sons.

“I used to get something like it all the time,” Lee admitted.

All the other kids were going out … Then the dream strayed … I looked over at the next desk and saw a girl … She was my age, with unruly black, punk-style hair, dark eyeliner around her stormy green eyes, and freckles across her nose.

“Well, I’ve got blue eyes,” Thalia said faintly. “Other than that … you were pretty spot-on. How …?”

“I don’t know,” Percy said, trying to move his arms. He couldn’t. It was as though they were pinned to his side. “Can you move your arms?”

Thalia raised her arms and nodded.

“It was just a dream then,” Percy said, “or you’d be stuck too.”

Somehow, I knew … She was Thalia, daughter of Zeus.

“Out of interest,” Thalia said, “how long are you going to tag that after my name?”

Percy shrugged. “I didn’t write this.”

She struggled against the straitjacket, glared at me in frustration and snapped, Well, Seaweed Brain? One of us has to get out of here.

Nico sniggered. “Seriously? You haven’t even met her yet, and you’re still arguing with her.”

She’s right, my dream-self thought.

“More proof it’s just a dream,” Annabeth said with a sly grin. “Percy and Thalia never agree the other one’s right.”

“I thought they got along,” Athena said, mildly confused.

“Oh, they do,” Annabeth said. “It’s just they fight like brother and sister and they’re both stubborn.”

I’m going back to that cavern.

All humour evaporated from the room.

“Oh, don’t do that,” Hermes said, groaning.

I’m going to give Hades a piece of my mind.

“You can try,” Hades said, but he didn’t sound all that angry.

The straitjacket melted off me … The teacher’s voice changed until it was cold and evil, echoing from the depths of a great chasm.

Sally shivered and Amphitrite clutched her hand, her face white.

Percy Jackson, it said. Yes, the exchange went well, I see.
Luke stiffened. He remembered this conversation. So Percy had been there …

I was back in the dark cavern … it wasn’t addressing me.

Luke took a shaky breath. His father’s presence was warm and comforting at his side, but his churning in his stomach, making him feel sicker and sicker, until he felt like he had to scream his misdeeds at the top of his voice, just to get them out.

Soon … Soon it would all come out.

The numbing power of his voice seemed directed somewhere else.

And he suspects nothing? It asked.

Another voice, one I almost recognized, answered at my shoulder. Nothing, my lord. He is ignorant as the rest.

“You saw him?” Annabeth asked.

“No, I didn’t see him,” Percy said, rolling his eyes. “I heard him, but the place was echoing. I didn’t recognize his voice.”

Annabeth raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Really,” Percy said with a sigh. “C’mon, Annabeth, do you really think it would slip my mind the next morning? Don’t you think I’d have said something? ‘Morning, guys, what’s for breakfast; by the way, Luke’s a …’” An exceptionally sharp intake of breath cut him off and he closed his eyes. “How loud was I talking?”

Annabeth chanced a glance over her shoulder to where Luke had shrunk into himself and the rest of the campers looked like they were about to start a riot. “Very.”
The Casino of Dreams

“Excuse me,” Percy said, standing up. “I need to go and smack my head against a wall.”

Annabeth rolled her eyes, tugging him back down as Thalia stood up.

“Out of interest,” she said, “how much of that did you guys actually hear?”

“Everything,” Hermes said, sounding a little disgruntled, but was a little too concerned about his son (and his now-shell-shocked other children as well).


“Alright, let’s get something very clear,” Thalia said, crossing the room to stand beside Luke. “Luke was going through some things and, as a result, made a really bad decision, which he has now rectified, more or less. So if you do have any anger to take out, aim it at our Luke, please, because it’s going to get a lot worse.”

“How much has our Luke already done?” Travis asked, pretending not to see his father’s expression.

Thalia hesitated, but Luke answered for her. “Anything before the books started. Nothing since. He’s as in the dark as any of you. Thalia’s right, which makes me wonder why she’s not taking her own advice.”

Thalia gave him a dirty look. “If I thought you’d fight back, I would.” She gave her father a pleading look, not really surprised when she received no support, but she was startled when the support came from another area.

“Personally,” Hades said, “I am more concerned about the person who now has the items. I am hardly concerned about a boy who has admitted his wrongdoing and strives to make up for it.”

Thalia gave her uncle a grateful smile, but her eyes fell on Annabeth, who looked like she was about to cry. “I know we’re in the middle of a chapter,” she said, “but can I take five minutes?”

No one disagreed, and Thalia tugged Annabeth to her feet. “Come on.” She guided the younger girl out of the room, then stopped and doubled back, dragging Luke up as well. “You too. Talk among yourselves,” she added to the campers. “Hit him if you have to.”

Luke gave a token protest, but gave in to her wishes, and she led them both out of the throne room to the same small sitting room where she had successfully petitioned her father and uncles to show some leniency.

“Are you alright, Annie?” She asked gently.

“No,” Annabeth answered, looking at her like she was mad. “How could I possibly be alright?”

Thalia looked at Luke. “Do you want me to explain?”

“No,” Luke said, taking a deep breath. “No, I need to do it. After that quest went wrong, I started getting dreams. And I listened to them.”

“The dreams Percy was having?” Annabeth asked. “You got them too?”

Luke nodded. “He kept showing me Thalia and telling me it was their fault and … I shouldn’t have
listened, Annie, I know that now, and I’m so sorry.”

Annabeth couldn’t meet his eyes. “I know, and I’ll be okay. I just need to get my head around it.”

“Are you going to be alright?” Thalia asked.

Annabeth nodded. “I just need us to get on with it.”

Thalia squeezed her shoulder and ushered them out of the sitting room and back into the throne room.

It was strangely quiet.

Percy was standing in front of Luke facing the rest of the room, Annabeth clinging to his hand. He caught Thalia’s eye as she entered.

“I gave them the short version,” he explained. “He's not saying anything.”

“Luke’s on a guilt trip,” Thalia said with a sigh. “Like I said, he won’t fight back.” She returned to her seat, turning to face the campers.

Malcolm had wrapped Annabeth in another hug, and Travis and Connor had settled in beside Luke again, silently stating their allegiance.

“Luke was a symptom,” she said softly, “not a cause. He was the first to listen, but not the last, nor was he the only one in this room. Stopping him from listening, as we have, is the equivalent of cutting off the hydra’s head. We need to burn the stump, or three more will grow.”

“Man, that was so much more poetic than mine,” Percy complained.

Thalia rolled her eyes and smiled over at Will, who was still gripping the book. For various reasons, one of them being Apollo’s frequent visits to the hunters’ camp, she harboured a soft spot for Cabin 7. “Will, would you continue please?”

Will nodded and opened the book again, finding his place.

I looked over, but no one was there. The speaker was invisible.

“Me and my big mouth,” Annabeth muttered

Percy squeezed her hand. “I said it, not you.”

Deception upon deception … Excellent.

“Is it excellent because they won’t get caught?” Nico asked. “Or because he enjoys it?”


Truly … you are well-named the Crooked One.

Several of the gods shivered.

But … I could have brought you what I stole directly-

You? The monster said in scorn.
Thalia frowned. “Since when do you put up with that kind of treatment?”

“Since I didn’t think I had any other choice,” Luke answered. It was almost a relief, to be able to speak freely about it, even if he hadn’t dared look at the younger campers yet.

**You … would have failed me completely had I not intervened.**

“That’s a good point,” Athena said, frowning. “We all went out looking for that bolt; how did _none_ of us track down a half-blood?”

“I think one of you did,” Hera said sternly. “Thalia has already said that the items are likely to be on Olympus still. I highly suggest that anyone who knows where they are speaks up _now_.”

No one said anything – Ares did not believe for one second that two half-blood kids and a satyr could possibly find out he had anything to do with it.

**But …**

**Peace, little servant.**

Thalia shook her head. “What’s become of you?”

Luke didn’t answer.

**Our six months have brought us much … Poseidon has played his most desperate card.**

“Desperate?” Sally asked.

“I would not have put Percy in danger unless I absolutely had to,” Poseidon said softly.

_Now we shall use it against him. Shortly you shall have the reward you wish …_

Thalia glanced over at Luke, and he nodded.

She sighed. “You ever hear of the Trojan Horse?”

Luke sighed. “Yeah, I know. No such thing as a free lunch.”

Technically, of course, Kronos _had_ kept his promise to save Thalia – if one counted getting Luke to poison her, forcing the Camp to search for the Golden Fleece, as saving her.

**… and your revenge.**

Luke flinched, but his father gave him a sad smile. He would have done more, but his oldest was now practically sandwiched between all three of his brothers – because the Stolls had pulled Chris in as well.

_As soon as … but wait. He is here._

Silena gave a little squeak of dismay.

**What? … You summoned him, my lord?**

Thalia rolled her eyes. “Yes, because that would make sense. Really, Luke, use your head.”

“Really?” Luke asked dryly. “You sure you want me to do that?”

Thalia thought for a second, remembering exactly where he was and what he was doing. “Yes, use
your head. Maybe then you’d realise you’re better than this.”

“Thalia!” Annabeth sighed. “I agree with you, but we can’t change what happened to us and you berating Luke is not going to change what’s going to happen to them.” Thalia pulled a face. “Right, sorry Will.”

No. The full force of the monster’s attention was now pouring over me, freezing me in place.

Percy gasped, cold flooding through his body. “Okay, the word ‘freezing’ was a turn of phrase.”

Despite the situation, Annabeth couldn’t help smirking, patting his shoulder.

Blast his father’s blood – he is too changeable, too unpredictable.

Percy couldn’t help smirking either. “That’s the sea for you.”

The boy brought himself hither.

Luke shook his head. “I knew then, you know.”

“What?” Percy asked.

“That he’d end up telling me to kill you,” Luke answered.

“Well,” Percy said, ignoring the gasps of horror from the younger campers, “I guess it’s lucky I’m pretty hard to kill then, isn’t it?”

Luke cracked a smile. “You’re a pain in my ass is what you are.”

Percy grinned. “And you’re very welcome.”

“Boys,” Thalia said over Percy’s head. “I swear I will never understand them.” Annabeth was looking at her boyfriend in confusion. “I don’t think we’re supposed to.”

Impossible! The servant cried.

“I wish,” Percy muttered.

For a weakling such as yourself …

Thalia scowled and leaned forwards to look over at Luke. “You are a lot stronger than he is giving you credit for, Luke. Remember that.”

… you wish to dream of your quest, young half-blood? Then I will oblige.

Apollo sighed. “Oh, here we go again.”

The scene changed.

I was standing in a vast throne room with black marble walls and bronze floors.

Nico sat bolt upright. Across the room, Hades and Persephone had also suddenly become far more interested.

The empty, horrid throne was made from human bones fused together.
“That’s the Underworld!” *Nico* announced, a little shocked.

“We really should redecorate in there, darling,” Persephone said, thoughtfully. “It all sounds a little cliché from an outsider’s point of view.”

Hades sighed. “Yes, dear.”

“Hades, there are rules,” Zeus said sternly. “Why has your son been to the Underworld?”

“I don’t know, it hasn’t happened yet,” Hades said scowling. “But since my children aren’t allowed at Camp, where else are they supposed to go?”

“We would not turn away a child of Hades,” Chiron said, a little nervously, “just as we would not turn away a child of one of the lesser gods, without a cabin. We’d just …”

“Put them in my cabin,” Hermes finished. “Like there’s extra room.”

“Maybe we should build an extension to Cabin 11,” *Annabeth* said thoughtfully.

“Given all your other projects,” *Percy* said, “we shouldn’t need to.”

*Standing at the foot of the dais was my mother … her arms outstretched.*

Sally took a shaky breath, letting her son grasp her hand.

*I tried to step towards her, but my legs wouldn’t move.*

“Oh, not again!” *Percy* complained.

*I reached for her, only to realise that my hands were withering to bones.*

*Annabeth* gasped, grabbing *Percy’s* hands.

“It’s alright,” *Percy* said, with a grimace. “It feels like they are, but they’re not really. And anyway, it’s only a dream.”

*Grinning skeletons … crowded around me … wreathing my head with laurels that smoked with Chimera poison, burning into my scalp.*

*Percy* cried out again, and *Annabeth* tugged his head onto her shoulder.

*The evil voice began to laugh. *Hail, the conquering hero!**

Sally scowled, bristling with anger, and Amphitrite gave her a weak smile. “Calm down, Sally. That’s not an enemy you want to make.”

*I woke with a gasp.*

*Percy* jolted, the sudden pain vanishing as fast as it had appeared, along with his paralysis.

*Grover was shaking my shoulder.*

Sally relaxed all at once, giving the satyr a grateful smile

‘*The truck’s stopped … they’re coming to check on the animals.*’
“Uh oh,” Thalia muttered.

‘Hide!’ Annabeth hissed.

“Stating the obvious a little,” Connor said.

“It’s a family trait,” Malcolm said. “Drives my dad up the wall.”

She had it easy … Grover and I had to dive behind feed sacks and hope we looked like turnips.

“Don’t say it,” Percy warned.

Thalia and Rachel both closed their mouths, looking disappointed.

The trailer doors opened …

‘Man … I wish I hauled appliances.’

Grover scowled. “Then do that. It’s not like you’re actually looking after them.”

He climbed inside and poured some water from a jug into the animals’ dishes … then splashed the rest of the bucket right in the lion’s face.

Grover made a very un-satyr-like growl and Percy patted his arm, looking rather nervous.

“I’m sure we’ll help them.

… Next to me … Grover tensed. For a peace-loving herbivore, he looked downright murderous.

The trucker threw the antelope a squashed-looking Happy Meal bag.

Nico gave a little sigh. “Happy Meals …”

“No,” Thalia said firmly. “You eat too much junk food.”

Nico looked at her in disbelief. “Every time we see you, you ask for a burger.”

“Yes, but that is very rarely and it’s the only time I eat them,” Thalia pointed out.

He smirked at the zebra. ‘How ya doin’ Stripes. Least we’ll be getting rid of you this stop.

“That doesn’t sound good …” Katie said.

You like magic shows … They’re gonna saw you in half!’

Silena gasped, tears springing to her eyes. “Oh, they can’t! You have to stop him!”

The zebra … looked straight at me … as clear as day, I heard it say: Free me, lord. Please.

“Wait, what?” Percy asked.

“Dad created horses,” his future self said. “I can understand them.” He heaved a sigh. “I miss Blackjack.”

“We’ve only been here a few days,” Annabeth said in amusement.
“Yeah, well, I normally don’t go more than one without him bugging me for doughnuts,” Percy said.

… There was a loud knock, knock, knock on the side of the trailer … ‘What do you want Eddie?’

A voice outside … shouted back, ‘Maurice? What’d ya say?’

“Ah,” Athena said, smiling. “Good idea, Annabeth.”

… Our guy Maurice rolled his eyes and went back outside, cursing at Eddie for being an idiot.

“Pot, meet kettle,” Thalia muttered.

A second later, Annabeth appeared … ‘This transport business can’t be legal.’

“It wasn’t,” Percy said darkly.

‘No kidding … The lion says these guys are animal smugglers.’

Hermes shook his head. “I do not understand some people.”

… He and Annabeth both looked at me, waiting for my lead.

“Well, it was your quest,” Annabeth said. “That van was our ride to LA. If we stopped it then, we lost it.”

“You can find another way to LA,” Hermes said, scowling. “You cannot leave those poor creatures like that.”

“You certainly can’t,” Aphrodite agreed, mopping her eyes with a hanky her husband had passed her. It was a little grease-smudged, certainly, but he had at least bothered to do something about her tears.

Ares had ignored them.

I’d heard the zebra talk, but not the lion. Why?

“Horses,” Thalia said slowly.

“Thanks, Thals, I got it,” Percy said, rolling his eyes.

… Then I thought: horses.

“ Took you long enough,” Thalia muttered, ducking the pillow Percy swung at her.

… Was a zebra close enough to a horse? Was that why I could understand it?

“A zebra is a breed of horse,” Annabeth said. “I’m not sure there’s enough genetic difference to be called a sub-species.”

Percy blinked. “Right. What she said.”

The zebra said, Open my cage, lord. Please. I’ll be fine after that.

“Why do they keep calling me ‘lord’?” Percy asked.
“Because I’m my Father’s son and he created them,” his future self said. “It’s a thing. Sea creatures do it too, which, believe me, makes aquariums uncomfortable.”

“Have you ever been to supermarkets where they have live lobsters?” Annabeth asked curiously.


Thalia smirked. “Never again because you don’t want to or because they won’t let you in?”

Percy gave half a shrug. “I may have led a prison break.”

Poseidon laughed. “That’s my boy!”

… I grabbed Riptide and slashed the lock off the zebra’s cage.

The zebra burst out … turned to me and bowed. Thank you, lord.

Grover held up his hand and said something to the zebra in goat talk, like a blessing.

“It probably was,” Grover said. “Probably something to allow him to get somewhere safe without any trouble.”

Just as Maurice was poking his head back inside … the zebra leaped over him and into the street.

Several people snickered.

… We rushed to the doors just in time to see the zebra galloping down a wide boulevard lined with hotels and casinos and neon signs.

“Well, it did say the stopover was in Vegas,” Apollo said with a grin.

We’d just released a zebra in Las Vegas.

Thalia shook her head, her eyes alight with laughter. “Only you, Kelp-Head.”

Maurice and Eddie ran after it, with a few policemen running after them, shouting ‘Hey! You need a permit for that!’

The Stolls howled with laughter.

It probably wasn’t that funny, but after the revelation about Luke, they all needed a laugh.

‘Now would be a good time to leave,’ Annabeth said.

“Yeah, you don’t want to get blamed for that little stunt,” Katie said.

‘The other animals first,’ Grover said.

“Oh yeah,” Katie muttered, blushing slightly. Her mother smiled at her.

I cut the locks … The antelope and the lion burst out of their cages and went off together into the streets.

Sally couldn’t help laughing. “I wish I could see the news segment on that.”
Some tourists screamed.

“Only some?” Chris asked.

His father shrugged. “It’s Vegas. Weird stuff happens in Vegas.”

Most just backed off and took pictures … ‘Why can’t you place a blessing like that on us?’ I asked.

“Because that would be too easy,” Thalia answered.

‘It only works on wild animals.’

‘So it would only affect Percy,’ Annabeth reasoned.

Several of the campers laughed, while Percy mock-pouted until Annabeth kissed his cheek.

‘Hey!’ I protested.

‘Kidding,’ she said.

“Mostly,” Annabeth whispered with a grin, just to annoy her boyfriend.

‘Come on. Let’s get out of this filthy truck.’

Aphrodite shuddered. Those poor children.

We stumbled out … It was forty degrees, easy …

Percy and Annabeth grimaced, dry heat washing over them. Thalia immediately shifted away from them to give them a bit of space.

… and we must’ve looked like deep-fried vagrants …

“There’s an image,” Nico remarked.

“Actually he’s being nice,” Annabeth said, fanning herself. “We looked awful.”

… but everyone was too interested in the wild animals to pay us much attention.

Sally frowned, but had to admit that was probably for the best.

We passed the Monte Carlo … and the Statue of Liberty, which was a pretty small replica, but still made me homesick.

“Me too,” Annabeth admitted. “And you can’t really see it from Camp.”

I wasn’t sure what we were looking for.

“Uh oh,” Nico muttered. In Las Vegas, there was one place in particular that tended to appear when you didn’t know what you were looking for.

Maybe just a place to get out of the heat … We must have taken a wrong turn, because we found ourselves at a dead end, standing in front of the Lotus Hotel and Casino.
“Uh oh,” *Nico* repeated.

“What’s wrong?” Sally asked, seeing the gods looking worried as well. “Is it run by monsters?”

“Not exactly,” *Nico* answered. “I’m not sure what or who runs it, but … When you go in, you don’t want to leave and time … time loses itself.”

“You’ve been there?” Lee asked.

*Nico* nodded. “After Mom died, Bianca and I were taken to the hotel. We stayed there for a month. At least, that’s what it felt like.”

Lee frowned. “How long were you there for?”

But Michael had caught on and was staring at *Percy* and *Annabeth* in horror. “When they arrived, Queen Persephone told Lady Demeter that Nico was born *before* the oath, but the oath was made decades ago.”

“I was born in 1938,” *Nico* said flatly. “We were there for about seventy years.”

“But they’ve only got a week!” Katie protested. “What if they get stuck?”

*Percy* whistled. It wasn’t the ultrasonic whistle that some of the Apollo campers had, but it got everyone’s attention. “Do I look vaporised to you?”

That seemed to settle everyone, and Will started reading again, describing the hotel.

… The doorman smiled at us. ‘Hey, kids. You look tired. You want to come in and sit down?’

“No!”

“Yes,” *Annabeth* sighed, settling against *Percy*. The air conditioning from the hotel was slowly seeping out of the book and cooling them both down. Now they just had to brace themselves for the hotel’s unique magic.

I’d learned to be suspicious … I figured anybody might be a monster or a god.

*Thalia* sighed. “He’s not wrong.”

**You just couldn’t tell. But this guy was normal. One look at him, and I could see.**

“That’s a bit of a contradiction,” Lee said.

“Yes, but it was really hot and we’d spent the night in turnip sacks,” *Percy* said.

**Besides, I was so relieved to hear somebody who sounded sympathetic … Inside, we took one look around, and Grover said, ‘Whoa.’**

“What does it look like?” Connor asked eagerly.

*Nico* grinned, a shadow of his younger self shining through. “Awesome.”

**The whole lobby was a giant game room … you name it, this place had it.**

“I want to go!” Travis and Connor chorused.
“No!” Luke said with a sigh. “That’s the last thing we need.”

There were a few other kids playing … waitresses and snack bars all around, serving every kind of food you can imagine.

Several stomachs grumbled on cue, and Sally laughed, picking up the plate of cookies to pass it around again.

‘Hey!’ a bellhop said. … ‘Welcome to the Lotus Casino. Here’s your room key.’

“And that didn’t tell you there was something wrong?” Michael asked.

Percy shrugged. “Don’t get me wrong, I thought it was weird, but … I could tell that they weren’t monsters and … Well, we were hot and dusty and really tired so, I figured they’d made a mistake and we could get out of there before they worked it out.”

I stammered, ‘Um, but …’

‘No, no,’ he said, laughing. ‘The bill’s taken care of. No extra charges, no tips. Just go on up to the top floor, room 4001 … Here are your LotusCash cards. They work in the restaurants and on all the games and rides.’

“Oh, that’s how they get you,” Nico said, wincing.

“But the cards must run out at some point,” Sally said.

… I knew there must be some mistake … But I took the card and said, ‘How much is on here?’

… ‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, when does it run out of cash?’

“It doesn’t,” Nico said darkly. “They’re eternal.”

He laughed. ‘Oh, you’re making a joke. Hey, that’s cool. Enjoy your stay.’

“And we did,” Annabeth said fairly. “Just could have done without the time trap.”

“What do they get out of it?” Sally asked. “If they’re not getting paid or anything?”

Annabeth frowned thoughtfully. “I don’t know. Maybe they harvest the energy from the guests or something – but I don’t think any of them go missing.”

“I didn’t notice anyone going missing,” Nico said. “I think it’s just run on magic. I don’t even think the people that work there know what it really is – they have everything they could ever want so why would they leave?”

We took the elevator upstairs … It was a suite with three separate bedrooms …

Athena breathed a sigh of relief.

… and a bar stocked with candy, sodas and crisps.

Demeter sniffed disapprovingly, but said nothing.
Will carried on, reading the description of the room with increasing disbelief.

… ‘Oh, goodness,” Annabeth said. ‘This place is …’

“Awesome!” The Stolls chorused.

Luke groaned quietly. He foresaw at least a summer of keeping them from sneaking off to Vegas.

‘Sweet,’ Grover said. ‘Absolutely sweet.’

**There were clothes in the closet, and they fitted me.**

“You’re right, Nico,” Amphitrite said. “I think it must be pure magic.”

“Maybe Hecate knows something about it,” Hera said thoughtfully.

… I threw Ares’s backpack in the trash can.

“Don’t,” Hera snapped, beating her son to it. He smirked for a second, before he realised her ire was aimed at him. She didn’t, however, elaborate.

… I took a shower, which felt awesome after a week of grimy travel … In the back of my mind, some small problem kept nagging me. I’d had a dream or something …

“An important one,” Thalia said.

… I needed to talk to my friends. But I was sure it could wait.

“Okay,” Percy said sheepishly, when everyone turned to look at him. “So maybe there’s a chance that even if I had seen him, I might not have said anything.”

“You would have done,” Annabeth said with certainty. “You wouldn’t have waited until we found somewhere to stay.”

I came out of the bedroom and found that … Grover was eating crisps to his heart’s content, while Annabeth cranked up the National Geographic Channel.

“Oh, Annie,” Thalia said with a fond smile. “Only you.”

“All those stations,” I told her, “and you turn on National Geographic.

“Hello,” Annabeth said with a grin. “I’m Annabeth. Have you met me?”

Percy chuckled. “Yeah, I know.”

**Are you insane?’**

“Don’t,” Annabeth said.

Percy, Thalia and Nico shut their mouths.

‘It’s interesting.’

“It really was,” Annabeth said. “There was this …”

Percy put a hand over her mouth. “Tell us later, Wise Girl. I think everyone wants to know how
much time we lost.”

‘I feel good,’ Grover said … Without his even realising it, the wings sprouted out of his shoes and lifted him a foot off the ground, then back down again.

Hermes grimaced. “That’s not good. When they start reacting without any sort of prompt, your emotions are likely out of your control.”

‘So what now?’ Annabeth asked. ‘Sleep?’

Percy snorted. “Yeah, like that was going to happen.”

Annabeth sighed. “I’m sorry I thought you two might be sensible.”

Grover and I looked at each other … I couldn’t remember the last time I had so much fun.

Despite her worry, Sally couldn’t help a sad smile. Beside her, Percy squeezed her hand.

… Our idea of a splurge was eating out at Burger King and renting a video.

“Yeah, but they were the best days,” Percy said fondly. “Aside from when we used to go to Montauk.”

A five-star Vegas hotel? Forget it.

“When it comes to this one,” Amphitrite said, “that’s not a bad thing.”

… I saw Grover a few times … He really liked the reverse hunter thing – where the deer go out and shoot rednecks.

Grover grinned. “That does sound like fun.”

“Dude, for a peace-loving vegetarian, you have a serious violent streak,” Percy said.

Grover shrugged. “I don’t like hunters.”

I saw Annabeth playing trivia games … They had this huge 3-D sim game … I didn’t think much of it, but Annabeth loved it.

Annabeth worried her bottom lip. That did sound like fun, but … surely she would realise there was something wrong.

I’m not sure when I first realized something was wrong.

“I can’t believe you got there first,” Annabeth said with a sigh. Even now, her mind didn’t seem to be working properly. Concentrating on any one thing was even harder than it usually was – and for someone with ADHD, that was saying something.

“I can,” Thalia said honestly. “Nothing against you, honey, but you and Grover were both playing solo games. It sounds like Percy was playing with other people. There’s more chance to notice something wrong.”

Probably, it was when I noticed the guy standing next to me … he said, ‘Groovy, man.

“So the clothes didn’t throw you, but the use of ‘groovy’ did?” Connor asked.
Percy shrugged. “We were in Vegas, the clothes weren’t weird. I’ve never heard anyone use ‘groovy’ unironically.”

… Been here two weeks, and the games keep getting better and better.’

“Because technology’s moving on outside,” Apollo said softly.

Later … I said something “rocked”, and he looked at me kind of puzzled …

“Why don’t more people catch on then?” Malcolm asked.

“Several reasons,” Nico answered. “First of all, most of them are mortals who stumble in there – the Mist keeps them from noticing the magic. Second of all, the Hotel itself has magic that keeps you there.”

… I said … ‘What year is it?’

“Good boy,” Poseidon murmured.

… ‘In the game?’

‘No. In real life.’

He had to think about it. ‘1977.’

“And he thinks he’s only been there a few weeks?” Lee asked.

Nico shrugged. “We thought we were only there a month.”

‘No,’ I said, getting a little scared. ‘Really.’

“Did you really think he was kidding?” Thalia asked.

“I was hoping,” Percy said.

… After that he totally ignored me.

“Magic,” Nico said.

“Thanks,” Percy said dryly.

I started talking to people … it wasn’t easy. They were glued to the TV screen, or the video game, or their food, or whatever.

“Something doesn’t want them asking questions,” Rachel said, doodling patterns on her jeans with a marker that had come out of nowhere. She had ‘lost’ her school uniform as soon as possible. “They must get something out of the guests being there.”

I found a guy who told me it was 1985 … 1993 … They all claimed they hadn’t been here very long, a few days, a few weeks at most.

Sally frowned. “How many mortal ‘missing person’ cases would be solved if we looked there?”

No one answered her.
They didn’t really know and they didn’t care.

“Why would they?” Thalia asked. “As far as they’re concerned, they’re in paradise.”

Then it occurred to me: how long had I been here?

“That’s what we want to know,” Silena said, her eyes wide with worry.

It seemed like only a couple of hours, but was it?

“No,” Percy and Annabeth answered.

I tried to remember why we were here … We were supposed to find the entrance to the Underworld. My mother … for a scary second, I had trouble remembering her name.

Percy shuddered. That had been an awful moment. He never wanted that feeling ever again.

… I had to stop Hades from causing World War III.

Hades sighed, but didn’t say anything. Persephone patted his hand. They all knew that he wasn’t behind it now.

I found Annabeth still building her city.

‘Come on,’ I told her. ‘We’ve got to get out of here … We need to leave.’

‘Leave? What are you talking about?’

Annabeth shivered. She prided herself on her logic and her intelligence – all of her siblings did. The thought that something could take over her mind like that was terrifying.

Her mother’s hand ran down her back and took her hand, squeezing it gently.

… ‘Annabeth, there are people here from 1977. Kids who have never aged. You check in, and you stay forever.’

‘So?’ she asked. ‘Can you imagine a better place?’

Malcolm pressed against his sister’s other side.

I grabbed her wrist and yanked her away from the game.

‘Hey!’ She screamed and hit me …

Percy flinched. “Ouch.”

“Sorry,” Annabeth said, looking guilty.

“Not your fault,” Percy said, pretending his cheek wasn’t throbbing. “It wasn’t that bad anyway. I just wasn’t expecting it.”

… but nobody else even bothered looking at us. They were too busy.

I made her look directly into my eyes. I said, ‘Spider. Large, hairy spiders.’

Annabeth squeaked, but her future self shook her head slowly. “Thank you.”

“Sorry,” Percy said, squeezing her hand. “It was the only thing I could think of.”

“I know,” Annabeth said, kissing his cheek. “Thank you.”

That jarred her.

“Thank Olympus for that,” Thalia muttered.

Her vision cleared. ‘Oh my gods,’ she said. ‘How long have we –’

‘I don’t know, but we’ve got to find Grover.’

“Tell us!” Silena said, covering her eyes and hiding her face in the shoulder of the person next to her.

Beckendorf abandoned the machine in his lap and patted her back, looking a little perplexed.

“Silena, it can’t be too bad,” Katie said. “Like Percy said, he’s not vaporised, so they must have managed it.”

Silena relaxed, but she didn’t sit up.

We went searching, and found him still playing Virtual Deer Hunter.

Percy snorted. “Maybe we should get him that for his birthday.”

“He’d never do anything else,” Annabeth said fondly.

… He turned the plastic gun on me and started clicking, as if I were just another image from the screen.

Grover bleated with alarm. “I’m sorry, Percy.”

Percy grinned. “It’s fine. It’s just a plastic toy – it won’t hurt me.”

I looked at Annabeth, and together we took Grover by the arms and dragged him away.

“Probably for the best,” Thalia said, looking highly amused.

His flying shoes sprang to life and started tugging his legs in the other direction as he shouted, ‘No! I just got to a new level! No!’

“That is some powerful magic,” Hermes said, frowning. “Maybe we should …”

“No,” Zeus said. “We cannot interfere.”

Hermes scowled and muttered something under his breath that made his sons (even Luke, who was still pale-faced and shaking) grin with appreciation.

The Lotus bellhop hurried up to us. ‘Well, now, are you ready for your platinum cards?’

“No!” Several people shouted.
‘We’re leaving,’ I told him.

“Good boy,” Amphitrite said. “Be firm.”

‘Such a shame,’ he said, and I got the feeling that he really meant it, that we’d be breaking his heart if we went. ‘We just added an entire new floor full of games for platinum-card members.’

“Oh, they’re good,” Apollo said.

His sister hummed in agreement, mentally planning a hunting trip to check up on this place. She would have to pick her hunters carefully for that one – there weren’t many who would cope with that many boys around.

But Sally did have a point – who knew how many mothers were waiting for their children to return to them, with no idea if they were alive or dead?

He held out the cards, and I wanted one … I’d be playing virtual rifleman with groovy Disco Darrin forever.

“And that was tempting?” Annabeth asked.

“I didn’t take it,” Percy said. “But I do miss Disco Darrin.”

Grover reached for the card …

“No!” Grover yelped.

Sally patted his shoulder. “It’s alright, dear. They won’t let you.”

… but Annabeth yanked his arm back and said, ‘No thanks.’

“Good girl,” Athena said, squeezing her daughter’s hand again.

We walked towards the door, and as we did, the smell of the good and the sounds of the games seemed to get more and more inviting … We could just stay the night, sleep in a real bed for once …

Annabeth sighed longingly. “Yeah, that would have been lovely.”

Then we burst through the doors … It felt like afternoon … The weather had completely changed.

“Uh oh,” Percy said nervously. “How long had it been?”

It was stormy, with heat lightning flashing out in the desert.

Apollo sighed in relief. “Well, that’s nothing that hasn’t been happening for the last six months.”

Ares’s backpack was slung over my shoulder … I was sure I had thrown it in the trash can in room 4001, but at the moment I had other problems to worry about.

“That’s quite remarkable,” Athena said, but Nico was frowning.

“That’s … not how the Lotus Casino works,” he said. “If you left that backpack there, it would still
be there. Bianca and I left a couple of things there; we never got them back.”

“How did the backpack reappear then?” Aphrodite asked.

Ares shrugged. “Maybe because I gave it to him. Maybe I made sure they couldn’t lose it.”

“That was very nice of you,” she said, but she sounded far more suspicious than she did affectionate.

_I ran to the nearest newspaper stand … Thank the gods, it was the same year it had been when we went in._

“Well, that’s something,” Annabeth said.

**Then I noticed the date:**

There was a sharp increase of breath.

**June twentieth.**

There was a beat of silence. Then …

“They’re screwed.”

“Travis!” Hermes chided.

“Well, they are!” Travis said. “They still need to get to LA, they need to get whatever message Lord Poseidon has for them, then they need to get into the Underworld, we know that Lord Hades doesn’t even have what they’re looking for, so then what are they going to do?”

Hermes sighed. “Regardless, now may not be the best time to say so.” He glanced down at Luke, who was bypassing worry and gradually reaching hysteria.

**We had been in the Lotus Casino for five days.**

“Unbelievable,” Sally muttered, worry coursing through them.

**We had only one day left until the summer solstice. One day to complete our quest.**

“Thank goodness you realised when you did,” Thalia said to Percy, “or you really would have been screwed. On saying that, Travis has a point.”

“Yeah, but, again, do I look vaporised to you?” Percy asked.

“Fair point,” Thalia said, getting to her feet. She stepped into the small kitchenette for a second and emerged with a paper bag, crossing the floor to hand it to Luke. “Breathe into this, in for four, out for seven. How are you going to get back to New York once you’ve managed it though?” She added, returning to Percy.

_Percy_ looked at her in amusement. “You’ll see.”

“What’s the smile for?” Thalia asked.

_Percy_ shook his head. “You are such a mom.”

_Thalia_ rolled her eyes. “I am not.”
Annabeth clapped a hand over Percy’s mouth before he could argue. “Will, was that the end of the chapter?”

Will nodded.

“How many chapters are left?” Hera asked.

Will flicked through the book. “Six, Lady Hera.”

“I suggest we read three more, then stop for dinner,” Hera said, glancing at the time. “And then we can hopefully get the last three read before bed.”

No one disagreed with her, and Hermes held out a hand for the book. “I’ll read next. It should be a safe one.” He flipped to the next chapter and smiled. “And perhaps a fun one.”
Sorry about the delay, folks. Christmas kind of took the wind out of my sails!

“Fun?” Sally repeated dubiously.

Hermes nodded, reading the title.

Chapter Seventeen

We Shop for Waterbeds

Sally relaxed with a smile. “That does sound fun.” She frowned. “Although why were you shopping for waterbeds?”

Percy shrugged. “It just sort of happened.” He tightened an arm around his girlfriend’s waist. He was more or less alright during the whole thing.

It was Annabeth’s idea.

“Shopping for waterbeds?” Athena asked blankly.

Annabeth laughed, reluctantly. “No, just getting to L.A.”

“Oh,” Athena said with a smile. “In which case, of course it was your idea.”

She loaded us into the back of a Vegas taxi … and told the driver, ‘Los Angeles, please.’

“Annabeth,” Sally said kindly, “how were you expecting to pay for it?”

“I was hoping,” Annabeth said. “And I had a plan. A-”

“Athena always has a plan,” Nico and Percy finished for her.

… ‘That’s three hundred miles. For that, you gotta pay up front.’

Connor grimaced. “So you can’t even do a runner when you get there.”

‘You accept casino debit cards?’ Annabeth asked.

Apollo’s eyes lit up. “That’ll work.”

He shrugged. ‘Some of ’em … I gotta swipe ’em through, first.’

Annabeth handed him her green LotusCash card … ‘Swipe it,’ Annabeth invited.

… His meter machine started rattling … Finally an infinity symbol came up next to the dollar sign.
Travis and Connor looked like they were about to start salivating.

... He looked back at us, his eyes wide. ‘Where to in Los Angeles ... uh, Your Highness?’

Annabeth smirked. “I could have gotten used to that.”

Percy snorted. “Please. If I started calling you ‘Princess’, you’d ...” he huffed out a groan as her elbow automatically dug into his side. “Exactly.”

‘The Santa Monica pier ... Get us there fast, and you can keep the change.’

Nico whistled. “You made his whole life, I should think.

Maybe she shouldn’t have told him that.

The cab’s speedometer never dipped below ninety-five the whole way through the Mojave Desert.

Sally grimaced, but didn’t say anything. At least they might get there in time.

On the road, we had plenty of time to talk ... The Lotus Casino seemed to have short-circuited my memory.

“Is that why you had memory problems?” Percy asked Nico.

Nico rolled his eyes. “No, I have memory problems because Bianca and I went for a swim in the Lethe.”

I couldn’t recall what the invisible servant’s voice had sounded like, though I was sure it was somebody I knew.

“I hate that feeling,” Annabeth said, trying to pretend they weren’t talking about Luke, “when something’s just out of reach, but you know you know you should know it.”

The servant had called the monster in the pit something other than ‘my lord’ ... some special name or title ...

Percy sighed. “If only I’d remembered ...”

“I’d still have gone into denial,” Annabeth whispered, resting her head on his shoulder.

‘The Silent One? ... The Rich One? Both of those are nicknames for Hades.’

“Not for years,” Nico said, wrinkling his nose.

Annabeth shrugged. “So sue me.”

‘Maybe ...’ I said, though neither sounded quite right ... ‘Something’s wrong.

Annabeth shook her head. “I’m sorry, Percy. I should have listened to you.”

The throne room wasn’t the main part ... It didn’t feel like a god’s voice.’

Persephone gave Percy a calculating look. “You’re a lot smarter than people give you credit for, aren’t you?”
“Yes,” Annabeth answered, when Percy turned red and mumbled something under his breath. “He is.”

Annabeth’s eyes widened … ‘No, it has to be Hades.

“Did you know then?” Athena asked.

“I knew that Kronos was the only other option,” Annabeth answered. “I just couldn’t – or didn’t want to, I suppose – believe that it could be him.”

Maybe he sent this thief … something went wrong … the gods were hunting him … So this thief had to hide the bolt, or he lost it somehow …

Annabeth took a deep breath and turned to Luke. “Be honest. How close was I?”


Anyway, he failed to bring it to Hades … That would explain what the Furies were searching for when they can after us on the bus.

“That would make sense,” Amphitrite said thoughtfully. “I would certainly agree with that theory, if I didn’t know otherwise.”

Maybe they thought we had retrieved the bolt.’

“But why would you then be going to the Underworld?” Katie asked.

“Percy asked that,” Annabeth admitted.

I wasn’t sure what was wrong with her. She looked pale.

Thalia snorted under her breath. “I wonder why.”

‘But if I’d already retrieved the bolt,’ I said, ‘why would I be travelling to the Underworld?’

‘To threaten Hades,’ Grover suggested. ‘To bribe or blackmail him into getting your mom back.’

“You have evil thoughts for a goat,” Connor said, sounding impressed.

Grover shrugged modestly. “Thank you.”

Hermes chuckled and read the next few lines. Everyone laughed at the coincidence and Connor and Percy high-fived.

‘But the thing in the pit sat it was waiting for two items … what’s the other?’

“I don’t know,” Annabeth said with a sigh. “I’m trying to pretend this isn’t much worse than it already is, would you humour me for five minutes?”

… Annabeth was looking at me as if she knew my next question, and was silently willing me not to ask it.

“Then why did you?” Annabeth asked.
“Because I like to know what I’m up against,” Percy said dryly. “I’m weird like that.”

‘You have an idea what might be in that pit, don’t you?’ I asked her. ‘I mean, if it isn’t Hades?’

‘Percy … let’s not talk about it. Because if it isn’t Hades … No. It has to be Hades.’

Hades grimaced, but he couldn’t fault them for that.

… We passed a sign that said: CALIFORNIA STATE LINE, 12 MILES.

Sally took a shaky breath. They were so close.

I got the feeling I was missing one simple, critical piece of information.

“And I was,” Percy muttered, rubbing his forehead.

It was like when I stared at a common word … but I couldn’t make sense of it because one or two letters were floating around.

“I hate it when that happens,” Michael said with a grimace.

The more I thought … the more I was sure that confronting Hades wasn’t the real answer.

“I’m impressed,” Athena admitted. “If you had known about Kronos and Tartarus, is that the conclusion you would have drawn?”

Percy thought for a second. “I’m not sure, Lady Athena. Maybe.”

There was something else going on, something even more dangerous.

Sally shuddered, gripping Percy’s hand as though that would change things in itself.

The problem was: we were hurtling towards the Underworld at ninety-five miles an hour … If we got there and found out we were wrong, we wouldn’t have time to correct ourselves.

“Oh no …” Silena whispered. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

The solstice deadline would pass and war would begin.

Everyone looked towards the future demigods, worried.

“That wasn’t it,” Percy said carefully. “We sorted things out in time. This time, at least.”

‘The answer is in the Underworld … You saw spirits of the dead, Percy. There’s only one place that could be.

“Well, she’s not wrong,” Nico said fairly.

We’re doing the right thing.’

“And we were,” Percy added. “Without going to the Underworld, we wouldn’t have found the last piece of the puzzle.”

She tried to boost our morale by suggesting clever strategies for getting into the Land of the
Dead …

Nico sniggered. “Be honest – how many would have worked?”

“None of them,” Annabeth admitted with a sheepish smile. “Turns out it was unnecessary anyway. Getting in was the easy part.”

“Easy?” Hades asked, sounding faintly offended.

“You’ll see, Father,” Nico said.

… but my heart wasn’t in it.

“And you hid it oh-so-well,” Annabeth said sarcastically.

There were just too many unknown factors.

Thalia shook her head. “Give him all the facts and he’s a military genius. As soon as there’s the slightest chance he might make a mistake, he shuts up like a clam.”

“Well, I’m sorry if I don’t feel comfortable knowing people’s lives are resting on my shoulders,” Percy retorted.

“Stop it,” Annabeth said automatically.

It was like cramming for a test without knowing the subject. And believe me, I’d done that enough times.

Travis snorted. “Haven’t we all?”

The cab sped west … At sunset, the taxi dropped us off at the beach in Santa Monica.

“I’d forgotten about the message in the river,” Apollo admitted.

It looked exactly the way L.A. beaches do in the movies, only it smelled worse.

There were a few sniggers, but no one interrupted as Hermes read through the description.

… Grover, Annabeth and I walked down to the edge of the surf.

‘What now?’ Annabeth asked.

The Pacific was turning gold … How could there be a god who could control all that?

Amphitrite smiled at her stepson – the younger version, that is. She supposed it must be incredibly overwhelming to learn all of this in such a short period of time.

… How could I be the son of someone that powerful?


Percy gave him a smile that made his heart stutter in his chest, which he promptly ignored. Things had been getting better – now was not the time for this – thing, whatever it was – to be starting up again.
I stepped into the surf.

‘Percy?’ Annabeth said. ‘What are you doing? … You know how polluted that water is? There’re all kinds of toxic –’

That’s when my head went under.

*Thalia* laughed. “Well, that’s one way to do it.”

*Annabeth* huffed, but there was a glint of laughter in her eyes.

I held my breath at first.

“Seaweed Brain,” *Annabeth* muttered, with a fond shake of her head.

**It’s difficult to intentionally inhale water.**

“That must be strange,” Sally said.

“It really is,” *Annabeth* admitted. “Percy’s taken me swimming once or twice and … I trust him with my life … literally, sometimes – but he still has to tell me to breathe.”

**Finally I couldn’t stand it anymore … Sure enough, I could breathe normally.**

“When are you going to stop being surprised?”

Percy shrugged. “It still surprises me, to be honest.”

I walked down into the shoals. I shouldn’t have been able to see through the murk, but somehow I could tell where everything was … I could even see the currents, warm and cold streams swirling together.

“That must have been so beautiful,” Silena whispered.

Percy grimaced. “It was and it wasn’t. It was amazing, but when I compare it to what it’s like in cleaner waters … there’s no comparison.”

I felt something rub against my leg … Sliding along beside me was a two-metre-long mako shark.

Sally let out a little scream that she promptly felt embarrassed by, but she wasn’t the only one – Silena had clapped a hand over her mouth, Katie had jumped several inches out of her chair, and several others looked a little white.

“Relax,” Percy said. “It won’t harm me.”

**But the thing wasn’t attacking. It was nuzzling me. Heeling like a dog.**

Sally relaxed, and Poseidon gave her a smile. “No sea creature would harm him, Sally. I promise.”

*Tentatively, I touched its dorsal fin. It bucked a little … I grabbed the fin with both hands. It took off, pulling me along.*

Silena cooed. “Have you ever swum with dolphins, Percy?”
“I find it difficult to swim without them,” Percy admitted. “It’s not quite as magical when you can understand them.”

… It deposited me at the edge of the ocean proper, where the sand bank dropped off into a huge chasm.

Annabeth gasped. “You didn’t tell us you went out that far!”

“Relax,” Percy repeated. “I was never in any danger. This was probably the safest I’d been in the entire quest.”

… I knew I should’ve been crushed by the pressure.

“You shouldn’t be able to breathe either,” Rachel said, making Percy jump. “Sorry.”

“Forgot you were there for a second,” Percy said. “You’ve been strangely quiet.”

Rachel shrugged. “I think it’s the Oracle, she prefers to listen. Besides, I’m not in the story yet. I’m sure once you start insulting me in your head, I’ll get louder.”

“What makes you think …?” Percy began, then thought better of it. “Fair enough.”

Then again, I shouldn’t have been able to breathe.

Rachel smirked.

I wondered if there was a limit to how deep I could go, if I could sink straight to the bottom of the Pacific.

Annabeth sighed. “You probably could, but for the love of Olympus, don’t.”

Then I saw something glimmering in the darkness below, growing bigger and brighter as it rose towards me … ‘Percy Jackson’.

Amphitrite smiled.

As she got closer, her shape became clearer … Light flickered around her, and her eyes were so distractingly beautiful I hardly noticed the stallion-sized seahorse she was riding.

“Distractingly beautiful?” Annabeth repeated.

“Nowhere near as distractingly beautiful as yourself, obviously,” Percy answered, waiting for her to smile reluctantly. “Besides I was twelve and – have you met my step-aunts?”

“I have,” Annabeth said, squeezing his hand. “You have a point.”

“Now that’s over,” Silena said. “Giant seahorse?”

Percy nodded.

… The underwater lady smiled at me. ‘You’ve come far, Percy Jackson. Well done.’

I wasn’t quite sure what to do, so I bowed.

Amphitrite’s smile widened. Her sisters would be civil to demigods, especially her stepchildren, but
they had little to no love for humans, and respect such as that would carry him a long way.

‘You’re the woman who spoke to me in the Mississippi river.’

‘Yes, child. I am a Nereid, a spirit of the sea.

“Oh ….” Annabeth murmured.

… We have watched you with great interest.’

“Really?” Percy asked, surprised.

“We all did,” Amphitrite confirmed.

Suddenly I remembered faces in the waves … reflections of smiling women.

Sally sighed. “Percy, please tell me these things. I know they weren’t a danger, but … please tell me.”

Like so many of the weird things in my life, I’d never given it much thought before.

_Thalia_ shook her head. “Of course you didn’t.”

_Percy_ rolled his eyes. “Are you telling me you don’t have a scale of weirdness that runs from ‘Things I can ignore’ to ‘I should probably tell someone’?”

_Thalia_ thought for a second. “I didn’t think I did,” she said finally. “But now you’ve said that … yes, I do.”

‘If my father is so interested in me,’ I said, ‘why isn’t he here? Why doesn’t he speak to me?’

“I get it now,” _Percy_ said. “I don’t like it, but I get it. I get that it’s not your fault.”

Poseidon smiled sadly. “Thank you, Percy.”

A cold current rose out of the depths.

‘Do not judge the Lord of the Sea too harshly,’ the Nereid told me. ‘He stands at the brink of an unwanted war.

Amphitrite smiled. “I think that must be Halie. She’s being a little too helpful.”

“Should she not be helpful?” Annabeth asked tentatively.

“She should,” Amphitrite agreed. “But most of my sisters would just deliver the message and leave. They wouldn’t take the time to reassure him.”

… Besides, he is forbidden to help you directly. The gods may not show such favouritism.’

“Exactly,” Zeus said, as though that settled the matter.

“Except we’re not looking for favouritism,” _Thalia_ said softly. “None of us want you to swoop in and solve all of our problems. All we want is an occasional conversation. Maybe the odd ‘I’m proud of you’ or ‘I love you’. That’s not interfering in our lives. That’s being a parent.”

Not even Zeus had an answer for that. Especially not when a lot of the Olympians were nodding
along with him.

“You can do it,” Percy added. “Even with the rules the way they are, you can do it; it’s just that most of you choose not to.”

“How do you know?” Artemis asked curiously.

Percy smiled sadly. “Twelve cabins at Camp. Two are empty – yours and Lady Hera’s. Mine and Thalia’s only have one. Mr D’s there anyway, so I’m not going to count cabin 12. So that’s seven cabins left. Out of those seven cabins, at least one demigod joined Kronos’s army. Except one.”

“No one left from cabin 7,” Thalia continued. “Because Apollo doesn’t interfere but he also makes sure his kids know he cares. So when Kronos started whispering, none of them had any reason to listen.”

If Zeus was angry about this, he wasn’t about to argue – Hestia’s smile was blinding.

‘Even to their own children?’

‘Especially to them.

“Surely that is a kind of favouritism,” Percy said, frowning. “Or … the opposite of favouritism.”

Annabeth shrugged. “Just leave it.”

... That is why I give you a warning, and a gift.’

Tension seemed to be leaving Sally’s body with every word read. Even if Poseidon couldn’t directly interfere, he was there (which was more than she was at the moment) and she had to believe that he wouldn’t let harm come to his son.

... Three white pearls flashed in her palm.

“What will they do?” Annabeth asked curiously.

“It’s hard to say, my dear,” Amphitrite said. “It will depend on the reason they are used.”

‘I know you journey to Hades’s realm,’ she said. ‘Few mortals have ever done this and survived … Do you have these talents?’

Percy snorted. “Not even close.”

“Be fair,” Thalia said. “You do have talent, just not those talents.”

‘Um … no, ma’am.’

‘Ah, but you have something else, Percy. You have gifts you have only begun to know.

Annabeth sniggered. “That’s certainly true. I’ve lost count of the number of times Percy’s surprised himself with what he can do.”

The oracles have foretold a great and terrible future for you, should you survive to manhood.

“Well, that’s comforting,” Sally said, the tension returning with a snap.

“He’ll be alright,” Annabeth said, cuddling into her boyfriend’s side.
Poseidon would not have you die before your time.

“Well, that’s comforting,” Thalia muttered under her breath.

Therefore take these, and when you are in need, smash a pearl at your feet … remember: what belongs to the sea will always return to the sea.’

“What does that mean?” Sally asked nervously.

“You’ll see,” Annabeth said with a sigh.

‘What about the warning?’

Her eyes flickered with green light. ‘Go with what your heart tells you … Hades feeds on doubt and hopelessness.

“That’s …” Persephone began, then sighed. “Okay, that’s true. It’s a wonder how you put up with me.”

… Once you are in his realm, he will never willingly let you leave.

“Because people aren’t supposed to,” Hades grumbled.

“I come and go,” Nico said, frowning.

“Yes, but you’re special,” Thalia said.

Keep faith. Good luck, Percy Jackson.’

… ‘Wait!’ I called. ‘At the river, you said not to trust the gifts. What gifts?’

“Any of them,” Annabeth repeated.

“Does that include the pearls?” Sally asked curiously.

Annabeth thought for a second. “At the time I thought so, but … not in the same way.”

‘Goodbye, young hero … You must listen to your heart.’

“The problem is,” Thalia remarked, “when you’re in danger, your heart tends to beat too hard for you to hear it.”

… When I reached the beach, I told Grover and Annabeth what had happened, and showed them the pearls.

Annabeth grimaced. ‘No gift comes without a price.’

‘These were free.’

‘No … There will be a price. You wait.’

“What was the price?” Sally asked.

Annabeth didn’t answer, but Amphitrite looked thoughtful. “Well … if I had to guess. There are three pearls, and three of them. However, if they are used in the Underworld, and they do find you,
there will be four of you.”

Sally’s eyes widened, and she turned to Percy. “You get yourself and Grover and Annabeth out of danger first, you hear me?”

Percy smiled sadly. “Mom, this already happened for me, remember?”

**On that happy thought, we turned our backs on the sea.**

Sally took a shaky breath and tried to relax. She had always felt so much better when Percy was near the ocean.

**With some spare change … we took the bus … he’d never heard of DOA Recording Studos.**

“It would be covered with the Mist,” Athena said with a frown.

‘You remind me of someone I saw on TV’, he told me …

“Uh oh,” Travis muttered, as several people tensed up.

‘… I’m a stunt double … for a lot of child actors.’

Everyone relaxed again. In Los Angeles, no one would think twice.

**… we got off quickly at the next stop.**

Sally grimaced. “I get why, but … I’d rather you wouldn’t walk the streets – you don’t know where you’re going.”

**We wandered for miles on foot … Twice, we ducked into alleys to avoid cop cars.**

Annabeth grimaced, flexing her ankles. “I’d forgotten how far we walked.”

I froze … because a television was playing an interview … Smelly Gabe.

“Oh, not again!” Artemis groaned.

He was talking to Barbara Walters …

Clarisse rolled her eyes. “Who does he think he is?”

… and there was a young blonde lady sitting next to him, patting his hand.

Sally raised an eyebrow. “Well, he moved fast.”

… ‘Honest, Ms Walters, if it wasn’t for Sugar here, my grief counsellor, I’d be a wreck.

“Grief counsellor,” Annabeth snorted. “Yeah, alright.”

“She had to be in it for the money,” Percy said shaking his head. “She had to be young enough to be his daughter.”

**My stepson took everything I cared about. My wife … my Camaro …**

Sally shook her head. “I can’t believe I’m almost flattered that I came before the car!”
… I have trouble talking about it.’

‘There you have it, America …’ The screen cut to a grainy shot of me, Annabeth and Grover … talking to Ares.

Hermes groaned. “How did they explain that away?”

‘Who are the other children in this photo? … When we come back, we chat with a leading child psychologist. Stay tuned, America.’

Several people were sniggering.

“So,” Aphrodite said innocently, “could you have blamed everything on Ares and be done with it?”

Percy rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. “To be honest, I think we did in the end. I can’t quite remember.”

‘C’mon,’ Grover told me. He hauled me away before I could punch a hole in the appliance-store window.


Grover patted him on the shoulder. “I’d have let you punch him, I would think. But not a window. That would hurt.”

It got dark, and hungry-looking characters started coming out on the streets to play.

“Oh dear,” Sally murmured.

“At least they’re armed,” Chris said hopefully.

“Yes, but they’re armed with celestial bronze,” Luke said, looking as worried as Sally. “It would go straight through mortals.”

… I’m a New Yorker. I don’t scare easy.

“No New Yorker does,” Lee said with a grin.

But L.A. had a totally different feel … Back home, everything seemed close … The street pattern and the subway made sense.

All of the campers who had lived in New York – whether legitimately or on the streets – were nodding in agreement.

There was a system … A kid could be safe as long as he wasn’t stupid.

“Define ‘safe’,” Thalia said.

“From mortal problems,” Percy elaborated. “Not necessarily from monsters.”

L.A. wasn’t like that … It reminded me of Ares.

Hera immediately put a restraining hand on her son’s arm.

It wasn’t enough for L.A. to be big; it had to prove it was big by being loud and strange and
difficult to navigate too.

Ares scowled, but many of the gods were sniggering in agreement.

I didn’t know how we were ever going to find the entrance to the Underworld by tomorrow, the summer solstice.

Luke was almost vibrating with nerves.

We walked past gangbangers, bums and street hawkers, who looked at us like they were trying to figure out if we were worth the trouble of mugging.

“Probably not,” Amphitrite said, partially to reassure Sally. “They don’t exactly look like they have a lot of money on them.”

**As we hurried past the entrance of an alley, a voice from the darkness said, ‘Hey, you.’**

“Unless, of course, they’re dealing with idiots,” Amphitrite said with a sigh.

**Like an idiot, I stopped.**

“Percy!” *Thalia* groaned.

“It said I was an idiot,” *Percy* protested.

**Before I knew it, we were surrounded.**


A gang of kids had circled us. Six of them … Like the kids at Yancy Academy; rich brats playing at being bad boys.

Sally glowered at the book, muttering something about incompetent parents that made Hera smile appreciatively.

**Instinctively, I uncapped Riptide.**


“It might,” Chris said. “Kids are more likely to see through the mist, right? Maybe they actually saw a sword.”

**When the sword appeared … the kids backed off, but their leader was either really stupid or really brave …**

“Or maybe he didn’t see it,” Luke said grimly, glancing towards Annabeth like he wanted to go over to her, but was unsure of his welcome.

… because he kept coming at me with a switchblade.

Sally muffled a cry of alarm. “Get out of there!”

“Mom, I’m fine,” *Percy* said soothingly.

**I made the mistake of swinging … but the blade passed harmlessly right through his chest …**
Luke groaned, but his father squeezed his shoulder. “It’ll surprise them. Give them some time.”

I figured I had about three seconds … ‘Run!’ I screamed at Annabeth and Grover.

“Like we’re going to argue,” Grover bleated, eyes wide.

We pushed two kids out of the way and raced down the street … ‘There!’ Annabeth shouted.

Only one store on the block looked open … The sign above the door said something like …

Hermes blinked at the book, carefully sounding out the next words. “You’re right, Athena,” he said finally. “How do you lot cope?”

“With difficulty,” Travis said.

‘Crusty’s Waterbed Palace?’ Grover translated.

Sally grimaced. “Ugh, that sounds horrible.”

Poseidon frowned. “Why does that sound familiar?”

“I dread to think, darling,” Amphitrite said, rolling her eyes.

It didn’t sound like a place I’d ever go except in an emergency but this definitely qualified.

“You think?” Nico asked.

We burst through the doors, ran behind a waterbed, and ducked.

A split second later, the gang kids ran past outside.


‘I think we lost them,’ Grover panted.

A voice behind us boomed, ‘Lost who?’

We all jumped.

“I hate it when people do that,” Connor said.


“Well, yeah, it’s fun when we do it,” Travis said.


Standing behind us was a guy who looked like a raptor in a leisure suit … ‘I’m Crusty,’ he said, with a tartar-yellow smile.

Amphitrite’s eyes widened. “Uh oh. Is that who I think it is?”

“Maybe?” Poseidon answered.

“Who is he?” Sally asked. “A monster?”
“Yep,” Percy said with a grimace. “And one of my half-brothers. I seem to keep running in to them.”

I resisted the urge to say, Yes, you are.

Amphitrite giggled. “He probably wouldn’t get it even if you did.”

‘Sorry to barge in,’ I told him. ‘We were just, um, browsing.’

Thalia gave him an incredulous look. ‘You were hiding behind a waterbed.”

Percy shrugged. “I was winging it.”

“You mean hiding from those no-good kids,’ he grumbled. ‘… Say, you want to look at a waterbed?’

Sally frowned. “I liked him until that point. They’re kids. Why would they want a waterbed?”

“We don’t.” Annabeth took Percy’s hand, bracing herself.

… There was every kind of waterbed you could imagine … ‘This is my most popular model.’

Crusty spread his hands proudly over a bed … The mattress vibrated, so it looked like oil-flavoured jelly.

“Ugh!” Aphrodite said with a grimace. “Why would you want that?”

‘Million-hand massage,’ Crusty told us. ‘Go on, try it out.’ …

“No!” Amphitrite and Poseidon cried.

“What’s wrong?” Sally asked. “I mean, it’s a bit creepy that he’s asking them to, since they’re kids, but … Percy said he was one of his half-brothers.”

“That means nothing, Mom,” Percy warned. “I’ve met one decent one, the rest have all tried to kill me.”

“Who was the decent one?” Amphitrite asked curiously.

Percy thought for a second. “Two,” he amended. “I hadn’t counted Triton. Then again, we’ve said all of two words to each other. The one I was thinking about pops up next summer.”

“So probably in the next book,” Annabeth said with a smile.

Shoot, take a nap. I don’t care.

“Strange business model,” Athena said, frowning.

No business today, anyway.’

‘Um,’ I said, ‘I don’t think …’

“Percy,” Thalia said seriously, “for once, you’re talking sense.”

‘Million-hand massage!’ Grover cried, and dived in.

“Grover!” Several people cried.
Grover turned a very deep red. “Why didn’t I smell him?”

“That’s …” Chiron paused. “That’s a very good question actually. I’d say it’s something to do with humanity, but you smelled Medusa.”

“Is it because he’s a demigod?” Annabeth suggested. “I mean, I know he’s a monster, but his father’s a god – would that confuse the scent?”

“Potentially,” Athena agreed. “Or he could have had some kind of diffuser or air freshener in his shop covering the scent, just in case.”

... ‘Hmm,’ Crusty said … ‘Almost, almost.’

“Almost what?” Grover asked nervously.

‘Almost what?’ I asked.

“That’s what I want to know!” Grover said.

“I didn’t get an answer either,” Percy told him.

He looked at Annabeth.

“Don’t you dare,” Athena murmured.

‘Do me a favour and try this one over here, honey …’ … He patted her reassuringly on the shoulder and led her over to the Safari Deluxe model … When Annabeth didn’t want to lie down, Crusty pushed her.

Annabeth let out a yelp of surprise, sudden sharp pressure jolting between her shoulder blades.

‘Hey!’ she protested.

“Get out of there,” Malcolm said nervously.

Crusty snapped his fingers. ‘Ergo!’

Ropes sprang from the sides of the bed … holding her to the mattress.

“I would if I could,” Annabeth said, “but I can’t move.”

Grover tried to get up, but ropes … lashed him down.

Grover bleated in alarm.

‘Not cool! … Not cool at all!’

“Understatement of the century,” Lee muttered, glancing over at Luke who was staring at Annabeth in horror.

The giant looked at Annabeth … ‘Almost, darn it.’

“Almost what?!?” Sally demanded.

Sally thought for a second, then paled drastically. “Oh no. No, no, no, no, no …”

Hermes read over her chanting, sounding nervous.

**I tried to step away …**

“Thanks,” **Annabeth** said, a little shakily.

“I Couldn’t help you if I was stuck too,” **Percy** pointed out.

… **but his hand shot out and clamped around the back of my neck.**

**Percy** grimaced.

‘**Whoa, kid.** Don’t worry. We’ll find you one in a sec.’

Sally looked even more terrified.

Amphitrite patted her hand. “It’s alright, dear. Percy’s right there. I’m sure he’ll be alright.”

“We may need to get her a sedative later,” **Thalia** whispered.

“She’ll be fine,” **Percy** said, but he didn’t look convinced.

‘Let my friends go.’

**Nico** rolled his eyes. “Yeah, that’ll work.”

**Percy** shrugged. “I thought I’d start polite and work up. Besides, it was weird, but not dangerous. Yet.”

‘**Oh, sure I will. But I got to make them fit, first.’**

“Don’t ask,” **Thalia** said, closing her eyes. “Just don’t ask.”

‘**What do you mean?’**

“**Percy!**”

**Percy** rolled his eyes. “Look, we’d run into a waterbed shop to escape a gang of knife-wielding mortals, and now my friends were tied to beds; I’m sorry if my brain doesn’t immediately start rolling through every monster I could have ever heard of.”

‘**All the beds are exactly six feet, see? Your friends are too short.**’

“I suppose it could have been worse,” **Annabeth** commented. “We could have been too tall.”

“Then I wouldn’t have had any time to work with,” **Percy** said, squeezing her hand.

**Got to make them fit … Ergo!**’

**Annabeth** closed her eyes, bracing herself.

A new set of ropes leaped out from the top and bottom of the beds … The ropes started tightening, pulling my friends from both ends.
Annabeth gritted her teeth letting out a whimper.

‘Don’t worry … They might even live.

“Do something!” Malcolm cried. “Quickly!”

“I was working on it,” Percy assured him.

“Then work faster,” Annabeth hissed, through laboured breaths.

Now why don’t we find a bed you like, huh?’

My mind was racing … I couldn’t take on this giant … He would snap my neck before I even got my sword out.

“That’s an excellent point,” Athena admitted, watching her daughter anxiously.

‘Your real name’s not Crusty, is it?’ I asked.

“Gee, what was your first clue?” Nico asked.

“Nico,” Annabeth whispered, “can we get on with it please?”

‘Legally, it’s Procrustes,’ he admitted.

Amphitrite shook her head. She may have harboured no resentment towards any of her stepchildren, but that didn’t mean she liked them all. Some of the creatures her husband created were beyond her.

‘… But who can say “Procrustes”? Bad for business. Now “Crusty”, anybody can say that.’

‘You’re right … And the workmanship on these beds? Fabulous!’

Amphitrite smiled. “Well done.”

“Will that work?” Sally asked nervously.

“It should do,” Amphitrite said reassuringly. “He never was too bright. Although he’s not actually a giant, Percy, just for future reference. A giant would be far harder to kill. You need the assistance of a god to do that.”

He grinned hugely, but his fingers didn’t loosen on my neck.

“Oh,” Annabeth said softly – or perhaps she didn’t have much breath left to speak. “Sorry. I’d forgotten about that.”

“You were being stretched,” Percy said, watching her in concern.

‘I tell my customers that … Nobody bothers to look at the workmanship.

“Gee, I wonder why?!” Silena said, rolling her eyes.

How many built-in Lava Lamp headboards have you seen?’

“He has a point on that,” Connor said seriously.

… ‘Percy!’ Annabeth yelled. ‘What are you doing?’
‘Don’t mind her,’ I told Procrustes. ‘She’s impossible.’

“Thanks,” Annabeth said, breathing heavily.

“It was working,” Percy said, rubbing her back. “Just breathe.”

The giant laughed. ‘All my customers are. Never six feet exactly …’

… ‘What do you do if they’re longer than six feet?’

“Ask a stupid question,” Thalia muttered. Her focus was on Annabeth, but her gaze couldn’t help flickering towards Luke. He was staring at Annabeth too, but with a kind of quiet horror. She had a feeling that it wouldn’t matter who or what was hurting them over the next few days or, more likely, weeks, because he would take personal blame for all of it.

‘Oh, that happens all the time. It’s a simple fix.’

“That’s one word for it,” Amphitrite murmured.

He let go of my neck …

“Do something!” Several people shouted.

… but before I could react, he … brought out a huge double-bladed brass axe.

“Or don’t,” Rachel said. “That’s good too.”

He said, ‘I just centre the subject as best I can and lop off whatever hangs over on either end.’

Silena turned a very pale green, and Beckendorf patted her shoulder comfortingly.

‘Ah,’ I said, swallowing hard. ‘Sensible.’

Athena stared at him. “Do you actually have a plan?”

“I did,” Percy assured her. “I mean, once the axe came out, I had to change it slightly, but I did have a plan.”

“And it did work,” Annabeth said weakly. “Just … not as fast as I would have liked.”

‘I’m so glad to come across an intelligent customer!’

“Don’t,” Percy said, glancing at Thalia. “Not the time.”

Thalia shrugged. “I didn’t say anything.”

“You were thinking it,” Percy muttered.

The ropes were really stretching my friends … Annabeth was turning pale.

Annabeth sucked in a desperate breath, whimpering in pain.

Grover made gurgling sounds like a strangled goose.

Grover bleated softly and Sally patted his hand vaguely, not in any state to offer any real comfort.
‘So, Crusty … Does this one really have dynamic stabilizers to stop wave motion?’

“They’re being stretched and you’re discussing the merchandise?!” Clarisse demanded, but Malcolm was smiling, albeit weakly as he watched his sister.

“No, I know what he’s doing.”

‘Absolutely. Try it out.’

“Why would he do that when he knows what’s going to happen?” Travis asked.

“I don’t think he’ll be given much of a choice,” Hermes said quietly.

‘Yeah, maybe I will. But would it work even for a big guy like you? No waves at all?’

Slowly, everyone began to realise exactly what the plan was.

‘Guaranteed.’ … ‘Show me.’

He sat down eagerly on the bed … I snapped my fingers. ‘Ergo.’

A cheer went up round the room and Sally finally breathed a sigh of relief.

“Brilliant!” Thalia said. “Now help Annabeth and Grover.”

“No,” Annabeth said faintly. “He has to deal with Crusty first or he would have managed to get free.”

Ropes lashed around Crusty … Crusty’s whole head stuck out at the top. His feet stuck out at the bottom.

Clarisse looked downright gleeful.

‘No!’ he said. ‘Wait! This is just a demo.’

“No, you’re just taller than six feet,” Amphitrite said with a smirk.

I uncapped Riptide. ‘A few simple adjustments …’ … I swung the sword. Crusty stopped making offers.

There was another cheer.

I cut the ropes on the other beds.

Annabeth let out a sharp breath of air, doubling over into Percy’s arms.

Annabeth and Grover got to their feet … ‘You look taller,’ I said.

Thalia sniggered.

“Hey!” Annabeth protested. “You’re supposed to be on my side!”

“I am, sweets,” Thalia said with a grin. “And you’re okay.”

‘Very funny,’ Annabeth said.
“See?” Thalia asked. “You agreed.”

“I was being sarcastic,” Annabeth muttered.

Be faster next time.

I looked at the bulletin board behind Crusty’s sale desk … a bright orange flier for DOA Recording Studios, offering commissions for heroes’ souls.

“What?” Hades asked before any of the other gods to complain. “I certainly didn’t authorise that!”

Persephone pursed her lips. “It was probably Charon looking for a raise again.”

‘We are always looking for new talent!’

Hades grumbled under his breath about lack of space.

DOA’s address was right underneath with a map.

“Well,” Hera said after a few seconds’ silence. “That certainly makes things easier.”

‘Come on,’ I told my friends.

‘Give us a minute,’ Grover complained. ‘We were almost stretched to death!’

“Time waits for no satyr,” Travis said sagely.

‘Then you’re ready for the Underworld,’ I said. ‘It’s only a block from here.’

Hermes looked up, a little pale. “That’s it,” he informed them. “That’s the end of the chapter.”

“Annabeth,” Athena said, addressing the elder of her daughters. “Would you check the chapters again please?”

“Of course, Mother,” Annabeth said, taking the book from Hermes and flicking through it again. “Well, there are five chapters left, which we should get done tonight … Looking at the chapter titles, I would suggest two more, then dinner, then the last three.”

“And it’s probably best to read them all tonight,” Percy added. “No one wants to sleep on a cliffhanger.”

There were several nods of agreement, and Travis held his hand out. “Can I read next?”

No one argued, although several people looked like they wanted to make a joke about the one of the Stolls willingly reading, and Annabeth handed the book over.

Travis opened it to the next chapter and began to grin. “If this means what I think it means, Annabeth, you are awesome.”

“Thank you,” Annabeth said primly, but with a glint in her eye. “In which case, you’re probably right.”
I may or may not have mentioned that I suffer from anxiety. Recently it has been sky-high, which has resulted in it being exceptionally hard to write.

My brain seems to have settled on CSI: NY again and the rewrite of Kindred Spirits, which - okay, is nice, because it's been a while since my inspiration was there, especially since the show was cancelled.

However, it does mean that inspiration for everything else has dried up. And I could force myself to write, but when my anxiety acts up, that ends up causing panic attacks. You do not want me writing on panic attacks, trust me.

I have not given up on any of my other stories or series. I just need to give myself a time-out for a bit.
Thank you so much for all your kind words. Fanfiction is something I love and usually something that makes me feel a lot better, but I was putting myself under so much pressure that it was making me feel worse. I am working on a way to manage my anxiety and my writing at the same time, which might mean finishing stories before I start posting them, so I can just set up a weekly chapter. In the meantime though, please accept this offering - I have also amended an earlier chapter, (chapter 9) in which several eagle-eyed readers noticed that I'd screwed up some of the ages of the campers. I've fixed it now.

Travis fought off his brother's suddenly eager arm, cleared his throat, and read the chapter title.

Chapter Eighteen

Annabeth Does Obedience School

Nico’s jaw dropped. “Annabeth,” he said weakly. “That’s not … That’s not talking about Cerberus, is it?”

“Well, that’s all I have to do,” Nico said thoughtfully. “I didn’t think you’d manage it, no offence.”

“Now Nico,” Persephone said, hiding a smile at her husband’s expression, “I’m sure the chapter isn’t talking about Cerberus.”

Hermes grinned. “Go ahead, Travis.”

We stood in the shadows … looking up at gold letters … NO SOLICITORS. NO LOITERING. NO LIVING.

Apollo sniggered. “Nice. Subtle.”

Hades didn’t comment, but he did look a little less put out.

It was almost midnight, but the lobby was brightly lit and full of people.

Sally frowned. “Do that many people die all at once?”

“No,” Persephone answered, when Hades didn’t, “but people rarely turn up with payment anymore.”

Behind the security desk sat a tough-looking guard with sunglasses and an earpiece.

“That’s Charon,” Annabeth remarked innocently. “Make sure you pronounce it properly.”
Nico sniggered. “Seriously?”

“Oh, not me,” Annabeth said with a grin.

“Well, I didn’t think it was you,” Nico said. “You’re smart.” He ducked, a pillow sailing harmlessly over his head and hitting Luke.

Percy shrugged. “Sorry, not sorry.”

I turned to my friends. ‘Okay. You remember the plan?’

“You had a plan?” Thalia asked.

“Yeah,” Percy said. “I don’t remember it. But I definitely had one.”

“The plan was to pretend we were dead,” Annabeth said, her lips twitching, “which seemed like a really good plan at the time.”

“It’s not,” Nico said flatly. “It’s a really bad one.”

… Annabeth said, ‘What happens if the plan doesn’t work?’

‘Don’t think negative.’

“You should always have a plan B,” Athena chided, although not as sharply as she would usually have done.

‘Right,’ she said. ‘We’re entering the Land of the Dead, and I shouldn’t think negative.’

“A little bit of positive thinking can go a long way,” Thalia said sagely. “In fact, for a while it was all that kept us alive on the streets.”

I took the pearls out of my pocket … They didn’t seem like much of a backup in case something went wrong.

Amphitrite smiled. “They will get you out of there, Percy, I promise.”

Annabeth put her hand on my shoulder. ‘I’m sorry, Percy … It’ll be fine.’

Nico shook his head in silent disbelief. Annabeth admitting that she was overthinking something – even between the lines – was almost unheard of.

She gave Grover a nudge.

‘Oh, right! … No problem.’

“Prompts make everything at least 50% less comforting,” Connor said sagely.

Malcolm raised an eyebrow. “That was actually very wise, Connor.”

Connor grinned. “Always the tone of surprise.”

I looked at them both, and felt really grateful.

Percy hugged Annabeth to him, pressing a kiss into her hair.
Only a few minutes before, I’d almost got them stretched to death on deluxe waterbeds …

“First of all,” Thalia said, “that wasn’t your fault.”

“I could have been quicker,” Percy said.

“Maybe,” she conceded, “but you didn’t put them there. Secondly, that would be a brilliant thing to put on a tombstone. Stretched to death on deluxe waterbeds.”

… and now they were trying to be brave for my sake, trying to make me feel better.

“That’s what friends are for,” Annabeth said quietly.

I slipped the pearls back in my pocket. ‘Let’s whup some Underworld butt.’

Nico smirked. “Good luck with that.”

“I was twelve!” Percy protested

“I’m twelve,” Nico pointed out.

“Yes, but you’re a lot more sensible than Percy was at that age,” Annabeth said. “Come to think of it, you’re more sensible than Percy is now.”

Percy pouted. “You are so mean to me.”

We walked inside the DOA lobby … Nobody moved, or talked, or did much of anything.

“No new ones then,” Nico remarked. “They’re normally demanding to see the manager or insisting there’s a mistake.”

… if I focused on any one of them in particular, they started looking … transparent. I could see right through their bodies.

Silena and Katie both shuddered in near-unison. Their mothers’ dominions – love and life, essentially – were the very opposites of death.

The security guard’s desk was a raised podium … we had to look up at him … I read the name tag then looked at him in bewilderment. ‘Your name is Chiron?’

“Percy!” Nico groaned. “That’s the second-worst thing you could have said!”

“What’s the first?” Sally asked curiously.

“To start crying and wailing about how he wasn’t dead,” Nico answered. “Charon hates that more than people getting his name wrong.”

He leaned across the desk … his smile was sweet and cold, like a python’s, right before it eats you.

“Charon would not harm anyone there,” Persephone said, before any of the parents could get there first. “Aside from anything else, they’re all dead – or they should be – so there’s really no point.”

‘What a precious young lad … Tell me, mate, do I look like a centaur?’
‘N-no … Sir,’ I said.

He pinched the name tag … ‘Can you read this, mate? It says C-H-A-R-O-N. Say it with me: CARE-ON.’

Sally relaxed a little. Okay, so Charon was being a bit abrasive, but it didn’t sound like he was going to do anything other than teach Percy how to say his name properly.

‘Charon.’

‘Amazing! … And now, how may I help you little dead ones?’

“He actually thinks you’re dead?” Nico asked. “I thought he could smell it.”

“He can,” Hades said with a frown.

… I looked at Annabeth for support.

“Smart move,” Connor said, grinning.

‘We want to go to the Underworld,’ she said.

“Right, that right there is your first mistake,” Nico said. “No one wants to go to the Underworld.”

Charon’s mouth twitched. ‘Well, that’s refreshing.’

Hades sighed. “That’s it? Is he even doing his job?”

‘It is?’ she asked.

‘Straightforward and honest … How did you die, then?’

“Clearly not,” Persephone said.

I nudged Grover.

“Oh, don’t do that,” Grover moaned. “I’m a terrible liar.”

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘Um … drowned … in the bathtub.’

A few people sniggered nervously.

“Tell me that wasn’t a pre-arranged story,” Thalia said.

“We actually didn’t have one,” Annabeth admitted. “Which, with hindsight, feels like a huge mistake.”

“It was,” Nico said flatly. “Only an idiot would believe that.”

‘All three of you?’ Charon asked.

We nodded.

‘Big bathtub.’ Charon looked mildly impressed.

“Are you kidding me?!” Nico asked. “Travis, are you actually reading what it says?”
“Cross my heart,” Travis said with a grin. “Isn’t Charon a god as well?”

“One of the children of Nyx, yes,” Persephone confirmed. “Along with Thantos, Hecate and Nemesis, but they are a kind of primordial god. I would definitely expect more of Charon.”

‘I don’t suppose you have coins for passage. Normally, with adults, you see, I could charge your American Express, or add the ferry price to your last cable bill.

“Why is the room full of people then?” Sally asked.

“Not everyone dies with their wallet on them,” Hades answered. “Also, he still needs someone to agree to it. Most of the people there will be in denial. Until they agree to give him the fare, they can’t go anywhere.”

But with children … alas, you never die prepared. Suppose you’ll have to take a seat for a few centuries.’

‘Oh, but we have coins.’ I set three golden drachmas on the counter, part of the stash I’d found in Crusty’s office desk.

“That’s going to tip him off,” Nico said. “It has to. No one gives him drachmas anymore.”

Sally frowned. “Surely demigods do?”

“If the proper funeral rites are done,” Hades said, “demigods will not enter that way. They appear immediately at the pier because their fare has already been paid directly to me.”

‘Well, now …’ Charon moistened his lips. ‘Real drachmas. Real golden drachmas. I haven’t seen these in …’

Nico groaned. “Part of me wants him to let it go, because you’ve got a job to do. The rest of me is just … There are no words.”

… We were so close.

“And he’s jinxed it,” Thalia said.

Then Charon looked at me … ‘Here now,’ he said. ‘You couldn’t read my name correctly. Are you dyslexic, lad?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I’m dead.’

Connor sniggered. “I’ll have to remember that one.”

Charon leaned forward and took a sniff. ‘You’re not dead. I should’ve known. You’re a godling.’

“Okay, so what’s plan B?” Annabeth asked.

Her future-self shrugged. “Let Percy do what he does.”

“And what’s that?” Percy asked. “Impprovise or talk out of my ass?”

“With you, the two tend to cross over quite a bit,” Annabeth said. “And it works surprisingly well.”
‘We have to get to the Underworld,’ I insisted.

“He’s not going to listen,” Nico predicted.

“At least we know the security works,” Persephone said, although like Nico, she was rooting for the three to get in, even if just to learn about the Helm of Darkness sooner rather than later.

Charon made a growling sound … ‘Leave while you can … I’ll just take these and forget I saw you.’

“Stand your ground,” Thalia murmured.

He started to go for the coins, but I snatched them back.

“Was that a good idea?” Silena asked.

“Absolutely,” Conner said, his eyes gleaming. “That’s the weak link. Offer him more money.”

“Conner,” his father said, trying not to smile. “You cannot bribe your way into the Underworld.”

‘No service, no tip.’ I tried to sound braver than I felt.

“You managed it,” Annabeth said. “I believed you.”

Charon growled again … The spirits of the dead starting pounding on the elevator doors.

“Why is that?” Sally asked.

“They instinctively feel his anger,” Persephone said. “It’s not a good sign.”

‘It’s a shame, too,’ I sighed. ‘We had more to offer.’

“Points for trying,” Apollo said with a grin. “But you can’t bribe a god.”

“Oh really?” Hermes asked innocently. “How did I get away with the cows again?”

Apollo pulled a face. “Fine. You can’t bribe him.”

I held up the entire bag from Crusty’s stash … ‘Do you think I can be bought, godling? Eh … just out of curiosity, how much have you got there.’

Persephone hid a smile. She had been telling her husband for centuries that Charon needed some kind of monitor.

‘A lot,’ I said. ‘I bet Hades doesn’t pay you well enough for such hard work.’

“Oh, don’t start him off again!” Hades grumbled. “He does this once every few decades and then he sulks when he doesn’t get one!”

‘Oh, you don’t know the half of it … I haven’t had a pay raise in three thousand years.

“There’s a reason for that,” Hades muttered.

Do you imagine suits like this come cheap?’

“It wasn’t even that nice a suit,” Annabeth commented. “At least, I didn’t think that it was.”


“You’re ability to spew crap never ceases to amaze me,” Thalia said. “Seriously.”

…”I must say, lad, you’re making some sense now. Just a little.’

Hades sighed, and caught sight of his wife’s face. “Alright, so maybe we should have two people there.”

I stacked another few coins. ‘I could mention a pay raise while I’m talking to Hades.’

“That’s going to go down like a ton of bricks,” Nico warned.

Persephone smiled. “I’m sure he won’t actually.”

“No, he will,” Nico predicted. “Percy keeps his promises.”

“Really?” Percy asked quietly.

Their eyes met for a second and Bianca hung heavy in the air between them.

Nico looked away first, willing the heat away from his cheeks (not an easy task with how pale he was). “The older I get,” he said quietly, “and the more that happens, the more I realise that … you would have done your best to keep that one.”

Percy reached out and clapped his shoulder, squeezing gently.

Nico took a deep breath and turned back to his stepmother. “He’ll do it.”

He sighed. ‘The boat’s almost full, anyway. I might as well add you three and be off.’

“I cannot believe that worked!” Apollo said, shaking his head.

“Still, that was the easy bit,” Nico warned. “They’ve got to get past Cerberus yet, and I refuse to believe that the title isn’t being sarcastic.”

“Don’t take that away from me,” Travis said with a grin, turning the page. “He …”

But what Charon did next was interrupted by another knock at the door.

Rachel sat up straight, narrowing her eyes at the door.

“Rach?” Percy asked. “Is that the people from the prophecy?”

“I don’t … think so,” she said slowly. “But they’re not from this time. Or ours.”

“Enter,” Hera called, stopping the debate.

The boy that entered was about fourteen, but tall; almost the spitting image of Apollo, but human.

His eyes swept over the time-travellers, faltering on Luke, before settling on Thalia, who got to her feet, meeting his eyes with a feeling of foreboding. “Will? How bad is it going to get?”
A note about Will Solace: I believe it has now been made canon that Will and Nico are the same age. In 'Their Father's Children', I have Will as eighteen months older, which I will be sticking to, for the simple reason that it means I don't need to rewrite. I do also realise that this makes Past!Will about ten at this point. This is intentional. It may get talked about at some point, we'll see.
Speaking of 'Their Father's Children', you don't need to read it, but events will be referenced in this story and future stories. Think of it as a kind of unofficial sequel'.
August 2010

“I mean it.”

“But …”

“No.”

“But …”

“No.”

“What if …?”

“No!” Will glared at his patient, hands on his hips. “No shadow travelling. No raising the dead. No nothing! I don’t want to see a single pebble out of place!”

Nico scowled at him. “Look, I’ve been a model patient for three days; would you get off my back?!”

Will snorted. “Yeah, if by ‘model’, you mean ‘fought me at every turn’.” His voice softened and he stepped closer to the demigod desperate to escape the infirmary. “Nico, I’m not doing this for fun. I’m not doing this to piss you off, or to make your life harder, or anything like that. I’m doing it because you seriously over-extended and I’m worried if you do too much too soon, it could actually kill you. And contrary to what you seem to believe, I don’t want you to die.”

Nico fidgeted, his gaze dropping in a way Will had learned meant ‘I am very uncomfortable with this situation’. “How long?”

“A couple of weeks,” Will answered, relieved. “Then we can reassess.”

Nico nodded. “Alright.”

“Thank you.” Will almost reached out and clasped his shoulder, but he remembered, just in time, Nico’s aversion to touch. His hand faltered, then swung up to rub the back of his own neck. “Try and remember to eat as well.”

Nico nodded, still avoiding his eyes. “Can I go now?”

Will sighed. “Yes, you can go.”

Nico almost bolted out of the infirmary and Will sank on to his vacated hospital bed, burying his face in his hands.
Nico was more or less the last patient, having avoided the infirmary for a good week or so after the battle with Gaia. Now it was just a matter of same-old, same-old – cuts and bruises, the odd broken limb, and an influx of concussions every Friday night.

On saying that, summer would be over soon, and most of the campers would leave.

Will hoped Nico would keep his promise and stick around – it might be easier to get the guy integrated into Camp Half-Blood without as many campers around.

Footsteps roused him and he stood up, just in time to greet Jason Grace as he rounded the corner.

Jason’s place at Camp Half-Blood was a little strange – a Roman son of Jupiter replacing one of their de facto leaders should have gone down like a lead balloon, but Jason was almost impossible to dislike and there was still something to be said for being Thalia Grace’s brother – even if she was now Artemis’s lieutenant.

Maybe it was because she was a daughter of Zeus, maybe it was because Annabeth and Percy respected her, maybe it was the Camp legends of how her spirit still powered the magical boundaries, whenever Thalia returned to Camp, the campers fell into line behind her as well.

This respect carried over to give Jason a chance, but now it made Will feel a little lonely.

During the Titan War, his father had often sent messages with Thalia – during the Giant War, he had heard nothing.

After they heard that Annabeth and Percy had fallen into Tartarus, Will had tried to Iris Message Thalia – but it hadn’t gone through.

The same thing had happened when they got word that the two had escaped.

Maybe it was a bit odd, but Will missed Thalia as much as he missed the messages from his dad, especially since Michael’s death. Physically, she wasn’t much older than Will was now, but she felt older, like she had more answers, like …

“Uh, Will?”

Will blinked, realising that he had been staring into space for a little too long. “Sorry, Jason. What’s up?”

“We have a visitor,” Jason answered, still looking at him oddly. “You alright?”

Will hesitated. “Tired,” he said finally, and not untruthfully. “I thought things were going to get easier after Manhattan, not harder.”

“Yeah,” Jason muttered, jerking his head towards the door. “Well, it’s not over yet.”

Will followed him out, dread pooling in his stomach. He expected to find the remaining crew from the Argo II, and he did.

He wasn’t expecting to find his surviving brothers and sisters as well, all huddled together.

Piper immediately situated herself under Jason’s arm, and Nico stubbornly ignored him, but Will pressed past him to the mob of siblings, to find his youngest sister Eliza, clinging to …

“Dad?” Will whispered.
Apollo looked up, a soft smile crossing his face. He looked more or less the same as he had after the Titan War, when Thalia had helped him trick Zeus for a few hours so he could visit his children, but something seemed off. “Hey kiddo.”

“What happened?” Will asked.

“Well, that’s a long story,” Apollo said. “Unfortunately, I don’t have a lot of time.”

“You can’t stay?” Eliza asked.

Apollo looked down at her. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. I would if I could. But it’s only the Fates that are allowing me to be here now – Father is furious with me, and I have no idea what he has in store.”

Will swallowed hard. “Will you be okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” his father said dismissively, in a way that made Will think that he wouldn’t. “Let me fill you in while I can. The Fates aren’t very happy about how things have gone – can’t say I blame them – and they want to make things right by sending people back in time to the summer of 2006.”

Will looked at Percy. “That was the year we got to Camp right? When the Master Bolt was stolen?”

Percy nodded grimly, gripping Annabeth’s hand so tightly Will was concerned it might fall off. “We should …”

“No,” Piper interrupted. “You two are not going. Neither is Nico. No!” She repeated, when Nico opened his mouth to argue. “Lord Apollo had already told us that whoever goes will physically relive the events as they’re read.”

“Read?” Will repeated.

“The Fates have put the details into a series of books,” Apollo explained, stroking Eliza’s hair as she nestled against him. “Saves you all trying to remember all the details but has an unfortunate side effect.”

“Yeah, you three can’t go back,” Will said immediately, backing Piper up. “You’ve done enough. You don’t deserve to have to relive that.”

“Only three of you need to go,” Apollo said. “The Fates have already sent some people back from just after the Battle of Manhattan. Rachel made a prophecy that there would be at least three more readers, who would ‘bridge the empires once divided and soon will see them reunited’.” He held up a hand to stop them interrupting. “You can work out who goes and who stays among yourselves. However, I would suggest that someone else go first, who can prepare the groundwork. It will probably work better if you don’t tell them about the Roman camp immediately; let them believe all the visitors are Greek and then it might go smoother when they find out.”

The six remaining demigods from the Argo II were having a silent conversation, and Will nodded. “That makes sense. Why am I here though, Dad? I mean, I didn’t do much …”

“I need you to go first,” Apollo said seriously. “You are an exceptional Healer, Will, and you will have a few seconds’ head start on me. And the time-travellers reading, who’ll be reliving everything …”

“They’ll need that,” Will finished. “Okay, I’ll do it.”

“Great,” Jason said brightly. “And we’ve figured it out.”
It took a few more minutes to work out the logistics of who was going when, but finally, Will had his head on straight. “Okay, when am I leaving?”

“Now,” Apollo said, setting a hand on his shoulder. “I’m proud of you, son.”

The words washed over Will like a warm bath, and he closed his eyes as time swirled around him. When he opened them again, he was standing outside the doors of the throne room on Olympus. With his heart in his throat, he squared his shoulders and knocked.

There was a brief pause, then a woman’s voice – Hera’s, called out: “Enter.”

Will pushed the door open and stepped inside, feeling his Healer’s satchel settle heavy over his shoulder.

Thanks, Dad.

The room looked different to his visits on the Winter Solstice over the years – for a start, the thrones were smaller, and the gods were scattered around – among their children?

That was new.

On one of the couches, set slightly apart from the others, were a group of people almost certainly from the previous summer – Percy, Annabeth, Nico, Rachel, Luke Castellan, late son of Hermes – Will would have reached for his bow, were it not for the next person he laid eyes on.

Thalia rose to her feet, her eyes fixed on his. “Will? How bad is it going to get?”

Will dropped his satchel, a wry smile crossing his face. “My fairy godmother,” he joked weakly. “You have no idea how good it is to see you.”

Thalia frowned. “You’re not from 2009, are you?”

“No, August 2010,” Will answered.

Thalia’s eyes widened and she stepped closer, enveloping him in a hug.

His head dropped to her shoulder and he closed his eyes for a second, grounding himself. She squeezed him just a little tighter, then let go, peering at him in concern. “You look awful, are you okay?”

Will had to cough to clear the lump that formed in his throat. “I’ve – uh – I’ve been better.”

Rachel rose as well, approaching him with a slight frown. “You’re not one of the prophesized three, are you?”

“No,” Will answered, “but Dad did mention them. They’ll be here soon, but Dad wanted me to come back first so that there’s a healer here with a split-second’s head start.”

“It worries me that a split-second is going to make such a difference,” Apollo said, frowning.

Will glanced over, and his heart nearly stopped when he saw Lee and Michael sitting beside him, both looking concerned at the state of their little brother.

Thalia squeezed his arm, drawing his attention back to her. Her eyes were understanding and he took a deep breath, glancing towards Luke. “They know yet?”

“Nothing,” Thalia said. “They know enough.”
“Good,” Will said, rolling his sleeves up.

“Don’t you dare,” Thalia said sharply. “You need your hands for healing – if he needs hitting, you let me do it.”

“If he needs hitting,” Will muttered, under his breath. “If?”

But now the initial shock of seeing him had passed, he could see the way that Luke couldn’t meet his eyes, could feel the guilt emanating from him.

Will sighed. “You’re right,” he said out loud. “It’s a bit like kicking a puppy, isn’t it?”

Thalia looked momentarily startled, then laughed. “I forgot you were empathetic,” she said nudging him towards their couch. “Are we expecting the others yet?”

“Not yet,” Will answered, taking the seat beside Rachel, who took a closer look at him and pulled one of the pillows into her lap.

“In case you fall asleep,” she said, by way of explanation.

“Wasn’t planning on it,” Will said, stifling a yawn. “But thanks.”

Annabeth was staring at the box of books. “Will, if you’re from 2010, does that mean the next Great Prophecy is going to get fulfilled in one year?”

“’Fraid so,” Will said. “To be honest, I’m interested to hear it myself; I was more of an onlooker. Where have we got up to?”

“Percy’s quest to find the Master Bolt,” Travis answered. “Percy’s just talked Charon into letting them into the Underworld.”

Will frowned. “Then how do you already know about Luke? If memory serves me, we didn’t find out until Percy got back.”

“I have no brain-to-mouth filter,” Percy answered.

“Oh, right,” Will said with a nod. “That makes sense.”

“Shall I start again?” Travis asked.

“One moment,” Artemis said. “Will, why did you call Thalia your ‘fairy godmother’?”

“It’s an inside joke,” Will answered.

“Remember when I said that Cabin 7 didn’t have anyone join Kronos because Apollo made sure his kids knew he cared?” Thalia asked. “He did that by finding loopholes.”

“Thalia was the loophole,” Will said with a grin.

Apollo just smirked when his sister glared at him. “What? The rules say I can’t talk to my kids. They don’t say I can’t talk to your hunters.”


Will grinned at her. “Relax, Thalia, I’m fairly sure I was born out.”
“I am definitely not his type,” Thalia finished. “He’s like Percy; he doesn’t count. Just for a whole other reason.” She waited a few second, but no one else protested. “Travis, go ahead.”

Travis nodded and found his place again.

**He stood … and said, ‘Come along.’**

“So how did they get into the Underworld” Will asked. “They were so coy about it when they got back.”

“Bribery,” Thalia answered.

“Oh of course,” Will said. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

**We pushed through the crowd of waiting spirits … Charon shoved them out of the way, grumbling, ‘Freeloaders.’**

Persephone frowned. “How many people were in there out of interest?”

Annabeth thought for a second. “Couple of hundred, I’d guess.”

“They can’t all be unable to pay,” she said.

Hades looked similarly troubled. “No. Even the ones that won’t give up the cable bills usually cave after a day or two.”

“Could he be insisting on cash so he can overcharge and keep the difference?” Persephone asked him.

“I’ll find out,” her husband assured her.

**He escorted us into the elevator … grabbed two spirits who were trying to get on with us and pushed them back into the lobby.**

“They must be desperate,” Sally murmured.

‘Right. Now, no one get any ideas while I’m gone … I’ll make sure you’re here for another thousand years. Understand?’

Persephone’s eyes flashed with anger, and Hades patted her arm. “I will find out,” he repeated.

**He shut the doors … and we started to descend.**

‘What happens to the spirits waiting in the lobby?’ Annabeth asked.

‘Nothing,’ Charon said.

“Until there’s payment,” Hades finished.

Nico was frowning. “Father, if Charon gets more than enough to cover one trip, isn’t he supposed to start taking the people who have been there the longest?”

“He is,” Hades confirmed. “I think Persephone may be right, but I’ll look into it.”

‘For how long?’
‘Forever, or until I’m feeling generous.’

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘That’s … fair.’

“Try not to annoy him, Annie,” Thalia said, “He’s the one getting you in.”

Annabeth rolled her eyes. “I’ll remember to do that on my quest three years ago.”

Charon raised an eyebrow. ‘Whoever said death was fair, young miss?’

“I thought death was fair,” Sally commented. “It’s life that’s not fair, isn’t it? Death comes to us all and takes indiscriminately. That’s the definition of fair.”

“That’s an exceptional way of looking at it,” Hera remarked. “But not inaccurate.”

Wait until it’s your turn. You’ll die soon enough, where you’re going.’

Sally stiffened, and Amphitrite squeezed her hand. “It’s alright, Sally. They’re right here.”

‘We’ll get out alive,’ I said.

“That’s it, think positive,” Thalia said. “That’ll help.”

“It will actually,” Nico said.

… I got a sudden dizzy feeling. We weren’t going down any more, but forward.

“That’s because it’s becoming the barge,” Nico said. “Also, dead people don’t get nauseas so it’s not usually a problem.”

The air started turning misty … I blinked hard. When I opened my eyes, Charon’s creamy Italian suit had been replaced by a long black robe.

“Is that the Mist lifting?” Sally asked, her voice shaking.

“Not exactly,” Hades answered. “He takes a mortal appearance in the waiting room because it’s easier to interact with the newly dead that way.”

… Where his eyes should’ve been were empty sockets – like Ares’s eyes, except Charon’s were totally dark, full of night and death and despair.

Silena shuddered again.

He saw me looking, and said, ‘Well?’

‘Nothing,’ I managed.

“Oh good,” Thalia said. “You’re learning.”

“Oh, like you don’t have a smart mouth at the worst times,” Percy said.

Thalia shrugged. “Yes, but I’m older than you.”

“So?” Percy asked. “Also, no you’re not.”

Thalia smirked at him. “Not physically. And I just like pointing it out.”
“Look, if we don’t count Nico as being over seventy, just because he’s physically twelve,” Percy said, “I’m not counting you as however old you should be just because you’re physically fifteen.”

A sharp whistle cut of Thalia’s retort, and Will grinned a little sheepishly at the spontaneous round of applause from Travis and Connor.

“Trust me,” he said, “you wouldn’t be clapping if I’d done that for real. Can you two maybe have this argument for the fiftieth time later?”

“He’s right,” Annabeth said. “No one ever wins.”

Travis took advantage of the quiet and jumped right in.

I thought he was grinning, but that wasn’t it.

He read the next line and grimaced, but pushed on.

The flesh of his face was becoming transparent, letting me see straight through to his skull.

“Oh gods,” Silena blurted out, clapping a hand over her mouth.

Before his younger self could move, Will reached into his Healer’s bag, praying that his dad had packed it with more than just nectar and ambrosia – both of which were abundant on Olympus. Thankfully, he had a few bottles of ginger ale and he pulled one out and handed it over to her.

“Take small sips of that, it’ll help with the nausea.”

The floor kept swaying … When I blinked again, the elevator wasn’t an elevator anymore. We were standing in a wooden barge.

“So they’re on the Styx now?” Sally asked softly. “What happens if you fall in?”

Percy and Luke exchanged a heavy look, but no one answered.

Charon was poling us across a dark, oily river, swirling … plastic dolls, crushed carnations, soggy diplomas with gilt edges.

Amphitrite frowned. “How does the River Styx get polluted? Surely no one in the Underworld is throwing out trash?”

“It’s to do with the oaths,” Persephone explained. “And wishes.”

‘The River Styx,’ Annabeth murmured. ‘It’s so …’

‘Polluted,’ Charon said. ‘For thousands of years, you humans have been throwing in everything you come across – hopes, dreams, wishes that never came true.

“Oh,” Sally murmured. She wanted to say that none of that was tangible, but she supposed that didn’t matter in the Underworld.

Irresponsible waste management, if you ask me.

“Well, that’s not fair,” Hestia commented. “Humans can’t control what happens to their hopes and dreams.”
Mist curled off the filthy water … Panic closed up my throat.

Percy inhaled sharply, his heart beginning to race. Annabeth curled up beside him, practically in his lap, and he kissed her forehead.

Will watched them with thinly-veiled concern. If their first trip to the Underworld was bringing back these kinds of feelings, how were they going to cope with Tartarus? Would those sensations be weaker because it was an experience they hadn’t yet had? Would they even relive those memories, since it hadn’t happened for them yet?

Will didn’t know, but he wasn’t looking forward to finding out.

What was I doing here? These people around me … they were dead.

Thalia wanted to make a joke to lighten the mood, but Percy and Annabeth both looked so distraught that she couldn’t bring herself to do so.

Annabeth grabbed hold of my hand … She wanted reassurance that somebody else was alive on his boat.

Percy squeezed his girlfriend’s waist, chancing a glance over at his past-self. He was watching Travis intently, his face white.

I found myself muttering a prayer …

“I can’t help you down there, son,” Poseidon murmured.

… though I wasn’t quite sure who I was praying to. Down here, only one god mattered, and he was the one I had come to confront.

Travis paused, realising just now that his hands were shaking. A shoulder brushed against his and he glanced over, expecting to see Connor, or maybe Luke, but it was Katie who smiled tremulously at him, silently urging him to keep going.

The shoreline of the Underworld came into view … A sound came from somewhere nearby in the green glow … the howl of a large animal.

A shudder ran all the way through Annabeth and into Percy.

“That will be Cerberus,” Nico said calmly.

‘Old Three-Face is hungry,’ Charon said.

“Do you not feed him when I’m not there?” Persephone asked.

“Of course I feed him, darling,” Hades said. “I just don’t give him treats every time I go past.”

His smile turned skeletal … ‘Bad luck for you, godlings.’

This time, no one said anything to try to reassure Sally. Cerberus’s role was to keep people from breaking into the Underworld – unlike Charon, he had no qualms about harming them.

The bottom of our boat slid onto the black sand. The dead began to disembark.

Sally sighed as Travis read out the description of the dead, wincing at the mention of a little girl, and
a boy no older than Percy. Yes, death was fair, but life certainly wasn’t.

… Charon said, ‘I’d wish you luck, mate, but there isn’t any down here.

“Cheerful, isn’t he?” Thalia asked, absently stroking Annabeth’s arm.

Mind you, don’t forget to mention my pay raise.’

Persephone hid a smile. “I hope you do. Just to see your reaction,” she added, when her husband turned wounded eyes on her.

He counted our golden coins … then took up his pole. He warbled something that sounded like a Barry Manilow song as he ferried … back across the river.

Lee winced. He didn’t have anything against Barry Manilow personally, but one of their brothers adored him and … well, once you’ve heard a song fifty times in one week, it begins to grate on you, just a little.

We followed the spirits … the entrance to the Underworld looked like a cross between airport security and the Jersey Turnpike.

Thalia paused, her hand settling on Annabeth’s shoulder. “Isn’t that how you described it earlier?”

“Well these were taken from my head,” Percy said, looking a bit better.

There were three separate entrances … Beyond this were tollbooths manned by black-robed ghouls like Charon.

“So when you said airport security,” Rachel said, “you weren’t just talking about the queues. What is someone going to smuggle into the Underworld anyway?”

“Well, at the moment, a sword, a knife, an enchanted pair of sneakers and an Invisibility Cap,” Thalia said.

The howling of the hungry animal was really loud now, but … Cerberus … was nowhere to be seen.

“So where is he?” Connor asked, sounding nervous.

“Oh, he’s there,” Nico said. “They just won’t be able to see him yet.”

The dead queued up in the three lines … The EZ DEATH line was moving right along. The other two were crawling.

“What’s the difference?” Sally asked.

“Line in the middle goes straight to Asphodel,” Nico said. “The other two take you to judgement and the judges will decide whether you deserve Elysium or the Fields of Punishment instead.”

“Why would you choose Asphodel?” Katie asked.

“You wouldn’t,” Nico said. “Unless you were worried about facing judgement.”

“So does that mean some people get away with doing awful things in life because they take the middle path?” Sally asked.
“Oh no,” Hades said with a smile. “We have them earmarked as soon as they arrive.”

“So it doesn’t matter then, does it?” Katie asked, a little nervously. “If you take the middle path because you’re afraid of judgement, you’re probably going to get punishment anyway, if you deserve it?”

“That’s right,” Persephone said. “However, few people truly live well enough for Elysium – that is almost solely reserved for heroes and demigods. Almost. And that’s not to say that some demigods do not go somewhere else. But because most people who are judged go to Asphodel anyway, we put in an extra path to move things along a bit quicker.”

When no one else spoke, Travis began reading again. It went a bit quicker for a while, as the three questers were discussing the three paths and judgement. Then …

A couple of black robed ghouls had pulled aside one spirit and were frisking him at the security desk.

“Necessary?” Thalia asked.

“Probably not,” Nico said.

The face of the dead man looked vaguely familiar.

Sally sat up straight, and Percy smiled at her. “No one we knew, Mom.”

‘He’s that preacher who made the news, remember?’ Grover said.

“Oh, him,” Percy grumbled. “He deserves whatever he’s going to get.”

‘Oh, yeah.’ I did remember now. We’d seen him on TV … He was this annoying televangelist from upstate New York who’d raised millions of dollars for orphanages …

“That’s not a bad thing!” Hera interrupted, glaring at her brother.

Hermes coughed. “Travis?”

… and then got caught spending the money on stuff for his mansion … He’d died in a police chase when his “Lamborghini for the Lord” went off a cliff.

“Oh,” Hera murmured. “Sorry.”

Hades rolled his eyes.

I said, ‘What are they doing to him?’

“You don’t want to know,” Nico muttered.

‘Special punishment from Hades,’ Grover guessed. ‘The really bad people get his personal attention as soon as they arrive.’

“Do you get many like that?” Sally asked.

“Not as many as you might think,” Hades said.

The Fu – The Kindly Ones will set up an eternal torture for him.’
Percy grimaced.

The thought of the Furies made me shudder.

_Percy_ cursed under his breath and _Annabeth_ smiled into his shoulder.

I realised I was in their home territory now. Old Mrs Dodds would be licking her lips with anticipation.

“Why are you still calling her that?” _Nico_ asked in exasperation.

“Once again,” _Percy_ said, “did you hear an introduction?”

‘But if he’s a preacher,’ I said, ‘and he believes in a different hell …’

“They will often see what they expect to see,” Persephone said with a sigh. “The Mist does still work. Although,” she gave a mischievous smile, “we do pull the Mist down for the religious extremists. Let them know exactly how wrong they were.”

_Grover_ shrugged. ‘Who says he’s seeing this place the way we’re seeing it? Humans see what they want to see. They’re very stubborn – er, persistent, that way.’

“No, you were right the first time,” Rachel said.

_We got closer … Then, about fifteen metres in front of us, the green mist shimmered._

“There he is,” _Nico_ murmured.

_Standing just where the path split … was an enormous shadowy monster._

“Cerberus?” _Katie_ asked, a little shakily.

_I hadn’t seen it before because it was half transparent … And it was staring straight at me._

_Sally_ was white-faced, clinging to Amphitrite with one hand and _Percy_ with the other.

_My jaw hung open. All I could think to say was, ‘He’s a Rottweiler.’_

_Nico_ snorted. “Seriously?”

_Percy_ shrugged. “Wasn’t what I expected.”

_I’d always imagined Cerberus as a big black mastiff._

_There was a murmur of agreement among the campers, and Hades smirked. It was good to know he wasn’t totally predictable._

_But he was obviously a purebred Rottweiler, except of course that he was twice the size of a woolly mammoth …_

_Katie, who usually loved animals (and dogs in particular), let out a tiny squeak of alarm._

_… mostly invisible, and had three heads._

_The dead walked right up to him – no fear at all._
“He isn’t a threat to the dead,” *Nico* said. “He’s there to prevent the living from getting in.”

“Nico,” *Thalia* murmured, nodding towards Sally. She wasn’t doing too well herself, the description of Cerberus a little too close to the hoard of hell-hounds that had attacked her on Half-Blood Hill.

The ATTENDDANT ON DUTY lines parted on either side of him …

‘I’m starting to see him better,’ I muttered. ‘Why is that?’

*Nico* opened his mouth, glanced at *Thalia*, then at Sally, and closed it again.

‘I think … I’m afraid it’s because we’re getting closer to being dead.’

*Nico* sighed, when all eyes turned to him again, and he nodded. “Yes, that’s why.”

*Will* frowned. No wonder the *Nico* he had left was so drained. He could only hope that he listened to advice and kept away from the shadow-travelling while *Will* wasn’t there.

The dog’s middle head … sniffed the air and growled.

“Uh oh,” someone whispered.

‘It can smell the living,’ I said.

‘But that’s okay … Because we have a plan.’

*Nico* shook his head with a small smile. “This, I want to hear.”

“Nico!” *Thalia* hissed.

“Thalia, Percy and Annabeth are right there, and we saw Grover two days ago,” *Nico* said. “We know they get out safely.”

‘Right,’ *Annabeth* said. I’d never heard her voice sound quite so small.

*Thalia* frowned, her hand inching over to take *Annabeth’s*.

‘A plan.’

… The middle head snarled at us, then barked so loud my eyeballs rattled.

“Are you kidding me?” *Percy* whined, holding his head.

The moment brought a bit of levity to the room, but it vanished quickly.

‘Can you understand it?’ I asked Grover.

“Probably,” Grover said nervously.

… ‘I don’t think humans have a four letter word that translates, exactly.’

“Can you try?” Connor asked.

“No,” *Katie* said hastily. “They don’t need any more encouragement.”

Travis rolled his eyes. “You are no fun.”
I took the big stick out of my backpack …

Nico closed his eyes. “Oh, you didn’t.”

“I’m sorry,” Percy said. “What would your plan have been?”

“I don’t know,” Nico admitted. “But it wouldn’t be to play fetch!”

… I held it up, and tried to channel happy dog thoughts … like I wasn’t about to die.

“Yeah, you looked terrified,” Annabeth said, her voice shaking. “And rightly so.”

‘Hey, Big Fella,’ I called up. ‘I bet they don’t play with you much.’

“I play with him,” Nico protested.

“Not back then, you didn’t,” Percy said.

“Cerberus doesn’t play,” Hades said.

“Of course not, dear,” Persephone said, giving her stepson a wink. She played with Cerberus too.

… I waved the stick … I had Cerberus’s undivided attention. I wasn’t sure that was a good thing.

“It’s not,” Nico said, then caught sight of Sally’s stark-white face. “Usually. It’s not usually. But, you know, I can be wrong.”

‘Fetch!’ I threw the stick into the gloom … Cerberus glared at me, unimpressed.

“You don’t say,” Nico muttered under his breath. He had been worried about spending all this time in close quarters with Percy, but the more they read, the more his heart seemed to cotton on to the fact that Percy was – well – human.

And once he was down off the pedestal, and they were on more even ground, the uncomfortable butterflies in Nico’s stomach seemed to be much happier to remain in hibernation.

… ‘Um,’ Grover said. ‘Percy? …. He’s saying we’ve got ten seconds to pray to the god of our choice. After that … well … he’s hungry.’

“Okay, run,” Sally said.

“Mom, we couldn’t,” Percy said, although his voice wasn’t as calm as he wanted it to be. “We either risked getting killed by Cerberus then, or missed the deadline and got killed a day later.”

“I wouldn’t have been killed a day later,” Annabeth said. “No one thought I stole anything. And we both know you wouldn’t have taken me to Olympus to get killed.”

‘Wait!’ Annabeth said. She started riffling through her pack.

“What have you got in there?” Malcolm asked, a little shrilly. “A magic dog whistle?”

“Something like that,” Annabeth said.

Uh-oh, I thought.
“Was that me or Cerberus?” Annabeth asked.

“Mostly Cerberus,” Percy admitted. “But I was hoping you had a plan B.”

‘Five seconds,’ Grover said. ‘Do we run now?’

“Yes please,” Grover bleated.

Releasing her son for a second, Sally reached past him to squeeze Grover’s shoulder.

Annabeth produced a red rubber ball the size of a grapefruit.

Thalia groaned. “Annabeth! If the stick didn’t work, what made you think the ball would?!”

Annabeth shrugged. “Optimism.”

Thalia shook her head. “Percy is a bad influence on you.”

… Before I could stop her, she … marched straight up to Cerberus … ‘See the ball? You want the ball, Cerberus? Sit!’

“How are you not dead?” Nico asked, in shock.

Cerberus looked as stunned as we were.

“Because he’s in shock,” Persephone answered, looking worried. “I suggest you back away slowly.”

… ‘Sit!’ Annabeth called again.

Travis glanced down the page and swallowed a grin.

I was sure that at any moment she would become the world’s largest Milkbone dog biscuit.

“Thanks for the confidence,” Annabeth said, her hands shaking from second-hand adrenaline.

But, instead, Cerberus licked his three sets of lips, shifted on his haunches, and sat, immediately crushing a dozen spirits who’d been passing underneath him in the EZ DEATH line.

Travis didn’t bother reading on, waiting for the reaction.

It started with a gasp, then a giggle, then erupted into cacophony of laughter and applause, which Annabeth acknowledged by standing and dipping a curtsey.

“Like I said,” she said with a grin, “do you really think all we needed to do was tell a three-headed dog to sit?”

The spirits made muffled hisses as they dissipated, like the air let out of tyres.

“They’ll be alright,” Persephone said. “They’ll reappear in a few minutes. Although they will need to go to the back of the queue.”

Annabeth said, ‘Good boy!’ … She turned towards us. ‘Go now. EZ DEATH line – it’s faster.’
“You’ll still need to get through security though,” Lee said.

I said, ‘But –’

‘Now!’ She ordered, in the same tone she was using on the dog.

Thalia sniggered. “If it works …”

… ‘Stay!’ Annabeth ordered the monster. ‘If you want the ball, stay!’

Cerberus whimpered, but he stayed where he was.

“Unbelievable,” Nico said.

‘What about you?’ I asked Annabeth as we passed her.

‘I know what I’m doing, Percy,’ she muttered. ‘At least, I’m pretty sure …’

Athena let out a shaky breath, giving in and tugging her daughter closer.

Grover and I walked between the monster’s legs.

“Let’s hope he doesn’t sit down again,” Connor quipped nervously.

Travis smirked.

Please, Annabeth, I prayed. Don’t tell him to sit again.

While a few people snickered at the coincidence, Annabeth rolled her eyes. “Come on, Percy, why would I do that?”

We made it through.

There was one cumulative sigh of relief.

… She threw the ball … While the monster was distracted, Annabeth walked briskly under its belly and joined us at the metal detector.

There was another smattering of applause and Athena pressed a kiss to her daughter’s hair.

‘How did you do that?’ I asked her amazed.

“I think we’d all like to know that,” Hades grumbled, although he didn’t look angry.

‘Obedience school,’ she said … ‘When I was little, at my dad’s house, we had a Dobermann …’

“Oh,” Katie said softly. “What happened?”

Annabeth shrugged, leaning into her mother’s embrace. “He was old. We had to have him put to sleep.”

‘Never mind that,’ Grover said, tugging at my shirt. ‘Come on!’

“Sorry, Annabeth,” Grover said.
“It’s okay,” Annabeth said. “We didn’t have time for me to get lost down memory lane.”

We were about to bolt … when Cerberus moaned pitifully … Annabeth stopped.

“No, don’t stop,” Sally whispered.

She turned to face the dog, which had done a one-eighty to look at us.

“I’ve never seen him do that before,” Persephone murmured.

… ‘Good boy,’ Annabeth said … ‘I’ll bring you another ball soon … Would you like that?’

The monster whimpered. I didn’t need to speak dog to know Cerberus was still waiting for the ball.

Nico laughed suddenly. “That’s amazing. He likes you.”

‘Good dog. I’ll come visit you soon. I – I promise.’

Nico sighed, as Annabeth turned to him. “I’m not sneaking you into the Underworld to play with Cerberus.”

“I did promise him,” Annabeth said.

“No,” Thalia said. “No one is going to the Underworld unless they’re dead.”

Percy coughed something that sounded like ‘hypocrite’.

“And if you’re talking about last winter,” Thalia said, ‘a. you were with me, b. that was a quest, and c. we had no choice in the matter whatsoever.”

Sally shook her head. “I’m not going to ask.”

… Grover and I pushed through the metal detector, which immediately screamed and set of flashing red lights.

“Uh oh,” Connor said.

… We burst through the EZ DEATH gate … and raced into the Underworld.

Persephone frowned. “I’m glad they got in, but there should probably be more security to stop that from happening.”

A few minutes later, we were hiding … as security ghouls scuttled past, yelling for backup from the Furies.

Several people shuddered.

Grover murmured, ‘Well, Percy, what have we learned today?’

Percy sighed. “Oh, boy, where should I begin?”

‘That three-headed dogs prefer red rubber balls over sticks?’

“Technically, the stick probably would have worked,” Nico said grudgingly. “You just didn’t have
the same finesse as Annabeth.”

Percy shrugged. “Story of my life.”

‘No,’ Grover told me. ‘We’ve learned that your plans really, really bite!’

“Hey, I got us out of Crusty’s!” Percy protested. “And Annabeth’s plan was the same as mine.”

“I don’t think I can hear you over my heart racing,” Grover said flatly.

I wasn’t sure about that. I thought maybe Annabeth and I both had the right idea … I pretended not to see Annabeth wipe a tear from her cheek as she listened to the mournful keening of Cerberus in the distance, longing for his new friend.

“Oh, alright,” Nico sighed. “I’ll talk to Father when we get back, see if you can visit.”

Annabeth beamed at him. “Wonderful! I’ll get a new ball.”

Nico muttered something under his breath.

“That’s the end of that chapter,” Travis said.

“My turn,” Connor said, a little jerkily, taking the book.

Chapter End Notes

Eliza Hanson daughter of Apollo was borrowed (with permission) from HonorH - go check out Becoming Us in my bookmarks.
Percy cleared his throat. “Connor, before you start, maybe we should talk about actions and consequences.”

“What do you mean, Perseus?” Hestia asked, cutting off her siblings before they could begin to say anything.

“Well, all of us are potentially going to do stupid things,” Percy said, gesturing to the other time-travellers.

“Some more stupid than others,” Thalia put in, glancing at Luke.

“Right,” Percy agreed. “And they’re probably things that we’ve already been …” he hesitated. “Not necessarily punished for, that’s not the word, but …”

“We’ve already suffered the consequences,” Annabeth finished, taking pity on him. “I can understand yelling, but maybe hold off on anything too permanent until we’ve finished?”

Luke grimaced. “Please don’t do this for my sake.”

“Not just yours,” Percy said. He thought for a second. “Okay, mostly yours. But the Fates brought you back for a reason – although that might just be to give them someone to yell at – but if you get disintegrated every time you do something, and we have to wait for them to reform you, we’re going to be here forever.”

“And we have all done stupid things,” Annabeth admitted. “As much as I hate to admit it. None of us are perfect – we’ve made mistakes, we’ve made assumptions. None of us can get away from that.”

Hestia smiled at her. “I think what you’re asking for is understandable.” She looked at Zeus expectantly. “Don’t you, brother?”

“Look at it this way, dear,” Hera said, when Zeus didn’t answer. “At least you’re not going to risk contradicting yourself.”

That worked. While it certainly wasn’t uncommon for Zeus to contradict himself when it came to his behaviour and others’ (his reaction to Poseidon breaking the oath was proof of that), he hated having to backtrack on his decisions. It made it look like he didn’t know what he was doing.

“I agree, Hestia,” he announced. “I’m certain our future selves have already dealt with any issues.”


Chapter Nineteen

We Find Out the Truth, Sort Of

“Oh, finally!” Malcolm said.

“Sort of,” Connor repeated.
Imagine the largest concert crowd you’ve ever seen …

Everyone let Connor read in silence for several pages, listening intently.

Percy and Annabeth were both a little shaky, feeling the after-effects of being in the Underworld.

… The dead aren’t scary. They’re just sad.

Sally made a little noise of sympathy in her throat, the first noise throughout the description of Asphodel.

We crept along, following the line … that snaked from the main gates towards …

JUDGEMENTS FOR ELYSIUM AND ETERNAL DAMNATION

“So all three lines go through judgement?” Silena asked, confused.

“No, they all go through Asphodel,” Persephone corrected. “The middle line isn’t supposed to keep going.”

… Out the back of the tent came two much smaller lines.

“I guess the ones who get judged for Asphodel just get sent straight back?” Annabeth asked. Persephone nodded. “That’s right. That’s most people.”

To the left, spirits … were marched down a rocky path towards the Fields of Punishment …

Connor’s voice shook as he read, and his brothers tucked in against him.

… I saw worse tortures, too – things I don’t want to describe.

“I still don’t,” Percy said flatly.

“So don’t ask,” Annabeth added. “Please.”

The line coming from the right side … was much better.

“That is the point, I guess,” Katie said.

This one led down towards a small valley … which seemed to be the only happy part of the Underworld … I could hear laughter and smell barbecue cooking.

“That sounds lovely,” Silena said with a sigh.

“That’s the aim,” Annabeth said, somehow managing to keep the grief from entering her voice. Percy pressed a kiss to her temple.

Elysium.

In the middle of that valley was … The Isles of the Blest, for people who had chosen to be reborn three times, and three times achieved Elysium.

“You have to get to Elysium to be reborn though, right?” Annabeth asked.

“Yes,” Hades said, “and you also need to petition for it. Granted, I can’t think of anyone we’ve
turned down.”

“Do people remember?” Annabeth asked. “I mean, if this was our second time around, would we know?”

“If you achieve Elysium again, you would remember then,” Hades answered. “You might get a few moments of déjà vu while you were alive, but most people don’t remember until they die.”

**Immediately I knew that’s where I wanted to go when I died.**

“Who doesn’t?” Thalia asked.

… But I thought of how few people there were … how tiny it was compared to Asphodel or even Punishment … It was depressing.

“Don’t think like that,” Persephone said to the demigods as a whole. “You have to remember that to reach Elysium you have to do exceptional good. That’s not to say that the people in Asphodel didn’t do good.”

**We left the judgement pavilion and moved deeper into Asphodel … The colours faded from our clothes.**

Annabeth heaved a heavy sigh, resting her head on Percy’s shoulder. She had forgotten how draining Asphodel was, like all her energy was been sapped from her.

**The crowds of chattering spirits began to thin.**

“Why is that?” Katie asked.

“The dead get so far and just … stop,” Nico answered. “They forget why they wanted to keep going.”

**After a few miles of walking, we began to hear a familiar screech in the distance.**

Annabeth shuddered worse than Percy did. The sound had taken her right back to the day Thalia died. As if reading her mind, Thalia reached behind Percy’s shoulders to grip Annabeth’s.

**Looming on the horizon was a palace of glittering black obsidian.**

Persephone couldn’t help smiling at the mention of her second home (which, by this time, was only her second home to keep her mother somewhat happy).

**Above the parapets swirled … the Furies. I got the feeling they were waiting for us.**

“They would have been,” Nico said.

‘I suppose it’s too late to turn back,’ Grover said wistfully.

“Afraid so,” Hermes said.

‘We’ll be okay,’ I said, trying to sound confident.

“You really didn’t that time,” Annabeth said, but her voice was just as small.

‘Maybe we should search … Like, Elysium, for instance …’
Persephone smiled. “Sorry, Grover.”

… His trainers sprouted wings and his legs shot forward …

Apollo frowned. “Hermes, didn’t you say that only really positive emotions would cause those shoes to activate without the magic word?”

“I did,” Hermes said slowly. “That’s odd.”

… ‘Grover,’ Annabeth chided. ‘Stop messing around.’

“I don’t think I’m doing anything,” Grover said nervously.

… They levitated off the ground and started dragging him away from us.

“Alright, that’s not right,” Hermes said sharply. “Get rid of those shoes!”

‘Maia!’ he yelled, but the magic word seemed to have no effect. ‘Maia, already! 911! Help!’

Luke’s face drained of all colour, and he focused his gaze on his future self, who was staring at the floor.

I got over being stunned and made a grab for Grover’s hand, but too late.


“It’s fine,” Grover squeaked, as Sally pulled both of them into her side, squashing them together.

He was picking up speed, skidding downhill like a bobsled.

Hades inhaled sharply and Persephone bolted upright, her eyes wide. “Uh oh.”

“Don’t ‘uh-oh’!” Hermes sighed. “What don’t we want to know?”

“Downhill …” Persephone whispered. “Connor, are you sure that’s what it says?”

Connor read it again. “Yes, ma’am. Any chance they’re heading for Elysium?”

“I’m afraid not,” Persephone said, glancing at her husband. “I just hope I’m wrong.”

… Annabeth shouted, ‘Untie the shoes!’

“Why do I get the feeling that would be too easy?” Thalia asked.

“I don’t seem to remember any of this being mentioned when you guys got back,” Will said.

“Well, you know, we don’t like to brag,” Percy said, his voice shaking.

It was a smart idea, but I guess it’s not so easy when your shoes are pulling you along feet-first at full speed.

“You think?” Katie asked shrilly.

… I was sure Grover was going to barrel straight through the gates of Hades’s palace …

Grover whimpered, but Persephone looked hopeful. “Maybe he will.”
“Isn’t that a bad idea?” Apollo asked.

“Normally, but it’s better than the alternative,” she said.

... but his shoes veered sharply to the right and dragged him in the opposite direction.

Persephone closed her eyes. “Never mind.”

The slope got steeper ... I realised we’d entered some kind of side tunnel. No black grass or trees now, just rock underfoot, and the dim light of the stalactites above.

Apollo’s eyes widened, suddenly realising where they were. His youngest son shifted closer, apparently picking up on his discomfort.

... The tunnel got darker and colder ... It smelled evil down here.

Annabeth shivered again and Percy pulled her closer.

It made me think of things I should even know about ... Then I saw what was ahead of us, and I stopped dead in my tracks.

Connor glanced ahead and looked up, his face white. “You’re heading straight for ...”

“I know,” Percy said with a weak smile. “We’ll be fine.”

“Adrenaline is a wonderful thing,” Annabeth whispered. “You don’t realise how great it is until you’re reliving something like this without it.”

The tunnel widened into a huge dark cavern, and in the middle was a chasm the size of a city block.

“That’s the entrance to Tartarus, isn’t it?” Hera asked.

Grover let out an alarmed bleat and Sally stroked his hair.

... Grover’s predicament got me moving again.

“Good, good,” Thalia muttered, pressing against Percy’s side so she could hold on to him and Annabeth.

He was yelling, clawing at the ground ... What saved him were his hooves.

Hermes breathed a sigh of relief.

The flying sneakers had always been a loose fit ...”

“Thank the gods,” Luke murmured under his breath.

Thalia stiffened but said nothing.

... and finally Grover hit a bit rock and the left shoe came flying off ... He was three metres from the edge of the pit when we caught him and hauled him back up the slope.

Everyone else seemed to relax.
The other winged shoe tugged itself off, circled around us angrily and kicked our heads in protest …

Percy and Annabeth both flinched at the sudden impact.

… before flying off into the chasm to join its twin.

… My limbs felt like lead.

“Oh, why?!” Percy grumbled.

Thalia smiled weakly. “Suck it up.”

Percy shook his head, glancing over at the younger campers. Everyone’s eyes were fixed on Connor and the book, except Luke, who was staring at his future self.


Thalia looked from one to the other. “At this point, I think it’s semantics.”

Even my backpack felt heavier, as if somebody had filled it with rocks.

Percy rubbed his shoulder absently.

Grover was scratched up pretty bad … he was terrified.

“You okay, Grover?” Will asked.

Grover nodded shakily, trembling against Percy and Sally. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

… ‘Wait,’ I said. ‘Listen.’

“Don’t listen,” Thalia said immediately.


“What’s the bright side?” Thalia asked.

Percy smiled innocently. “I wasn’t the one wearing the shoes.”

Thalia opened her mouth to retort, then froze and turned on Luke. “How did you do that?!”

Luke didn’t answer for a second, then said, “I can’t tell you.”

Thalia’s eyes narrowed. “Luke …”

“I want to,” Luke said hastily. “But I can’t. I asked …” his words suddenly dropped off, even though his mouth kept moving.

Thalia frowned. “That’s weird. I wonder …” she trailed off and turned to Will. “Hey, Will, what actually happened to you last year?”

“Well …” Will began, but like Luke his voice seemed to vanish with his next words.

“Hang on, I can tell them I was dreaming about Luke, but Luke can’t tell us who charmed the shoes?” Percy asked. “How is that fair?”
“Maybe,” Annabeth said slowly. “Maybe that has something to do with Luke being here? All the other things we’ve told them have been fairly generic.”


Thalia frowned, untangled herself from Percy and Annabeth and moved over to sit beside Luke. “Try whispering it.”

Luke leaned closer and whispered one word: “Alabaster.”

Thalia thought for a second. “Oh! Wasn’t that …” Now it was her turn to lose her voice, before she could make the connection between the name and a son of Hecate.

“Oh, this is going to get old,” Annabeth said.

“Seriously?” Percy complained. “Does everyone get a spoiler alarm but me?”

“We’re just going to have to wait until tonight to talk about it,” Nico said sensibly.

“But why?” Thalia asked, turning back to Luke. “I don’t remember … Or did they?”

Luke thought for a second. “No more so than any of the others. Unless we just can’t tell them until after we’ve finished reading about the war.”

Thalia nodded. “So we’re talking about a child of …”

“Yes, exactly.”

“But I thought that particular …”

“No, that one did. But they didn’t all …”

“No, I suppose not.” Thalia stood up. “Fair enough.”

“You know,” Annabeth said. “Back on the streets, I genuinely believed you two could read each other’s minds.”

“And now?” Thalia asked, returning to her seat.

“Now, I’m still not convinced you can’t,” Annabeth said seriously. “What was all that about?”

“Tell you later, sweets,” Thalia said.


Thalia rolled her eyes. “I’ll yell or something later before we all go to bed. And it’ll probably be ‘something’, just to give you fair warning.”

Connor cleared his throat and, when no one protested, began reading again.

I heard something – a deep whisper in the darkness … a muttering, evil voice from far, far below us.

“Is that him?” Will whispered.

“Afraid so, kiddo,” Apollo said grimly, tucking his younger son to his side.
… I uncapped Anaklusmos.

“Will that help?” Lee asked dubiously. “I mean, what are you going to fight?”

“Celestial bronze is special,” Apollo reminded him. “Also, Anaklusmos is much older than you think.”

The bronze sword expanded … the evil voice seemed to falter, just for a moment, before resuming its chant.

“Chant?” Hera repeated sharply.

I could almost make out words now, ancient, ancient words, older even than Greek. As if …

‘Magic,’ I said.

“Run!” Several of the gods shouted.

‘We have to get out of here,’ Annabeth said.


“Yeah, I know,” Annabeth whispered.

… My legs wouldn’t move fast enough. My backpack weighed me down.

Hera and Aphrodite both frowned, both for different reasons.

The voice got louder and angrier behind us, and we broke into a run.

“I would’ve been running already,” Thalia admitted.

“I don’t think you can appreciate just how heavy we both felt,” Annabeth said. “You know when you’re dreaming – normal dreams, not demigod dreams – and it feels like you’re running through some kind of jello?”

Thalia pulled a face. “Oh, I know what you mean.”

Not a moment too soon.

A cold blast of wind pulled at our backs, as if the entire pit was inhaling.

Thalia gripped both of them as they both jerked backwards. “Will, do you have anything for second-hand hysteria?”

“Theirs or yours?” Will asked.

“Mine’s first-hand,” Thalia said with a weak smile. “Anything?”

Will shrugged. “Sorry, Thalia.”

For one terrifying moment, I lost ground … If we’d been any close to the edge, we would’ve been sucked in.

Sally gasped sharply, clinging to Percy and Grover, and looking as though she wanted to pull Annabeth in as well.
Athena had her though, wrapped up in her arms.

We kept struggling forward, and finally reached the top of the tunnel … The wind died.

A sigh of relief rippled through the room and Percy and Annabeth both relaxed, sagging against Thalia, who hugged them both tightly.

A wail of outrage echoed from deep in the tunnel.

The children of Kronos shuddered.

Something was not happy we’d got away.

“Why did he want Percy in Tartarus?” Poseidon asked. “He could hardly help Kronos get out from in there.”


Thalia rolled her eyes. “I’m not sure what’s worse – you doing awful things for bad reasons, or you doing bad things with no idea why.”

“It wasn’t exactly me he wanted,” Percy said carefully. He opened his mouth and paused. “And apparently, I couldn’t tell you why even if I wanted to. Now I get a spoiler alarm.”

Annabeth sighed. “Let it go, Percy.”

‘What was that? … One of Hades’s pets?’

Persephone laughed nervously. “Not even close.”

Annabeth and I looked at each other. I could tell she was nursing an idea … but she was too scared to share it.

“I was,” Annabeth said, clinging to Thalia’s hand.

That was enough to terrify me.

Percy took a shaky breath, and Annabeth tilted her head up to kiss his jaw.

… ‘Let’s keep going.’ I looked at Grover. ‘Can you walk?’

He swallowed. ‘Yeah, sure. I never liked those shoes, anyway.’

Hermes sighed, but said nothing.

He tried to sound brave about it, but he was trembling as badly as Annabeth and I were.

Sally rubbed Grover’s arm comfortingly –even though he wasn’t physically reliving it the way the time-travellers were, he was still violently trembling. Seeing that Percy was somewhat trapped between his mom and his best friend, Amphitrite tugged him to his feet and resettled him between her and Sally instead, bringing a smile to her husband’s face.

Whatever was in that pit was nobody’s pet.

“There’s an understatement,” Nico muttered.
It was unspeakably old and powerful. Even Echinda hadn’t given me that feeling.

“Echidna is old,” Hera conceded, “but not nearly as old as him.”

I was almost relieved to … head towards the palace of Hades.

“Really?” Thalia asked.

Almost.

“Oh, that makes sense,” Thalia murmured.

“Just watch out for the gardens,” Nico warned.

Connor paused for a second, steeling himself.

“You alright?” His father asked quietly.

Connor gave him a shaky smile. “I’m fine, Dad.”

The Furies circled the parapets … the two-storey- tall bronze gates stood wide open.

“I suppose you’re expecting him,” Persephone said with a frown. “Unfortunately, it’s not winter.”

“Persephone!” Demeter protested.

Persephone sighed. “Not now, Mother!”

Up close, I saw that the engravings on the gates were scenes of death.

Aphrodite wrinkled her nose delicately.

Some were from modern times … I wondered if I was looking at prophecies that had come true.

“Probably,” Apollo said. “Most of them are bad news.”

“I have never had a single vision that was good news,” Rachel said flatly. “Even before I was the Oracle.”

“I’m just the god of prophecies,” Apollo told her with a grin. “I don’t make ‘em.”

Inside the courtyard was the strangest garden I’d ever seen.

“But beautiful,” Percy added hastily.

“Yes, really lovely,” Annabeth agreed.

Persephone smiled at them both. “Thank you.”

… Standing here and there … were Medusa’s garden statues … all smiling grotesquely.

“I can’t believe you didn’t say anything,” Athena grumbled.

“Once again, I didn’t know it was her,” Persephone said, rolling her eyes. “Of course, I had my suspicions – they were just so detailed – but it is not my job to locate monsters. I assumed that if it
was her, someone would have said something."

*In the centre of the garden was an orchard of pomegranate trees …*

Demeter glared at her brother/son-in-law. “Really?”

“Oh, leave him alone!” Persephone sighed. “I planted those ones.”

... *The tart smell of those pomegranates was almost overwhelming.*

“And that’s why you have to watch out,” *Nico* said.

… *I pulled Grover away to keep him from picking a big juicy one.*

“Well, that was close,” Sally said.

*We walked up the steps of the palace … ‘You know,’ Grover mumbled, ‘I bet Hades doesn’t have trouble with door-to-door salesman.’*

There were a few nervous chuckles, and Hades smiled. “Oddly enough, I don’t.”

*My backpack weighed a ton now … I wanted to open if, check to see if I had somehow picked up a stray bowling ball, but this wasn’t the time.*

“Why is it so heavy?” Aphrodite asked.

Ares shrugged. “I dunno, do I? Maybe the Underworld doesn’t like it.”

“Is that the only reason?” Hera asked.

Ares rolled his eyes. “How am I supposed to know?”

‘Well, guys,’ I said. ‘I suppose we should … knock?’

“I shouldn’t think you’d need to,” Persephone said.

*An hot wind blew down the corridor and the doors swung open … ‘I guess that means “entrez”,’ Annabeth said.*

“I’d guess so,” *Thalia* said quietly.

*The room inside looked just like my dream … He was the third god I’d met, but the first who really struck me as godlike.*

Hades smirked.

“Likely because you’re seeing him in his own domain, rather than on Earth,” Athena said. “Your mind would be more protected and allow you to see more of his true self.”

… *Hades’s aura was affecting me, just as Ares’s had.*

“That’s actually a very flattering description,” Persephone said with a small smile.

*The Lord of the Dead resembled pictures I’d seen of Adolph Hitler, or Napoleon, or the terrorist leaders who direct suicide bombers.*
“Only one of them is a half-sibling,” *Nico* protested.

“You can’t help that, honey,” *Thalia* said, absently tugging him into the hug with *Percy* and *Annabeth*.

“She’s in Mama-Bear mode again,” *Will* said with a grin.

“Does she do this a lot?” *Artemis* asked.

“Only when she’s frettin’ about people, ma’am,” *Will* said. “That’s the other half of the reason she adopted Cabin 7.”

‘You are very brave to come here … Or perhaps you are simply very foolish.’

“Amazing how often those two coincide,” *Travis* said, his voice shaking.

*Numbness crept into my joints, tempting me to lie down … Curl up here and sleep forever. *Percy* yawned widely.*

*I fought the feeling and stepped forward … ‘Lord and Uncle, I come with two requests.’*

“This is going to go so badly,” *Nico* muttered into *Thalia’s* shoulder – he knew better than to fight her on this at the moment. “I can tell.”

*Hades raised an eyebrow … What horrible things would you have to do in your life to get woven into Hades’s underwear?*

Despite the tremor in his voice, *Connor* was grinning.

Everyone else was chuckling.

*Even Hades was smiling. “That’s not quite how it works. It’s only a reflection, they’re not really there.”*

‘Only two requests?’ *Hades* said.

“Train wreck,” *Nico* muttered.

‘Arrogant child … Speak, then. It amuses me not to strike you dead yet.’

“If you harm him,” *Poseidon* began.

“I’m fine, Dad,” *Percy* reminded him. “Lord Hades still believes I have the helm of darkness; with hindsight, I can understand why he was so angry.”

*I swallowed. This was going about as well as I’d feared.*

“It’s going better than I’d feared,” *Nico* said, lifting his head.

“Don’t jinx it,” *Thalia* said. “Please don’t.”

*I glanced at the empty, smaller throne … I wished Queen Persephone were here.*

“I am certainly less prone to dramatics,” she said with a smile.
“I am not prone to dramatics,” her husband said.

Persephone rolled her eyes. “Really, darling, all you needed to say was, “my helm of darkness went missing as well, and I believe you stole it.” He denies it and then we can all move on. That is, if you believe him.”

“Which I wouldn’t,” Hades pointed out.

I recalled something in the myths about how she could calm her husband’s moods.

Hades softened as he smiled at his wife. “That is true.”

But it was summer. Of course, Persephone would be above … with her mother … Annabeth cleared her throat. Her finger prodded me in the back.

“How do you get distracted in there?” Michael asked.

Percy smiled sheepishly. “ADHD. You know what it’s like. Apparently, the Underworld doesn’t make it any better.”

‘Lord Hades,’ I said. ‘Look, sir, there can’t be a war among the gods. It would be … bad.’

“Understatement of the century,” Apollo said. “In fact, that may be the biggest understatement since Helen said, ‘I’ll just go for a quick trip to Troy; no one will mind’.”

… ‘You keep saying “after what I’ve done”. What exactly have I done?’

Persephone frowned. “I’m surprised you can’t read their confusion. No child can act that well. Guilt is exposed in the Underworld.”

The throne room shook with a tremor so strong they probably felt it upstairs on Los Angeles.

“Oh dear,” Sally sighed. “I believe you might be about to get another influx.”

… Doors burst open … and skeletal warriors marched in, hundreds of them …

Hades bellowed, ‘Do you think I want war, godling?’

I wanted to say, Well, these guys don’t look like peace activists.

Hermes laughed. “Oh, don’t say that.”

But I thought that might be a dangerous answer.

“Suicidal,” Nico agreed, his lips twitching.

… ‘A war would expand your kingdom, right?’

Persephone winced. “Oh, that was a bad idea.”

‘… Do you think I need more subjects? … Do you have any idea how much my kingdom has swollen …? … I used to be a rich god, Percy Jackson. I control all the precious metals under the earth. But my expenses!’

“Don’t do it,” Nico said, closing his eyes. “Don’t do it!”
‘Charon wants a pay raise,’ I blurted, just remembering the fact.

“And you did it,” Nico sighed. “I knew you would, but I swear …”

… ‘Don’t get me started on Charon! … No, godling. I need no help getting subjects! I did not ask for this war.’

“Which, with hindsight, was obvious,” Annabeth said with a sigh.

… ‘Your father may fool Zeus, boy, but I am not so stupid.

“Hey!” Zeus protested. “I was blaming Poseidon as well!”

“And you’re both wrong,” Poseidon said, scowling.

I see his plan … You will be exposed as Poseidon’s thief, and I will have my helmet back!’

“One of you pick up on that,” Athena said, stroking Annabeth’s hair. “He’s completely beyond reason now.”

‘But …’ Annabeth spoke. … ‘Lord Hades, your helmet of darkness is missing, too?’

“Keep going,” Athena whispered. “Keep thinking.”

‘Do not play innocent with me, girl … Does Poseidon think I can be blackmailed into supporting him?’

“Hang on, that makes no sense!” Poseidon said. “What part of asking you for the master bolt translates into blackmailing you?”

“I don’t know,” Hades said. “I have had several more weeks to stew with this since now.”

… ‘I have said nothing of the helmet’s disappearance … because I had no illusions that anyone on Olympus would offer me the slightest justice, the slightest help.

“That is not true,” Hestia said quietly. “I would help. You are my brother.”

“As would we,” Hermes added, gesturing to Apollo, who nodded.

I can ill afford for word to get out … when it was clear you were coming to me … I did not try to stop you.’

“Which should give you some clue that whatever dragged you towards Tartarus was something else,” Thalia said.

… ‘Return my helmet now, or I will stop death … I will open the earth and have the dead pour back into the world.

“That wouldn’t stop death, would it?” Will asked.

“Technically, no,” Nico answered. “Only Thanatos can do that. But I don’t think an army of the undead would be any better.

… And you … your skeleton will lead my army out of Hades.’
“I’m fine,” Percy repeated.

... At this point, I probably should have been terrified.

“So why aren’t you?” Chris asked, his voice cracking embarrassingly.

The strange thing was … Nothing gets me angrier than being accused of something I didn’t do.

There was a murmur of agreement among the demigods, all of whom had experienced something similar at some point of their lives.

… ‘You’re as bad as Zeus,’ I said. ‘You think I stole from you? That’s why you sent the Furies after me? … And the other monsters?’

“Furies, yes,” Hades said. “Not the others.”

... ‘Return my property!’

“He can’t,” Sally murmured. “He doesn’t have it.”

‘But I don’t have your helmet. I came for the master bolt.’

‘Which you already possess!’ Hades shouted.

Aphrodite gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. All of a sudden, she knew what was going on; hundreds of words of war she had dismissed as flippant …

Hades didn’t want war.

But Ares did.

... ‘Open your pack, then.’

“No way …” Travis said slowly.

A horrible feeling struck me … I slung it off my shoulder and unzipped it. Inside was a sixty-centimetre-long metal cylinder, spiked on both ends, humming with energy.

Thalia sucked in a breath. “Oh, that’s not good.”

“How did you get that?” Sally whispered. “You didn’t take it, so how did you get it?”


Luke shrugged. “I don’t know. I didn’t have it for more than a few days.”

“But then …” Travis frowned, turning to his brother. “If you took the master bolt, but you now don’t have it … who does?”

No one answered, not even Ares, who still did not believe he would ever get caught – especially now the bolt was out of his hands.

‘Percy,’ Annabeth said. ‘How –’

‘I – I don’t know. I don’t understand.’
Amphitrite made a little noise of sympathy, slipping an arm around her stepson’s shoulders.

‘You heroes are always the same … I did not ask for Zeus’s master bolt, but since it is here, you will yield it to me.

“No he will not!” Zeus began.

Hera pulled him back on to his throne. “Not now.”

… I was speechless … I had no idea how the master bolt had got into my backpack.

“Neither do we,” Lee muttered, thinking hard.

… Hades was the bad guy.

“That’s what he wants you to think,” Persephone said, taking her husband’s hand.

But suddenly the world turned sideways.

Percy yelped, holding his head. “That was a figure of speech!”

The tension broken, Thalia laughed. “Are you alright?”

“No, I’m not alright!” Percy protested. “The room’s spinning!”

I realised I’d been played with.

Percy sighed with relief as the room righted itself again.

Zeus, Poseidon and Hades had been set at each other’s throats by someone else.

Athena raised an eyebrow. “You’ve realised it’s Kronos?”

“Not yet,” Percy said. “I was thinking a little closer to home.”

The master bolt had been in the backpack, and I’d got the backpack from …

“Ares,” Zeus said dangerously. “What do you know of this?”

“Father, I gave the boy the backpack with nothing but a change of clothes in, if I remember,” Ares said. “I don’t recall them finding the bolt before.”

Thalia’s mouth fell open, but, at her stepmother’s look, she said nothing.

Still, was Ares really going to keep playing stupid?

‘Lord Hades, wait,’ I said. ‘This is all a mistake.’

“Too late,” Nico said grimly. “There’s no reasoning now.”

… ‘There is no mistake,’ Hades said. ‘I know why you have come … You came to bargain for her.’


Hades loosed a ball of gold fire from his palm … there was my mother … just as she was at the
moment when the Minotaur began to squeeze her to death.

“Hades …” Poseidon began.

“Oh, hush,” Hades said wearily. “You have heard Nico and Thalia speak of knowing her; you know all will be well.”

Persephone scowled. “Still, she had nothing to do with any of it.”

… I reached out to touch her, but the light was as hot as a bonfire.

Percy winced, shaking his hand to try and cool it.

‘Yes … I took her … She is not dead, you know. Not yet. But if you displease me, that will change.’

Sally took a shaky breath, trying to remain calm. Percy pressed against one side, Grover against the other.

I thought about the pearls … If I could just get my mom free …

“There’s still only three of them,” Amphitrite said gently.

“Leave me there,” Sally said softly. “You get yourselves out, alright? You and Grover and Annabeth – you get them out.”

“Mom,” Percy said gently. “We’re right here. And I didn’t leave Grover behind either.”

‘Ah, the pearls … Only three … Try to take your mother then … And which of your friends will you leave behind to spend eternity with me?’

Athena glared at her uncle but said nothing, holding Annabeth close to her. Malcolm clung to his sister from her other side.

Go on. Choose. Or give me the backpack and accept my terms.’

“Do not give him the backpack,” Zeus said sternly.

“Father!” Athena snapped. “My daughter is down there; I would appreciate a little empathy.”

Hera snorted. “I’m not sure he knows the meaning of the word.”

… ‘We were tricked,’ I told them. ‘Set up.’

“Yeah, we had that by then,” Annabeth said.

… ‘Percy … you can’t give him the bolt … Leave me here.

“Absolutely not,” Sally said, squeezing Grover’s shoulder. “Thank you, but absolutely not.”

… Use the third pearl on your mom … I’m a satyr … We don’t have souls like humans do … I’ll just be reincarnated as a flower or something. It’s the best way.’

Katie choked back a sob and glanced at her mom, who nodded with a smile. Scrambling to her feet, she darted over to sit on Grover’s other side, hugging him.
‘No.’ Annabeth drew her bronze knife.

“Absolutely not!” Thalia said sharply, beating Athena to it, but she wasn’t the only one who had spoken.

She glanced over at Luke, who was staring at Annabeth in horror.

‘You two go on. Grover … You have to get your searcher’s licence and start your quest for Pan.

“That’s not as important as you two!” Grover cried.

… I’ll cover you. I plan to go down fighting.’

“Not yet, you’re not,” Thalia said, scowling.

… ‘Stop it, both of you!’ I felt like my heart was being ripped in two.

Percy groaned, rubbing his chest, which wasn’t easy with Annabeth curled against it, and Thalia still holding them and Nico in some semblance of a group hug.

A sudden weight on his feet made him peer over Annabeth’s head to see that Rachel had moved off the couch to sit on them.

She tilted her head back to look up at him. “I was feeling left out and Thalia’s out of arms.”

Annabeth loosed one hand and reached down to take hers, squeezing it.

… I had spent thousands of miles worried that I’d be betrayed by a friend …

“I’d forgotten about that part of the prophecy,” Michael said. “I guess it’s not either of those two.”

“I think it’s going to be me,” Luke said miserably.

Travis bumped his shoulder against his brother’s. “Lighten up, bro. You haven’t done this yet, and you’re not going to.”

“He’s right,” Thalia said. “Whatever happens, it’s not your fault.”

… but these friends would never do that.

“Best friends in the world,” Percy said firmly.

“Best family in the world,” Annabeth corrected with a smile.

They had done nothing but save me, over and over …

“You weren’t exactly idle on that quest,” Annabeth reminded him.

… and now they wanted to sacrifice their lives for my mom.

Sally stifled a sob. It wasn’t fair – they were just children. And okay, Grover was a lot older, but it was hard to remember that when he was right next to her, no bigger than Percy.

‘I know what to do,’ I said. ‘Take these.’
“Percy, don’t you dare stay there!” Sally protested.

Percy smiled sadly. “I’m not going to.”

Thalia sucked in a breath, tightening her hold on him. She knew how much he adored his mother (and she could hardly blame him for it); leaving her in the Underworld must have torn him apart.

… I turned and faced my mother … I knew what she would say … She would never forgive me if I saved her instead.

Sally breathed a sigh of relief into her son’s hair. “Good boy.”

I thought about the prophecy … You will fail to save what matters most in the end.

“Oh,” Silena whispered. “That’s what it was talking about. Not the master bolt.”

‘I’m sorry,’ I told her. ‘I’ll be back. I’ll find a way.’

“No, you won’t,” Sally said firmly.

The smug look on Hades’s face faded.

Persephone smiled. “You underestimated him.”

Hades sighed. “Apparently so.”

… ‘I’ll find your helmet, Uncle … I’ll return it. Remember about Charon’s pay raise.’

“Seriously?” Nico asked in disbelief.

Percy shrugged. “A promise is a promise.”

‘Do not defy me –’

‘And it wouldn’t hurt to play with Cerberus once in a while. He likes red rubber balls.’


… We smashed the pearls at our feet. For a scary moment, nothing happened.

Sally sucked in a breath and Amphitrite released Percy’s shoulder to squeeze hers. “It’s alright. They take a second or two to get going.

… Just as the skeletons opened fire, the pearl exploded … I was encased in a milky white sphere … Annabeth and Grover were right behind me.

Athena breathed a sigh of relief, loosening her grip on her daughter a little.

… Hades yelled with such rage … I knew it was not going to be a peaceful night in L.A.

Will frowned. “It wasn’t, from what I remember from the news. Wasn’t there an earthquake?”

“Yeah, there was,” Percy confirmed. “A big one.”

Persephone sighed. “You’re really not helping yourself, darling.”
‘Look up!’ Grover yelled. ‘We’re going to crash!’

Sure enough, we were racing right towards the stalactites, which I figured would pop our bubbles and skewer us.

“It’s alright,” Amphitrite said, over the cries of alarm. “The pearls will take them to safety.”

... We screamed as the bubbles slammed into the ceiling and ... Darkness.

“Oh gods, that’s weird,” Annabeth said.

Percy’s hold around her tightened, his vision going black as well. “Okay, we can’t see.”

Were we dead?

“You’d know if you were,” Luke said softly. His earlier horror had faded, but he was still watching them intently, his hands twitching like he wanted to grab Thalia and Annabeth in a hug and never let them go.

No, I could still feel the racing sensation.

Annabeth made a little noise of surprise, the feeling returning.

We were going up ... What belongs to the sea will always return to the sea.

“Is this a bad time to mention that I can’t swim?” Annabeth asked nervously.

“You’ll be fine, honey,” Thalia said, smiling over at her. “Percy won’t let you drown – either of you.”

For a few moments, I couldn’t see anything outside ... then my pearl broke through on the ocean floor.

Percy blinked, light flooding back. “Oh, hello.”

... we soared upward through the water. And ker-blam!

Annabeth gasped, cold water flooding over her – or rather, the sensation of it. Thalia certainly didn’t seem to notice it.

We exploded on the surface ... knocking a surfer off his board with an indignant, ‘Dude!”

Annabeth chuckled, shivering slightly. “I’d forgotten about him – who surfs in those conditions?”

“Surfers,” Will said with certainty. “Aren’t you a Cali girl?”

“I left when I was seven,” Annabeth reminded him. “And, sorry, aren’t you from Texas?”

“Mom’s band tours,” Will said. “I travelled.”

“You know, Will,” Thalia said, glancing at his past self. “I don’t think I’ve ever asked why you came to Camp so young.”

Will shrugged. “It’s the empathy. Some people can turn it on and off, but I can’t. It’s always there. The more people around me, the worse it gets. At Camp, it’s different. Something about the magic,
or the healing … I don’t know. But living in the mortal world was going to drive me mad. Thankfully, Mom knew what I was.”

“That sucks,” Thalia said quietly. “You still see her though, right?”

“Yeah, I visit home,” Will said. “It’d be nice if she could visit Camp, but, you know, no mortals.” He nodded to Connor, who found his place again.

I grabbed Grover and hauled him over to a lifebuoy. I caught Annabeth and dragged her over too.

Thalia smiled over at Annabeth. “See?”

A curious shark was circling us, a great-white about three metres long.

Sally almost cried out, but caught herself, remembering what had been said about no ocean creature harming Percy.

I said, ‘Beat it.’

The shark turned and raced away.

Travis grinned. “Awesome.”

The surfer screamed something about bad mushrooms and paddled away from us as fast as he could.

Annabeth giggled. “Thing is, the shark was already there, and we’d just popped up fully dressed, and Percy was completely dry. And that was what weirded him out.”

Somehow, I knew what time it was: early morning, June 21, the day of the summer solstice.

“First of all, how are you going to get the master bolt back to New York that quickly?” Lee asked worriedly. “Second of all, how did you know the date and the time?”

“I don’t know,” Percy admitted. “But when I’m in or on the sea, I know exactly where am, it wouldn’t surprise me if I know exactly when as well.”

In the distance, Los Angeles was on fire … There had been an earthquake, all right …

“And a host more spirits,” Persephone said tiredly.

… He was probably sending an army of the dead after me right now.


But at the moment, the Underworld wasn’t my biggest problem.

“Are you serious?” Michael asked incredulously. “How is that not your biggest problem?

I had to get to shore. I had to get Zeus’s thunderbolt back to Olympus.

“Yes, you do,” Zeus grumbled.

Most of all, I had to have a serious conversation with the god who’d tricked me.
“Watch it, kid,” Ares growled. “You’re making one huge accusation there.”

His aura washed over them.

Even as Hera scolded him, *Nico* and *Thalia* both flinched back, fighting the fury that rose up inside them.

They both knew this was *Percy’s* fight.

Tightening his grip on *Annabeth*, whose eyes were burning with righteous anger, *Percy* met his cousin’s eyes and smirked. “It’s not an accusation if it’s true.”

Chapter End Notes

A note about the 'spoiler alarm':
No, I wasn't planning on at the beginning of the story. I put it in because I have scenes planned for certain canon deaths (Lee and Silena to be precise) but I can't imagine the future demigods just keeping quiet and letting them find out through the books. Unless they had to. So the Fates are letting them say some things but not others. Percy (and Annabeth) letting slip that Luke was the thief had to happen when it did, so that everyone who didn't know could get used to it before he got outed in the book (and nearly killed Percy).

On another note: I have other readers planned. As I've said, Future!Will is not one of the three mentioned in Rachel's prophecy (mainly because I hadn't thought of him yet) and the three from the prophecy will not be the last. So my question is: who would you like to see? At some point, we will end up with the rest of the Seven, but I'm not telling you from when. So let me know in the comments if there's anyone else, other than Piper, Jason, Leo, Hazel, Frank or Reyna, that you'd like to see come in. The only person I don't foresee being included is Octavian. I know I've formed a redemption arc for Luke, but I like him.

Also, can someone tell me exactly when Hazel and Frank arrived at Camp Jupiter? I think they were both before Jason disappeared, but I can't work out exactly when. Also when does Percy disappear? I'm sure it was more than a few days before Piper, Leo and Jason get picked up in *TLH*, but I can't figure that one out either. Please and thank you :)
For a second, the room was silent.

Ares rose to his feet. “What did you just say?”

“Ares, sit down!” Hera said sharply.

“He has the right to be angry,” Zeus said, frowning. “That is an exceptional accusation …”

“One you would not even be questioning if it were one of us,” Apollo interrupted, getting to his feet.

The other gods had risen as well, sensing trouble. If Ares exploded, the demigods were not going to be safe.

“You sent us to search for the bolt,” Hermes said, shielding his sons. “You sent us out. Me, Apollo, Artemis, Athena, Ares – and he is the only one who would enjoy war between you.”

“Yes, but I didn’t know that,” Hermes said, taking a step towards them. “And you will leave my son out of this.”

“Enough,” Hestia interrupted, fire flickering in her gaze. “There will be no fighting in this throne room, Ares.”

Ares turned to face her, but the anger drained from him as soon as he met her eyes. “Yes Aunt Hestia.”

Hestia held his gaze for a little longer, then turned to Connor. The fire vanished to be replaced with her usual warmth. “Is that the end of the chapter?”

Connor nodded. “Y-yes, ma’am.”

“Then we shall take a break for dinner,” Hestia said.

No one really wanted to take a break, but no one was going to argue with her.

After she and Demeter had rustled up dinner, and everyone had, at the very least, attempted to eat something, Aphrodite reached into a cupboard and produced some of Sally’s cookies.

“I saved them earlier,” she said with a smile. “Don’t think you’d be up to making them now.”

“No, I’m not,” Sally said with a tremulous smile. “Thank you, Lady Aphrodite.”

“Oh, drop the ‘Lady’, sweetie,” Aphrodite said, with a wave of her hand as she handed the box to Annabeth. “It’s such a mouthful, otherwise.”

Hestia picked up the book and settled down. “I shall read the next chapter.”

“Probably a good idea,” Percy murmured to Annabeth, who nodded, passing the cookies on.

Chapter Twenty
I Battle My Jerk Relative

Ares scowled and grumbled, but Hera gave him a piercing stare and he stayed seated.

A Coast Guard boat picked us up …

“Thank goodness,” Annabeth whispered.

… but they were too busy to keep us … or to wonder how three kids in street clothes had got out into the middle of the bay.

“Did you have an excuse ready?” Hermes asked.

Percy sighed. “I don’t even know. I just remember being really angry, but at the same time …”

“Everything was falling into place,” Annabeth said. “Like pieces of a puzzle we hadn’t realised were missing.”

There was a disaster to mop up. Their radios were jammed with distress calls.

Amphitrite sighed. “I dread to think how many people died that day.”

They dropped us off at the Santa Monica pier … Our clothes were sopping wet, even mine.

Percy flinched as his clothes suddenly became drenched again. Annabeth just sighed. She was getting used to it.

When the Coast Guard boat had appeared … I’d willed myself to get soaked.

“Very smart,” Athena said with a small smile.

… I was also barefoot, because I’d given my shoes to Grover.

“Also a good idea,” Apollo said with a grin. “That would’ve been interesting.” He drew in a breath, and Artemis jumped in.

“No,” she said flatly. “No haikus.”

Apollo frowned. “Not even a little one?”

“They’re all little ones,” Artemis said tiredly. “Not now.”

Apollo turned to his sons. “I can tell you later, right?”

All three of them nodded hastily.

Better the Coast Guard wonder why one of us was barefoot than wonder why one of us had hooves.

Connor and Travis sniggered.

After reaching dry land, we stumbled down the beach, watching the city burn against a beautiful sunrise.

Silena sniffled a little. She had lived in L.A. when she was little.
So had Thalia – but she didn’t have quite as many nice memories of the place.

I felt as if I’d just come back from the dead – which I had.

“And it’s a weird feeling,” Percy said fervently.

My backpack was heavy … My heart was even heavier from seeing my mother.

Percy heaved a sigh, and Annabeth shifted into his lap again, curling up against his chest.

‘I don’t believe it,’ Annabeth said. ‘We went all that way –’

‘It was a trick,’ I said. ‘A strategy worthy of Athena.’

“Not an accusation,” Percy said hastily. “A comparison that was meant to be a compliment.”

‘Hey,’ she warned.

‘You get it, don’t you?’

She dropped her eyes, her anger fading. ‘Yeah, I do.’

No one said anything. They were all keeping a wary eye on Ares, especially the gods.

… ‘Percy …’ Annabeth said. ‘I’m sorry about your mother. I’m so sorry …’

Sally hugged her son close.

I pretended not to hear her. If I talked about my mother, I was going to start crying like a little kid.

Not even Clarisse laughed at that. Now they had all met Sally, not a single demigod in the room could blame him.

‘The prophecy was right,’ I said. “You shall go west and face the god who has turned.” But it wasn’t Hades.

“Finally,” Hades grumbled.

“Oh, hush, dear,” Persephone said wearily. “They know now.”

… Someone else pulled off the theft.

“Just not who I thought,” Percy admitted.

“Ha!” Ares said.

Percy rolled his eyes. “I said you didn’t steal it, not that you don’t have it.”

“Ares!” Hera warned. “Perseus, please stop antagonising him.”

Percy sighed, but nodded. “Of course, Lady Hera.”

Someone stole Zeus’s master bolt, and Hades’s helmet, and framed me because I’m Poseidon’s son … By sundown today, there will be a three-way war.
“Right, so get the master bolt back to New York!” Lee said.

“They can’t,” Luke said, his face ashen. “They need to get the helmet back first, or there’ll be war anyway.”

Lee glanced over at his best friend and their eyes met for the first time since Percy’s unintentional revelation. With a sigh, he reached over and clapped Luke on the shoulder. “We’ll fix this, buddy. We will.”

**And I’ll have caused it.**

“It wouldn’t be your fault,” Hera said with a sigh. “Sometimes I swear these three are just waiting for an excuse. I’ve never met three brothers who hate each other as much as they do.”

“We do not hate each other!” Three voices protested.

“Well,” Hera sniffed. “You have a strange way of showing it.”

Hestia cleared her throat.

**Grover shook his head, mystified. ‘But … Who would want war that bad?’**

**I stopped in my tracks … ‘Gee, let me think.’**

“Sarcasm does not become you,” Thalia said.

Percy snorted. “Says the girl who uses it as a second language.”

**There he was … ‘Hey, kid,’ Ares said, seeming genuinely pleased to see me. ‘You were supposed to die.’**

Poseidon glared at him.

“Hey, it said I was pleased to see him,” Ares reminded him.

“Yeah, why was that?” Thalia murmured.

“Probably because he could get the bolt back,” Percy answered under his breath.

‘You tricked me,’ I said. ‘You stole the helmet and the master bolt.’

Hera’s hand on her son’s shoulder kept him seated. Zeus had no such restraint.

“You dare accuse an Olympian of such treachery?”

“You’ve been accusing me for the last six months,” Poseidon reminded him.

“Gentlemen, please,” Hera said mildly, giving her son a deceptively sweet smile. “I am sure if Ares had been partly responsible, he would have confessed by now.”

Ares said nothing. Surely he wouldn’t have admitted it to the kid.

**Ares grinned. ‘Well, now, I didn’t steal them personally.’**

Even Hestia faltered. Whether she had previously believed Ares innocent, or had just assumed that he would never admit it, she gave no sign.
Thalia touched Aegis on her wrist, but didn’t expand it just yet. She had no idea how Ares would react – if he lashed out, it could go one of two ways: Percy or Luke.

The younger versions would be protected, and Percy would defend himself. But Luke …

He could. But he wouldn’t

Thalia was angry with him, but she didn’t want to see him get vaporised – even if Percy was right and the Fates would just reform him.

“Unbelievable,” Aphrodite said flatly.

Hermes laughed humourlessly and leaned over to Apollo, but didn’t bother lowering his voice. “Now watch Father make every excuse under the sun not to punish him.”


“I didn’t steal it!” Ares protested.

“But you didn’t return it,” Hera said sharply. “Either of them.”

Ares flinched and glanced at his uncle, who looked furious. “I can assure you, Hermes, if my brother does not, I will.”

“Stop,” Hestia said softly. “Let us finish first. At least then we will know the extent of it, since I do not believe Ares will tell us.”

Hestia’s quiet voice cut through the room, and seemed to have more of an effect on Ares than anyone’s anger.

God’s taking each other’s symbols of power … But you’re not the only hero in the world who can run errands.’

“I don’t understand,” Chris said, a little timidly. “I thought Luke was listening to … to … to …”

“Our not-so-friend way, way, way downstairs?” His father finished with a kind smile.


Ares didn’t answer.

“Maybe he found Luke and decided to take advantage of the situation,” Hephaestus said. “That sounds about right.”

He knew his wife’s anger wouldn’t last. She would be back in his bed before the week was out.

‘Who did you use? Clarisse? She was there at the winter solstice?’

“Leave me out of it,” Clarisse muttered, but she didn’t dare speak any louder.

The idea seemed to amuse him.

Clarisse scowled at her trainers. It didn’t matter what she did – her father refused to have any faith in her.

Not that she would have wanted to steal the master bolt or the helm of darkness – let alone both of
them – she did not have a death wish, thank you very much.

‘Doesn’t matter.

“I beg to differ,” Athena said, raising an eyebrow.

The point is, kid, you’re impeding the war effort.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Percy said under his breath.

Annabeth squeezed his hand, also feeling the second-hand ire rising in the air.

See, you’ve got to die in the Underworld.

Sally sucked in a breath, and Poseidon looked furious. “Touch my son, Ares …” Then Old Seaweed will be mad at Hades … Corpse Breath will have Zeus’s master bolt, so Zeus will be mad at him. And Hades is still looking for this …’

Hades growled deep in his throat. Persephone took his hand, looking just as angry.

From his pocket he took out a ski cap … and placed it between the handlebars … Immediately, the cap transformed into an elaborate bronze war helmet.

“I don’t like the idea of both of those weapons being in that situation,” Athena said immediately.

… ‘Now where was I? Oh yeah, Hades will be mad at both Zeus and Poseidon … Pretty soon, we got a nice little three-way slugfest going.’

“But this isn’t just a regular mortal war!” Aphrodite protested. “Those three get going, there’ll be nothing left!”

‘But they’re your family!’ Annabeth protested.

“Oh, like that means anything up here,” Ares grumbled.

Hestia fixed him with an exceptionally disappointed look. “It should.”

Ares shrugged. ‘Best kind of war. Always the bloodiest.

“That is true,” Thalia said quietly. “No one hurts you quite like the ones you love.”

Percy squeezed her hand.

Nothing like watching your relatives fight, I always say.’

Aphrodite pursed her lips, but said nothing.

‘You gave me the backpack in Denver,’ I said. ‘The master bolt was in there the whole time.’

“Percy, you know it wasn’t,” Thalia said, rolling her eyes. “You had to have seen inside it before then.”

‘Yes and no,’ Ares said. ‘It’s probably too complicated for your little mortal brain to follow …

“Then how do you understand it?” Hephaestus muttered.
Aphrodite gave a little cough that definitely, *definitely* wasn’t hiding a giggle.

*… but the backpack is the master bolt’s sheath …*

Now Hephaestus looked up, frowning. “In which case, the bolt should have been there all the time – it’s connected.”

*… The bolt is connected to it, sort of like that sword you got, kid. It always returns to your pocket, right?*

“How did you know that?” Poseidon asked slowly. “And don’t say one of your kids told you; Percy got that sword *as* he left Camp – they wouldn’t have known about it.”

Ares didn’t answer.

*I wasn’t sure how Ares knew … but I guess a god of war had to make it his business to know about weapons.*

“Not that specifically,” Hera said frowning.

‘Anyway,’ Ares continued. ‘I tinkered with the magic a bit … You get close to Hades … Bingo, you got mail.

“Okay, first of all,” Aphrodite said, “how?”

“What do you mean?” Ares asked.

“How did you tinker with the magic?” Aphrodite asked. “That’s not your department.”

“It’s more mine,” Hephaestus added. “And I certainly wouldn’t have helped you.”

“Secondly,” Aphrodite continued, “why? Why not just keep the master bolt? Hades already believed Percy had taken it, he didn’t need to see it. It’s not like you to give up a weapon like that.”

Ares hesitated for a second, long enough to cause his mother’s eyes to narrow with suspicion. “Look, I haven’t done this yet – how do I know what I’m thinking?”

*If you died along the way – no loss.*

Sally scowled, tightening her arm around her son.

*I still had the weapon.*

‘But why not just keep the master bolt for yourself?’ I said. ‘Why send it to Hades?’

“Exactly!” Aphrodite said, tossing her hair. “Maybe your future self can come up with a better answer.”

Ares got a twitch in his jaw. For a moment, it was almost as if he were listening to another voice, deep inside his head.

Hera closed her eyes. “So six months ago, you tracked down the master bolt, and before you could recover it, Kronos started speaking to you, convinced you to keep the master bolt and the helm of darkness and *send them down to him* in return for helping you start a war that would destroy the planet.”
Ares didn’t say anything.

“And you still won’t own up to it?” Hera shook her head and turned to were Hermes was sitting with his sons. “Luke, I would just like to commend you for having the decency and the bravery to come forward.”

Luke turned a little red and Hermes shifted so he was between his son and the firing line, muttering under his breath: “Please don’t draw attention to him right now.”

‘Why didn’t I … yeah … with that kind of fire-power …’

Aphrodite sighed. “I suppose we should feel grateful – he could have wreaked havoc with it.”

Ares scowled. “You’re supposed to be on my side!”

Aphrodite rolled her eyes. “You’re taking orders from Kronos, you won’t even admit it, and you expect me to be on your side?”

He held the trance … I exchanged nervous looks with Annabeth.

“I think we both knew by then that there was someone else involved,” Annabeth said.

Ares’s face cleared. ‘I didn’t want the trouble. Better to have you caught red-handed, holding the thing.’

“But you had it for six months before that,” Hera said. “The children must realise that.”

Ares was scowling at the floor, his temper emanating through the room.

Feeling Silena begin to squirm uncomfortably, Aphrodite hugged her daughter to her and let out a pulse-wave of her own, just enough to neutralise his, letting the demigods relax out of an agitated state they hadn’t even realised they had reached.

It was not enough, however, to counteract the effect the books were having on their future counterparts.

‘You’re lying,’ I said. ‘Sending the bolt to the Underworld wasn’t your idea, was it?’

Percy grimaced. He had been so fixated at the time by the truth unravelling before him that he had failed to notice the extent of the effect Ares was having on him. He squeezed Annabeth’s shoulder and pressed his mouth to her ear. “I love you, Wise Girl, but you may want to move.”

Annabeth nodded, sliding sideways out of his lap to squeeze in between him and Thalia.

… ‘You didn’t order the theft,’ I guessed. ‘Someone else sent a hero … That thing in the pit is ordering you around.’

“I don’t take orders!” Ares growled.

“Well, clearly, you do,” Hera said sharply. “We will talk about this later.”

“Dear, don’t you think …” Zeus began.

“What?” Hera asked. “Don’t I think we should talk about this now? Or don’t I think we should go easy on him? We will talk about this later, when the children aren’t here.”
‘I am the god of war! I take orders from no one! I don’t have dreams!’

“No one said anything about dreams,” Hermes said a little coldly. He knew full well that, without Thalia’s earlier intervention, Luke’s confession would have ended badly, even if he was being manipulated by Kronos (maybe even especially since he was being manipulated by Kronos).

But of course Ares would get away with barely a smack on the wrist.

**I hesitated. ‘Who said anything about dreams?’**

Will flinched, as Percy got another wave of second-hand anger. He was trying not to look at Lee and Michael, afraid that just seeing them again would cause him to break down.

He had been so young when this quest happened that he had never heard the whole story in the aftermath, but he did remember hearing a rumour that Ares had been involved in the theft.

What he didn’t remember was hearing about any kind of repercussions, which was frustrating, considering that when he left his father was facing an unknown punishment simply for being a convenient scapegoat.

Of course, it was possible he was missing something, and Apollo had done something else –but it certainly wasn’t going to be as bad as trying to give Kronos the master bolt.

**Ares looked agitated, but he tried to cover it with a smirk.**

‘Let’s get back to the problem at hand, kid.

“Let’s not,” Thalia muttered, wrapping an arm around Annabeth again as she nestled against her side.

**You’re alive.**

“Don’t you dare,” Poseidon growled.

**I can’t have you taking that bolt to Olympus. You might just get those hard-headed idiots to listen to you.**

Zeus’s scowl deepened. “Perseus, do you happen to know what punishment Ares received?” Percy hesitated. “Uh, actually, Lord Zeus, I don’t remember hearing of one. Then again … you didn’t believe Kronos was involved, so it’s possible you …” He broke off, grimacing as Ares’s ire washed over him.

Hermes and Apollo exchanged a glance and a silent agreement.

**So I’ve got to kill you. Nothing personal.’**

Amphitrite hastily rose from her seat to meet her husband’s ire head-on. “Remember, dear. Percy is seated right there in front of us. Someone must intervene on his behalf.”

“Yes, but who?” Athena asked. “We are forbidden from intervening.”

**He snapped his fingers … out charged a wild boar … waiting for the command to kill.**

Clarisse shrank into herself, trying to avoid the eyes of her fellow campers. Sure, she was angry with Prissy, especially after the toilet stunt, but she didn’t want him dead!
Someone touched her hand and she started, looking up to see Silena giving her a trembling smile. The other girl patted the seat beside her and Clarisse hesitated for only a second, before shifting over, the movement hardly noticed with everyone staring at the book in Hestia’s hands.

Silena’s smile brightened. She knew better than to attempt any further physical comfort, but at least Clarisse wasn’t alone now.

**I stepped into the surf. ‘Fight me yourself, Ares.’**

There was a sharp intake of breath, like the entire room had decided to inhale at once. Yesterday – even this morning – Clarisse would have laughed, mocked Percy – either of them – for challenging a god – her father.

But now – her father was helping Kronos, trying to bring about the war to end all wars – and Clarisse liked a good fight as much as anybody, but the kind of havoc that would bring was above even her palate.

Not to mention the fact that Ares had been very cold towards her. At least it wasn’t just her. She knew he was like that with all his kids – at least, all the ones she knew – but it had never bothered her before.

But it would have been nice to have her parent back her up, the way Hermes was doing with Luke, especially when everything she had done thus far was nowhere near as bad as what Luke had done.

So, yes, she was kind of hoping Prissy would kick his butt.

“Percy,” Thalia murmured, “you did know what you were doing, didn’t you?”

Percy glanced at her. “I’m challenging a god to a fight. What do you think?”

“I think you’re nuts,” Thalia said honestly. “And I’d have backed you up.”

**He laughed, but I heard a little edge to his laughter … an uneasiness.**

“Scared?” Hephaestus asked with a smirk.

Ares scowled. “You wish.”


“Kronos didn’t want you dead yet,” Luke answered. “Or, at least, he didn’t want Lord Ares to kill you. I don’t know why.”

‘You’ve only got one talent, kid, running away.

“I prefer to call them strategic retreats,” Percy muttered.

... You don’t have what it takes.’

‘Scared?’

“Please don’t antagonise him,” Amphitrite said, having urged her husband back into his seat. She was perched on the arm of his throne, holding his hand, but her eyes were fixed on Percy and Sally.

‘In your adolescent dreams.’ But his sunglasses were starting to melt from the heat of his eyes.
“That’s just as likely to be anger,” Aphrodite warned.

‘No direct involvement.

“And what do you call a giant boar?” Apollo asked.

“A loophole,” Ares shot back. “You’re good at those as well.”

Sorry, kid. You’re not at my level.’

Annabeth said, ‘Percy, run!’

Annabeth flinched against Thalia, remembering the wave of fear that had washed over her.

… But I was done running from monsters. Or Hades, or Ares, or anybody.

Percy’s face darkened.

As the boar rushed me … Riptide appeared in my hands. I slashed upwards.

“Come on,” Lee murmured under his breath.

The boar’s severed right tusk fell at my feet, while the disoriented animal charged into the sea.

A little cheer went up among some of the campers.

I shouted, ‘Wave!’

Nico chuckled under his breath. “Brilliant.”

Okay, so even when he acknowledged that Percy was a bit of an idiot, he had his moments as a hero.

Immediately, a wave surged up from nowhere and engulfed the boar … Then it was gone, swallowed by the sea.

Another cheer, but this one was muted by the fury beginning to burn in Ares’s eyes.

I turned back to Ares. ‘Are you going to fight me now?’ I asked. ‘Or are you going to hide behind another pet pig?’

A few people sucked in a breath. Aphrodite fixed her eyes on Ares and shifted in her seat, releasing her hold on Silena.

She caught Apollo’s eye and he shook his head, before looking meaningfully at his sons.

She nodded, relaxing back with her daughter, a silent agreement made.

Ares’s face was purple with rage. ‘Watch it, kid. I could turn you into –’

‘A cockroach,’ I said. ‘Or a tapeworm. Yeah, I’m sure. That’d save you from getting your godly hide, whipped, would it?’

Ares pushed away his mother’s hand and rose to his feet with a snarl. In a flash, Aphrodite, Hermes and Apollo were on their feet as well.
The love goddess planted herself in front of the campers, her aura expanding to shield them from any backlash.

Apollo and Hermes both vanished entirely to reappear in front of Percy and the others.

“Go ahead!” Apollo said. “We’ll see what happens!”


“We’re not allowed to intervene,” Apollo finished, rolling his eyes. “Look, that wasn’t a fair fight. And,” he continued, over his father’s protests, “we’re not allowed to intervene in our own kids’ lives. Percy isn’t ours. And that,” he smirked at Ares, “is a loophole.”

“He does have a point,” Hera admitted.

“For the record,” Hermes said to Percy, “we do have faith in you. But just because you can do something doesn’t mean you should have to.”

Percy gave him a small smile. “Thank you.”

“All the same, boys, sit down,” Hestia said firmly. “There will be no fighting in this room.”

Hermes and Apollo hesitated, but Hera and Zeus both had a tight hold on Ares’s shoulders, so they returned to their seats, Apollo squeezing Aphrodite’s hand as he passed. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” Aphrodite said, settling back beside her daughter.

Flames danced … ‘Oh, man, you are really asking to be smashed into a grease spot.’

Sally swallowed hard, gripping her son tightly.

‘If I lose, turn me into anything you want. Take the bolt. If I win, the helmet and the bolt are mine and you have to go away.’

“That’s quite a gamble,” Persephone warned.

“I know,” Percy admitted. “But I was running out of options. And time.”

… He swung the baseball bat off his shoulder. ‘How would you like to get smashed: classic or modern?’

“You’ll have better luck with a sword,” Thalia said, her voice tense. “But you really haven’t had that much training.”

“That’s not strictly true,” Percy said. “Luke practically ran me into the ground before I left. You did say that kind of training would come in handy, remember?”

Thalia frowned. “Well, yes, but … against a god?”

Percy shrugged, unable to say anything more.

… The baseball bat changed into a huge, two-handed sword … ‘Percy,’ Annabeth said. ‘Don’t do this. He’s a god.’

“Unfortunately, Percy’s right,” Rachel said. After dinner, she had returned to her seat next to Nico, and was once again doodling patterns on to her jeans. “He doesn’t have a choice.”
‘He’s a coward,’ I told her.

“Leave him,” Hera said sharply.

She swallowed. ‘Wear this, at least. For luck.’

She took off her necklace … and tied it around my neck.

Aphrodite made a little cooing noise. Annabeth had gone bright red.

‘Reconciliation,’ she said. ‘Athena and Poseidon together.’

Percy took a deep breath in. “Huh. It’s gone.”

“What’s gone?” Annabeth asked.


“Oh, that’s so sweet,” Aphrodite said with a smile. “That, or it’s because you’re confronting your anger instead of trying to ignore it.”

My face felt a little warm …

“You were bright red,” Annabeth advised him.

Percy sighed. “Thanks for not mentioning it at the time, I guess.”

… but I managed a smile. ‘Thanks.’

‘And take this,’ Grover said. He handed me a flattened tin can that he’d probably been saving … for a thousand miles. ‘The satyrs stand behind you.’

Sally gave Grover a smile, tucking both of them, demigod and satyr, close to her sides.

… ‘You all done saying goodbye? … I’ve been fighting for eternity, kid. My strength is unlimited and I cannot die. What have you got?’

“He’s got a point,” Silena said in a small voice.

Aphrodite pressed a kiss to her forehead. “It will be alright.” She looked over her daughter’s head at Clarisse and held out a hand to her in offering.

Clarisse hesitated, but took it, accepting a small piece of comfort.

A smaller ego, I thought …

Apollo sniggered.

… but I said nothing.

“Smart boy,” Artemis said, also grinning, although she was concerned.

Men and boys were, for the most part, below her notice entirely. She found them arrogant, hard-headed, convinced of their own gods-given right to control everything around them.

She had rarely met any of Apollo’s sons and those she had did nothing to sway her opinion. These
three, however – Lee, Michael and Will – they had certainly been courteous enough – enough so that she might even think about helping them out if they were away from camp and her brother was unable to.

Percy too – both of them – were not what she expected. She suspected they had Sally to thank for that.

Children of the Big Three tended to have their own faults – hubris was a big one – but Percy … and Thalia as well, now she thought about it, carried themselves differently.

Yes, they had the easy confidence that came with the power they possessed, but they both had something else, something that countered that and kept arrogance at bay.

Percy was modest – he had described his fatal flaw as personal loyalty – and Artemis could easily believe that, if asked, he would ascribe every single one of his heroics to the people around him – and probably shoulder the blame for every single one of his failures at the same time.

By contrast, Thalia seemed to possess an instinctive need to protect and nurture – something that would certainly make her an interesting lieutenant, but would also limit her time in the hunt.

Artemis still did not know why Thalia had taken the oath – although she was certain Luke had something to do with it – but she was also certain that the girl would not be able to stand by and watch as Annabeth, Percy, and the rest of her adopted family grew old and died while she stayed forever young.

Still, she would cross that bridge when she came to it.

In the meantime, if Thalia’s way of coping was to go into – what was it Will called it? – ‘Mama Bear mode’ … Well, there were certainly less healthy coping mechanisms.

I kept my feet in the surf, backing into the water up to my ankles.

“Good, now stay there,” Amphitrite said.

“It’s not going to be that easy,” Aphrodite said reluctantly. “Ares knows Percy’s strongest in the water. He’ll want to keep him away from it.”

… Even strength has to bow to wisdom sometimes.

Annabeth beamed at him. “Aww, you do listen to me!”

“Of course I listen to you,” Percy said. “You’re the smartest person I know; I’m not stupid.”

He cleaved downward at my head …

Sally stifled a scream.

… but I wasn’t there.

Sally breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh thank goodness.”

“Come on, Mom, give me some credit,” Percy said. “Will, is there anything in that bag for hysteria?”

Will took a look. “That will work on mortals? I do have something, but the more it’s used, the less it works, and you and I both know things are going to get worse.”
My body thought for me. The water seemed to push me into the air and I catapulted over him … the strike that should’ve caught him directly in the spine was deflected off the end of his sword hilt.

“Close,” Luke said. “But now he’s between you and the ocean, which is not really what you want.”

… He slashed again and I was forced to jump onto dry land.

“It will be alright,” Amphitrite said soothingly. “The ocean’s still right there. Percy doesn’t need to be in it to control it.”

I tried to sidestep … but Ares seemed to know what I wanted. He outmanoeuvred me …

“Obviously,” Ares muttered under his breath with a smirk.

… His sword had a reach a metre longer than Anaklusmos.


“I know,” Percy said. “I did listen to you occasionally, too.”

_Get in close, Luke had told me once … When you’ve got the shorter blade, get in close._

“Not the easiest thing to do,” Apollo said, “but good advice.”

_I stepped inside … but Ares was waiting for that. He knocked my blade out of my hands and kicked me in the chest._

Percy cried out in pain, doubling over.

Will reached over and grabbed his shoulder, grimacing when he did. “I thought we were just getting the pain, no actual injuries?”

“It started off as just the sensations,” Thalia said, “but Percy’s bled before now. What’s wrong with him?”

“Two cracked ribs,” Will said, gently nudging Percy to sit back. “I don’t think …” He felt down Percy’s side, expertly avoiding pressing on the broken bones. “No, they’re not not threatening the lungs at the moment, so I’m not too worried … Dad, can I risk ambrosia?”

“I don’t know,” Apollo admitted. “Normally, I’d say no, because it’s just the symptoms, not the injuries, but … they’re definitely broken?”

Will frowned, and felt again. This time, he pressed down a little and Percy sucked in a breath, for effect rather than actual pain.

“Yeah, definitely broken,” Will said. “So, Percy, that thing we talked about, how you dealt with … everything.”

_Percy_ glanced at him. “You mean mine and Nico’s brilliant plan to keep me alive? Yeah, what about it?”

“Sorry, _our_ brilliant plan?” Nico asked. “I think you’ll find it was my brilliant plan.”

“How’s that working out here?” Will asked.

“Well, it …” Percy grimaced. “It’s hard to answer that in words they’ll let me say.”

“Books are; we’re not?” Will guessed.

“Yeah, something like that,” Percy agreed, “which is weird.”

“Very,” Will agreed. “Anyway, his ribs are definitely broken. Can he have ambrosia?”

“I’m alright,” Percy protested.

Will rolled his eyes. “You won’t be if that rib does shift and you end up with something getting punctured.”

Apollo hid a smile. “Try a small piece – it should be alright.”

Will sighed in relief and handed Percy a small square, which he nibbled on a little reluctantly.

“You know it’ll heal up once I hit the water,” Percy said.

“Shut up and eat it,” Will said firmly.

Percy tutted. “Your bedside manner’s deteriorated.”

“Only with difficult patients,” Will said, rolling his eyes. “I just happen to have a lot of them.”

I went airborne …

Percy flinched. “Okay, maybe the ambrosia was a good idea.”

… I would’ve broken my back if I hadn’t crashed into the soft sand of a dune.

Percy grunted with the impact, but that was all.

Poseidon was vibrating with rage, Amphitrite’s hand on his chest the only thing restraining him from attacking his nephew.

‘Percy!’ Annabeth yelled. ‘Cops!’

Lee cursed under his breath. “Di Immortales, that’s all you need!”

“Think Percy can spin it so he’s the victim?” Michael asked.

I was seeing double.

Percy’s head swam, and he let out a small groan.

My chest felt like it had just been hit with a battering ram, but I managed to get to my feet.

Leaning against Annabeth, Percy rubbed his chest, breathing heavily. He’d forgotten how winded he was.

I couldn’t look away … I saw red lights flashing … Car doors were slamming.

“Better wrap this up quickly,” Athena said quietly. “Think smarter.”
… A gruff cop voice: ‘Looks like that kid on TV … what the heck …’

‘That guy’s armed,’ another cop said. ‘Call for backup.’

“That won’t help them,” Aphrodite murmured.

“At least they arrived when Percy wasn’t armed,” Apollo said. “Now he looks like the victim. He should be able to spin that.”

**I rolled to one side as Ares’s blade slashed the sand.**

Seeing Sally’s increasing distress, Will gave in and rummaged through his bag for a small bottle of pills. He shook out a couple into his palm and offered them to Sally. “Here. It’s a very mild sedative.”

“I didn’t know sedatives came in pill form,” Sally said.

“Normally, they don’t,” Will admitted. “We developed these last year after the number of demigods having panic attacks increased. Most of them could be settled, but those that couldn’t … Well, it was easier to give them a pill rather than run all over the infirmary with shots. You know how difficult it is to get a needle into someone who thinks they’re under attack?”

“I hadn’t thought about it,” Sally admitted, taking the pills. “Thank you.”

A glass of water appeared on the coffee table in front of her, and she swallowed the pills, immediately feeling herself relax.

“Oh wow,” she said. “These are amazing.”

Will grinned. “Yeah, I know. But you can’t take more than two in a twenty-four hour period.”

Sally smiled at him. “I don’t think I’ll need another dose, dear; don’t worry.”

**I ran for my sword, scooped it up …**

_Thalia_ breathed a small sigh of relief.

… and launched a swipe … only to find my blade deflected again.

Ares was openly smirking now. There was no way he was going to be beaten, although why he was merciful enough to leave the boy alive was beyond him.

**Ares seemed to know exactly what I was going to do the moment before I did it.**

“You’re projecting,” Luke said. “It’s kind of easy to guess. Plus, he’s the god of war, so it’s kind of his job to know.”

“Thanks,” Percy said, rolling his eyes. “You know this has already happened, right?”

**I stepped back towards the surf, forcing him to follow.**

“Well, I like those odds better,” Amphitrite said.

… My senses were working overtime … I was wide awake, noticing every little detail.

“It is strange,” Thalia conceded.
I could see where Ares was tensing. I could tell which way he would strike.

Hephaestus smirked. “Apparently, Percy’s not the only one projecting.”

Ares glared at him.

At the same time … I saw a second cop car pulling up … There were shimmering forms of spirits, too … I heard the flap of leathery wings circling somewhere above.

“Oh no,” Silena gasped. “That’s all he needs!”

Nico shook his head. “No, they won’t do anything. They’ll have followed him from the Underworld. My guess is they heard the whole thing. They won’t interfere either way, not yet.”

… I stepped further into the water … The tip of his blade ripped my sleeve and grazed my forearm.

Percy jerked back on instinct.

“It didn’t draw blood,” Annabeth said quickly. “It’s not over yet.”

A police voice on a megaphone said, ‘Drop the guns! Set them on the ground. Now!’

“Is that the mist?” Chris asked.

Hermes nodded. “Yeah, the mortals aren’t expecting to see swords, so they don’t.”

… I looked at Ares’s weapon, and it seemed to be flickering.

“Does the mist still work on demigods then?” Sally asked.

“We can see through it,” Thalia said. “But if we know what mortals are seeing, we can see that as well.”

… I didn’t know what the humans were seeing in my hands, but I was pretty sure it wouldn’t make them like me.

“Play the self-defence card,” Hermes said. “You’re just a kid and he’s an adult.”

Ares turned to glare at our spectators … There were five police cars now, and a line of officers crouching behind them, pistols trailed on us.

Hera frowned. She could only hope that Ares dealt with that sensibly.

… He swept his hand, and a wall of red flame rolled across the patrol cars.

Hera rolled her eyes. “You could have manipulated the Mist, but no.”

The police barely had time to dive for cover before their vehicles exploded.

“At least they did get to cover,” Sally murmured, now much more relaxed.

The crowd behind them scattered, screaming.

“I wonder how many of them could see what was really going on,” Katie said softly.
Her mother patted her hand. “Hopefully not too many.”

**Ares roared with laughter. ‘Now, little hero. Let’s add you to the barbecue.’**

“He is right there,” Amphitrite repeated, struggling to hold her husband back.

... I got close enough to strike, tried to fake him out … but my blow was knocked aside.

“Come on,” Thalia murmured. “You’re in your element now.”

... I felt the rhythm of the sea … and suddenly I had an idea. *Little waves*, I thought.

Amphitrite smiled, finally feeling Poseidon relax.

**And the water behind me seemed to recede.**

“It did,” Annabeth said. “It was amazing to watch, actually.”

**I was holding back the tide by force of will …**

“You will not be able to hold it for long,” Poseidon said, “so act quickly.”

Percy smiled. “Already happened, Dad.”

... but tension was building … Ares came towards me, grinning confidently.

“Strength will always bow to wisdom in the end,” Athena said with a smile.

I lowered my blade … I released the tide and jumped, rocketing straight over Ares on a wave.

“You’ll need a little more than that,” Aphrodite cautioned.

**A two-metre wall of water smashed him full in the face …**

Aphrodite didn’t bother hiding her smile. “That’ll do it.”

... I landed behind him with a splash and feinted towards his head, as I’d done before.

“He’ll see that coming,” Hermes said.

Apollo was grinning. “No, he won’t.”

**He turned in time to raise his sword, but … he didn’t anticipate the trick.**

Travis’s mouth fell open. “No way …”

**I changed direction, lunged to the side and stabbed Riptide straight down into the water, sending the point through the god’s heel.**

“Wait!” Hera said quickly, before anyone could react. “Percy must draw blood to win.”

**The roar that followed made Hades’s earthquake look like a minor event.**

“Great,” Hades muttered. “Another influx.”

... Ichor, the golden blood of the gods, flowed from a gash in the war god’s boot.
“He actually did it,” Connor whispered. “He won.”

After a beat of shocked silence, a cheer went up.

It stopped almost immediately, terrified of Ares’s reaction.

His parents’ hands pinning him in place, Ares did the only thing he could think of. Forcing a painful smile, he managed half a nod at Percy. “Well played, kid.”

Apollo and Hermes, both of whom had poised to intervene again, relaxed.

**The expression on his face was beyond hatred … pain, shock, complete disbelief that he’d been wounded.**

“Well, it is rather embarrassing,” Hephaestus muttered.

Aphrodite hushed him, more out of concern for Percy’s well-being than any kind of disagreement.

**He limped towards me, muttering ancient Greek curses.**

Poseidon tensed once more. “He won fair and square, Ares.”

“I haven’t done this yet!” Ares protested.

**Something stopped him.**

“Finally,” Amphitrite muttered. “An intervention.”

**It was as if a cloud covered the sun, but worse.**

“Or maybe not,” she amended, her face whitening.

Hestia’s voice shook as she read.

… A cold heavy presence passed over the beach … making me feel like life was hopeless, fighting was useless.

*Percy* drew in a raspy breath, tugging *Annabeth* closer. “Did you …?”

“I felt it too,” *Annabeth* whispered. “Like I would never be happy again.”

“Is that …?” Apollo asked.

“Yes,” Hera said stiffly. “That’s him.”

… *Ares looked stunned.*

“I think,” *Percy* said, “that was the moment he realised he’d been had.”

**Police cars were burning … The crowd of spectators had fled … Ares lowered his sword.**

Amphitrite rubbed her husband’s shoulder, feeling the tension recede once more.

“You have made an enemy, godling … every time you hope for success, you will feel my curse. *Thalia* frowned. “How … But you’re okay?”
Percy shrugged. He had realised pretty early on that the curse only worked when he thought about it.

“That’s quite mild for you,” Aphrodite commented.

“Mild?” Poseidon repeated.

“Yes, mild,” Aphrodite said. “He doesn’t even say what curse it is. It relies solely on Percy remembering he’s been cursed. My guess is that Percy’s right – he realised he was being manipulated and needed to get out of the situation quickly.”

… Beware, Perseus Jackson. Beware.’

… I turned away as the god Ares revealed his true immortal form.

Hera frowned at her son. “You should warn them before you do that.”

I somehow knew that if I looked, I would disintegrate into ashes.

“Thank goodness for demigod awareness,” Athena said. “Some things you just instinctively know.”

… The tide rolled out to reveal Hades’s bronze helmet of darkness.

Hades breathed a sigh of relief. At least Ares had kept the deal.

I picked it up … Three evil-looking grandmothers … drifted down from the sky and landed in front of me.

“Will they attack?” Sally asked.

“No,” Nico said. “You’d know if that was it. Also, those pills are incredible.”

Will smiled. “Thanks.”

The middle Fury, the one who had been Mrs Dodds …

Nico sighed. “I give up.”

… stepped forward … She looked more disappointed, as if she’d been planning to have me for supper, but had decided I might give her indigestion.

Now the threat of Ares had passed, the campers felt safe enough to laugh.

‘We saw the whole thing,’ she hissed. ‘So … it truly was not you?’

Persephone relaxed into her throne. “That should stop the war.”

I tossed her the helmet … ‘Return that to Lord Hades,’ I said.

“Thank you,” Hades said.

Percy nodded. “Of course.”

… ‘Live well, Percy Jackson. Become a true hero. Because if you do not, if you ever come into my clutches again …’
She cackled, savouring the idea.

_Nico_ nodded. “Yeah, she likes you.”

“I’m flattered,” _Percy_ muttered.

Then _she and her sisters … fluttered into the smoke-filled sky and disappeared._

“Well, that makes me feel better,” Sally murmured.

… ‘Percy …’ _Grover_ said. ‘That was incredibly …’

‘Terrifying,’ said _Annabeth_.

_Percy_ pressed a kiss to her head.

‘Cool!’ _Grover_ corrected.

“I’m with him!” The _Stolls_ chorused.

… _I was tired and sore and completely drained of energy._

_Percy_ sighed. “Alright, I’m going to say it now. I hate my head.”

_Thalia_ laughed, reaching over _Annabeth_ to ruffle his hair. “We’ve all got to deal with it.”

‘Did you guys feel that … whatever it was?’ _I_ asked.

“Don’t think they could have missed it,” Hermes muttered.

… ‘Must’ve been the _Furies_ overhead,’ _Grover_ said.

“Points for optimism, buddy,” Michael said.

But _I wasn’t so sure. Something had stopped_ Ares _from killing me, and whatever could do that was a lot stronger than the _Furies._

“It is,” _Zeus_ said darkly. “I presume you did warn us.”

_Percy_ opened his mouth and paused. “I really can’t say, Lord Zeus. But I will say that I am not stupid.”

_I looked at Annabeth, and an understanding passed between us._

“You knew,” Athena stated.

“We did,” _Annabeth_ said.

_I knew now what was in that pit … I reclaimed my backpack … The master bolt was still in there._

“Alright,” _Thalia_ said, “so how are you going to get that back to New York? It was the summer solstice.”

_Such a small thing to almost cause World War III._
“Small?” Zeus repeated, offended.

“Leave it,” Hera said tiredly.

‘We have to get back to New York,’ I said. ‘By tonight.’

“Again,” Thalia said, “how?”

‘That’s impossible,’ Annabeth said, ‘unless we –’

‘Fly,’ I agreed.

“But you can’t!” Amphitrite protested.

“Well, I was hoping that Lord Zeus would realise that I was trying to get the master bolt back to him and let it go just this once,” Percy said.

She stared at me. ‘Fly, like, in an aeroplane, which you were warned never to do … and carrying a weapon that has more destructive power than a nuclear bomb?’

“You make that sound like a bad idea,” Nico said flatly. “On saying that, I was born in Venice, so I’m not one hundred per cent sure how we got over here. Boat, I assume.”

“You don’t remember?” Lee asked curiously.

“No, I …” Nico trailed off, then rolled his eyes. “I can’t tell you. Even though I’m sure I mentioned it earlier.”

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘Pretty much exactly like that. Come on.’

Hestia turned the page. “That’s the end of the chapter.”

Hera held out her hand. “I will read the next one.”

Zeus cleared his throat. “Dear, don’t you think …?”

“We will speak to Ares later, while the children are not here,” Hera said firmly. “Hestia?”

Hestia smiled, handing her the book. “Of course, sister.”
So here we are, once again. I feel I should give some more background as to the reason behind the frequent long gaps between chapters, as the general opinion seems to be that all fanfic authors have hours of free time in which to write:
I am 26 years old and I work 9-5 at a finance company. At present I have five works in progress that demand immediate attention and a number of others that are currently on hiatus until I have time to write them. I also have an original work that I hope to finish and publish. If I get writers' block in my free time, I'm probably not writing that day. Couple this with the aforementioned anxiety, and you can begin to see the issue.

I was hoping I could get this story finished before the New Year, but that is unlikely, unless I manage to write the next chapter before tomorrow.
In case I don't, I wish you all a happy - and safe - new year, and I will see you all in 2018!

Hera turned to the next chapter.

Chapter Twenty One

I Settle My Tab

“I’m worried about how they’re going to get home,” Amphitrite said. “Quite aside from the flying aspect, how are they going to afford it?”

“Well, Gabe helped,” Percy admitted.

“Really?” Sally asked, surprised.

Percy grinned. “Not intentionally.”

It’s funny how humans can wrap their mind around things and fit them into their version of reality.

“Thank goodness for that,” Demeter said, “or the Mist would not work quite as well.”

Chiron had told me that … As usual, I didn’t appreciate his wisdom until much later.

Chiron smiled. “I find that with most demigods.”

According to the L.A. news, the explosion … had been caused when a crazy kidnapper fired a shotgun at a police car … This crazy kidnapper (a.k.a Ares) …

Apollo sniggered.

… was the same man who abducted me and two other adolescents in New York …

“Of course he was,” Aphrodite said with a mischievous smile.
… Poor little Percy Jackson wasn’t an international criminal, after all.

Sally breathed a sigh of relief, pressing a kiss to her son’s head.

… The crazy man had caused the explosion in the St Louis Arch … Finally, brave Percy Jackson (I was beginning to like this kid) …

A few people chuckled and Travis reached over to give Percy a high five.

… had stolen a gun from his captor in Los Angeles … Police had arrived just in time … No fatalities occurred.

The rest of what little tension had built in Sally’s body after the pills bled out.

… The reporters fed us this whole story. We just nodded and acted tearful and exhausted …

“Acted?” Annabeth asked. “Who was acting?”

… (which wasn’t hard), and played victimized kids for the cameras.

“Again, that wasn’t an act,” Annabeth said, shivering a little.

“You cold, sweets?” Thalia asked.

“No, just …” Annabeth took a deep breath. “It’s weird. We’re not getting the adrenaline from the books, but I’m definitely remembering what it felt like when it disappeared.”

‘All I want,’ I said, choking back my tears, ‘is to see my loving stepfather again.

Percy snorted. “Yeah, right.”

“No, it’s genius,” Luke said, brightening up. “All those people – someone’s bound to offer to pay for you to get home.”

… I know he’ll want to reward each and every person in this beautiful city … with a free major appliance from his store. Here’s the phone number.’

“Percy!” Sally chided, although it wasn’t amazingly effective through giggles.

The police and reporters were so moved that they passed around the hat and raised money for three tickets on the next plane to New York.

Hera paused, giving her husband a stern look. “You had better let him get here safely.”

Zeus sighed. “Dear, I can’t possibly guess – this hasn’t happened yet.”

I knew there was no choice … But it was still hard to force myself to board the flight.

“I’m not surprised,” Amphitrite said.

… Every spot of turbulence was scarier than a Greek monster.

“For you and me both,” Annabeth said, squeezing his hand

I didn’t unclench my hands from the armrests until we touched down safely at La Guardia.
Percy grimaced, flexing his fingers.

… We split up at the taxi stand.

“Split up?” Lee repeated.

“I really wasn’t sure what was going to happen when I reached Olympus,” Percy said.

I told Annabeth and Grover to … let Chiron know what had happened … if the gods didn’t believe me … I wanted Annabeth and Grover to survive to tell Chiron the truth.

Hera frowned, her hand still clamped on Ares’s shoulder. Obviously her husband had stayed his hand, or Percy would not be here – but would he believe him?

Would Ares risk lying to his father to cover up what he’d done?

If he hadn’t, would Zeus believe that Kronos was involved, or would he doom them all by hoping it would all blow over?

… I walked into the lobby of the Empire State Building. I must have looked like a homeless kid, with my tattered clothes and my scraped-up face.

“I think the guard’s used to it,” Annabeth said.

I hadn’t slept in at least twenty-four hours.

Percy yawned widely, which triggered a mini-run of yawns in the people beside him.

“I wasn’t even there!” Thalia protested, once she’d finished.

“Neither was I,” Rachel said, pulling the pillow back into her lap as Will swayed a little dangerously next to her.

I went up to the guard at the front desk and said, ‘Six hundredth floor.’

Sally pulled a face. “Was that a good idea?”

“There’s always someone there who knows,” Hermes assured her. “Clear-sighted mortal, demigod, minor god – something.”

… ‘I need an audience with Zeus.’ … I was about to decide this guy was just a regular mortal, and I’d better run for it before he called the straightjacket patrol …

“The mist will cover you,” Hermes added.

“Besides, he’d assume it was a bad prank before he assumed you were mad,” Annabeth said.

… when he said, ‘No appointment, no audience, kiddo. Lord Zeus doesn’t see anyone unannounced.’

“Oh, I think he will this time,” Athena said.

… I slipped off my backpack and unzipped the top … ‘That isn’t …’

“You must have given him a heart attack,” Thalia remarked.
“I really don’t care,” Percy admitted. “I was tired, I was cranky, everything ached …” He paused thoughtfully. “I’m actually amazed I wasn’t vaporised anyway.”

‘Yes, it is,’ I promised. ‘You want me to take it out and –’

‘No! No!’

There were a few snorts of laughter, but everyone was too on edge. What would Zeus do when he found out about Ares and Kronos?

… He … fumbled around his desk for a key card … As soon as the elevator doors closed, I slipped the key into the slot … a new button appeared … a red one that said 600.

… Muzak played. ‘Raindrops keep falling on my head …’

Artemis sighed. “We need to change that.”

“I like that song,” Apollo protested.

Artemis rolled her eyes. “No, you don’t. You pretend you do, because you know it irritates me.”

“And that’s why I like it,” Apollo said with a grin.

Finally, ding. The doors slid open. I stepped out and almost had a heart attack.

Percy yelped, grabbing his chest. “Almost!”

“Are you okay?” Annabeth asked, although her giggles probably didn’t help.

“You’re so nice to me,” Percy muttered, putting an arm around her as she nestled into his side again.

I was standing on a narrow stone walkway …

Hera read through the description of Olympus, smiling a little at the boy’s disbelief. She supposed Olympus would be an incredible sight to behold to a mortal who had never seen it before, even a demigod who could comprehend what they were seeing.

Amazingly, no one interrupted her; no one answered the rhetorical questions about how Olympus could be there, and why no one knew about it …

In fact, no one said a word, until the description reached the main palace.

… It was a reverse copy of the palace in the Underworld … I realised Hades must’ve built his palace to resemble this one.

“I did, actually,” Hades admitted. “Good architecture is good architecture.”

… Despite my bad experience with him, I felt a little sorry … To be banished from this place seemed really unfair.

“It is,” Persephone said, frowning. “It’s not like he did anything to get banished.”

Zeus coughed. “Well, my dear, the whole ‘god of the Underworld and death’ thing is a little unnerving for people.”
Persephone glared at her father. “And I suppose if things had gone another way? The three of you drew lots for your domains, did you not? If you had received the Underworld, would you have banished yourself from Olympus?”

“She does have a point,” Hestia said.

“She does,” Hera agreed. “However, I would once again suggest we have this discussion after the children go to bed.” She received no argument, and continued:

**It would make anybody bitter.**

Hades hid a small smile. The boy had hit it on the head. Still, enough had been said about the subject.

**Steps led up to … the throne room.**

Everyone glanced around them automatically.

*Room* isn’t really the right word. The place made Grand Central Station look like a broom closet.

“Well, you’re not wrong,” Thalia said, tilting her head back to watch the stars above them.

… The thrones were empty except the two at the end: the head throne on the right, and the one to its immediate left.

“Oh, dear,” Hera said. “It may have been better for someone else to be there as well.”

I didn’t have to be told who the two gods were … I came towards them, my legs trembling.

Percy clamped his hands down on his knees, grumbling under his breath.

The gods were in giant human form, as Hades had been, but I could barely look at them without feeling a tingle, as if my body were starting to burn.

“That was probably Zeus,” Demeter said. “He never has been very good at toning it down around mortals.”

Hera shook her head in agreement, reading through the two descriptions, rather relieved when there were, again, no interruptions.

… The gods weren’t moving or speaking, but there was tension in the air, as if they’d just finished an argument.

“Well, there’s a surprise,” Demeter muttered.

I approached the fisherman’s throne and knelt at his feet.

Thalia winced. “Bad idea.”

Percy rolled his eyes.

… If I said the wrong thing, I had no doubt they could blast me into dust.

“Your father wouldn’t,” Amphitrite said immediately. “Your uncle, maybe, but not your father.”
“To my left, Zeus spoke. ‘Should you not address the master of this house first, boy?’

“Told you so,” Thalia said.

“Honestly, it makes sense that he’d go to his father,” Demeter said. “Just because yours don’t.”

“Yes, well, let’s not get into that,” Persephone said hastily.

“I agree,” Hera said, turning the page.

… ‘Peace, brother,’ Poseidon finally said. His voice stirred my oldest memories: that warm
glow I remembered as a baby, the sensation of this god’s hand on my forehead.

Amphitrite smiled, still seated beside her husband. She remembered clearly the day her stepson had
been born – her husband had disappeared for hours and returned with a very different smile he
usually had after a dalliance or an affair. She had guessed immediately, of course, although he had
been very tactful and discrete in his confirmation.

She had even – although she would never admit to her husband – gone herself, to peek in on the
baby while Sally was asleep, although she did not dare linger too long, for fear of drawing attention
to him.

‘The boy defers to his father. This is only right.’

Sally frowned a little, but said nothing. She remembered what Percy had said about his father not
being the best at demonstrating his feelings – and she could imagine that it was at its worse around
the other gods, especially his younger brother.

‘You still claim him then? … You claim this child whom you sired against our sacred oath?’

Thalia coughed loudly, drawing everyone’s attention.

“Sorry,” she said, not bothering to hide her smirk. “Something in my throat.”

“The stench of hypocrisy maybe?” Hera asked.

“I really couldn’t say,” Thalia said, deceptively sweetly.

‘I have admitted my wrongdoing,’ Poseidon said.

“Oh for goodness sake,” Amphitrite sighed. “I love you, but you do pick your words badly, don’t
you?”

‘Now I would hear him speak.’

Wrongdoing.

“Of course you’d pick up on that word,” Sally said with a sigh.

Poseidon shook his head. “I would have been referring to the oath, Percy, which I admitted I broke –
which is more than what Zeus has done. That doesn’t change the fact that I do love you and I am
proud of you, and I do not regret it.”

“You …”
“Oh, stop it!” Hera snapped, interrupting her husband. “Thalia’s right; your hypocrisy is getting tiring.”

“When did you two start teaming up?” Zeus grumbled.

Hera rolled her eyes. “Oh, for goodness sake.”

A lump welled up … Was that all I was?

Thalia patted him on the shoulder. “Join the club.”

Hera caught her eye and shook her head.

Once Thalia would have bristled, but she understood what her stepmother was saying; although she was right, her father would not tolerate much more.

‘I have spared him once already … I should have blasted him out of the sky for his impudence.’

‘And risk destroying your own master bolt?’ Poseidon asked calmly.

“At least one of you has some sense,” Demeter muttered under her breath.

‘Let us hear him out, brother.’

Zeus grumbled some more.

Even with Will’s sedatives, Sally was getting a little nervous, Percy even more so.

Poseidon glanced at his brother and pressed his wife’s hand. She followed his gaze and nodded, moving to sit on Percy’s other side again, tucking him against her side and taking Sally’s hand.

“It’s alright,” she said softly. “If he’s grumbling, he knows he’s losing.”

‘I shall listen,’ he decided. ‘Then I shall make up my mind whether or not to cast this boy down from Olympus.’

“Not in front of his father, you won’t,” Hera muttered.

“For that matter,” Demeter said, “where are we? You two know you’re not supposed to do this without supervision.”

Zeus scowled. “You make it sound like we’re children.”

Poseidon, wisely, said nothing.

‘Perseus,’ Poseidon said. ‘Look at me.’

“Oh, don’t do that,” Amphitrite said. “You have an excellent poker face and no sense of when to drop it.”

I did … Nothing to encourage me.

Amphitrite shook her head. “Told you so.”

It was like looking at the ocean: some days, you could tell what mood it was in. Most days,
though, it was unreadable, mysterious.

“Wow, Percy, that was very poetic,” Thalia said. “Are you feeling okay?”

Percy sighed. “I didn’t write this.”

“Give up,” Annabeth advised him.

I got the feeling Poseidon didn’t really know what to think of me.

“That’s because you haven’t been down to Atlantis yet,” Amphitrite said with a smile. “No one in the ocean doubts it.”

… In a strange way, I was glad Poseidon was so distant … I could live with that.

“It wasn’t really the time or place,” Annabeth said.

Percy nodded. “Also, I hadn’t quite come to terms with everything yet. Another couple of weeks, it would’ve been different. I think.”

After all, I wasn’t sure about him yet, either.

Percy nodded.

‘Address Lord Zeus … Tell him your story.’

Sally sighed. “No offence to any of you, but I did give Percy a name for a reason, and it wasn’t to have something to write on the nursery door.”

So I told Zeus everything, just as it happened.

“Everything?” Hera asked.

“Absolutely everything, ma’am,” Percy confirmed. “I may have – ah – glossed over the incident at the water park, but then I figured all of Olympus knew what had happened there.”

I took out the metal cylinder … and laid it at his feet.

“That should keep you alive,” Thalia muttered. “At least long enough to get back to Camp.”

… Zeus opened his palm. The lightning bolt flew into it … ‘I sense the boy tells the truth,’ Zeus muttered.

Sally breathed a small sigh of relief.

‘But that Ares would do such a thing … it is most unlike him.’

Apollo snorted. “Means he’s going to get away with it.”

“I will see to it that he doesn’t,” Hera said firmly.

‘He is proud and impulsive,’ Poseidon said. ‘It runs in the family.’

Demeter laughed. “Well, that certainly is true.”

‘Lord?’ I asked.
They both said, ‘Yes?’

“I actually meant Lord Zeus,” Percey said sheepishly.

‘Ares didn’t act along. Someone else – something else – came up with the idea.’

“You give Ares too much credit,” Hermes said, watching his half-brother’s face redden with anger. “I do not doubt for one moment that he wouldn’t realise what war between those three would mean, and he should have walked away.” His hand tightened automatically around Luke’s arm, unable to keep from being grateful that Ares hadn’t.

After all, had he returned the items to Olympus immediately, his son would be dead.

I described my dreams … that momentary breath of evil that had seemed to stop the world and made Ares back off from killing me.

Hera glanced at her husband, hoping that he would not dismiss the warning.

‘In the dreams … the voice told me to bring the bolt to the Underworld … I think he was being used, just as I was, to start a war.’

“Was that the idea?” Thalia asked.

Luke cleared his throat. “I don’t know. On the surface, yes – a war would unsettle the Underworld and make escape easier, but having the weapons down in Tartarus would probably have helped as well.”

“Just a little bit,” Percey said dryly.

‘You are accusing Hades, after all?’ Zeus asked.

“When did he say that?” Persephone asked. “Father, please tell me you are going to listen to his warning.”

‘No,’ I said. ‘I mean, Lord Zeus, I’ve been in the presence of Hades. This feeling on the beach was different.

Percey and Annabeth both shuddered. With the exception of Luke, they had probably been in Kronos’s presence more than anyone else – and Luke had been protected by the simple fact that Kronos was in his head.

… Something powerful and evil is stirring down there … something even older than the gods.’

Thalia slipped a hand into Annabeth’s again, squeezing it tight.

Poseidon and Zeus looked at each other … had a quick, intense discussion in Ancient Greek. I only caught one word. Father.

“Good,” Hera said. “So you’re not being difficult about it.”

Poseidon made some kind of suggestion … Zeus held up his hand angrily. ‘We shall speak of this no more,’ Zeus said.

Apollo said something in Ancient Greek that none of the campers understood, but Thalia sniggered
“I’m not sure that’s possible,” she said lightly.

Demeter frowned. “Apollo, watch your language around the children please.”

Percy reached over Annabeth’s head to tap Thalia on the shoulder. “What does that mean?”

“It doesn’t translate that well,” Thalia said with a grin. “There aren’t words in English anymore. I picked it up from some of the older hunters. It’s kind of a cross between a curse and a suggestion that someone should go and …”

“Got it,” Annabeth said hastily. “Little ears are listening.”

“Some of us aren’t that much younger than you,” Silena pointed out with a smile.

“Father, tell me you aren’t going to ignore this!” Apollo protested, ignoring the byplay.

“Apollo, I am sure I have my reasons …” Zeus began.

“Yeah, the same reasons you always do,” Apollo said heatedly. “I have been telling you for years that Kronos is stirring and you are so terrified that maybe I’m right and maybe he might not be as dead as you want him to be that you refuse to even think about it in the hopes that it will just go away! Well, it hasn’t gone away and it won’t go away, and it’s our kids who are going to pay the price for it!”

Aphrodite rose to her feet, stepping in front of him. “Apollo, please … I understand your frustration, but Zeus has acknowledged the threat now.”

Apollo took a deep breath, unable to keep his anger from seeping out of him. “That’s cheating.”

Aphrodite smiled, her aura receding now that he had calmed. “I know. Now sit down, we agreed that we would only worry ourselves with things that have actually happened, not those that only may have done without intervention.”

“I know,” Apollo said, sinking back into his seat. “But I am the God of Prophecies, you know. Occasionally, I do know what I’m talking about.”

Hera cleared her throat and began reading again.

‘I must go personally to purify this thunderbolt … You have done me a service, boy. Few heroes could have accomplished as much.’

“Wow,” Thalia said. “That’s more of a compliment than I’ve ever had.”

“Well, I’m awesome and you’re not,” Percy said with a grin, ducking the inevitable swipe at his head.

‘I had help, sir,’ I said. ‘Grover Underwood and Annabeth Chase-’

Artemis gave the boy a look of approval.

“Points for trying,” Hermes said.

‘To show you my thanks, I shall spare your life.”
“Slow down,” Apollo said. “Don’t overdo it, please.”

**I do not trust you, Perseus Jackson. I do not like what your arrival means for the future of Olympus.**

*Percy* opened his mouth to point out that it actually meant nothing, that *he* wasn’t the hero of the prophecy after all, but nothing happened.

“I wonder,” Hades said, “where was this concern when your daughter was born?”

Zeus mysteriously didn’t hear him. Poseidon, however, frowned at him. “You tried to kill my son as well.”

“Only because I believed he had stolen the Helm,” Hades said. “I may be angry with you for breaking the oath you forced me to take, but you left my remaining children alone at least. Zeus would have seen them dead.”

“The prophecy said that the next child of ours to turn sixteen …” Zeus began.

Apollo cleared his throat, interrupting him. “My apologies, Father, but that’s not what it said. It said that a half-blood of the Elder gods would reach sixteen against all odds. Not the next one. I’m not convinced the prophecy is about Percy. Or Thalia or Nico for that matter.”

“Why do you say that?” Hera asked.

Apollo smiled. “I’d rather not say. I’m sure the books will prove me right or wrong. But think about the prophecy made seventy years ago, and the one Rachel gave yesterday. And you’ll see my point.”

Hera thought back, trying to figure out what Apollo meant. From the looks of the rest of the gods and the campers, they were all doing the same thing.

Athena’s expression cleared, but no one else’s. In fact, they seemed to be giving up, happy to let the books tell them.

Hera was just about to do the same, when suddenly Apollo’s words made sense. The original prophecy had said that ‘a hero’s choice shall end his days’, whereas Rachel’s foretold ‘his pathway blocked by a hero’s choice’. The same wording could not be coincidental, surely?

But it was Luke who now blocked Kronos’s escape, by choosing to turn his back on the dreams and trust in his father and, by default, in Olympus, not one of the Big Three children.

Apollo was right – best not throw that out there just yet.

**But for the sake of peace in the family, I shall let you live … Do not presume to fly again.**

“Wasn’t planning on it,” *Percy* said hastily.

“I think you’ve flown since then,” *Will* commented, thinking about the Argo II’s sudden return. “On saying that, I’m not sure that was planned. Or if you could really call it flying. More being flung.”

“I don’t want to know,” *Percy* decided.

**Do not let me find you here when I return.**

“Best advice you could get,” *Thalia* said. “Go, quickly.”
... Thunder shook the palace. With a blinding flash of lightning, Zeus was gone.

Apollo shook his head. “And they say I’m the dramatic one.”

To his surprise, Hera laughed. In explanation, she kept reading.

... ‘Your uncle,’ Poseidon sighed, ‘has always had a flair for dramatic exits. I think he would’ve done well as the god of theatre.’

Now Hestia laughed as well, and it was such a lovely sound that Zeus could not bring himself to be angry with his brother – and after all, it was an exceptionally mild insult for them.

An uncomfortable silence.

“Oh dear,” Amphitrite said. “Why do I get the feeling you’re about to say something stupid?”

“Because you know me, dear,” Poseidon said mildly. “And you’re not there.”

‘Sir,’ I said, ‘what was in that pit?’

Poseidon flinched slightly. “I’m not my brother; you don’t need to stand on ceremony.”


Poseidon regarded me. ‘Have you not guessed? ’

“Oh we’d guessed,” Annabeth said softly. “We just didn’t want to believe it.”

‘Kronos,’ I said. ‘The king of the Titans.’


Even in the throne room of Olympus ... the name Kronos darkened the room ...

Will was starting to shake now, picking up on the emotions running through Percy and Annabeth. Thalia tugged him closer and slipped an arm around him.

Poseidon gripped his trident. ‘In the First War, Percy, Zeus cut our father, Kronos, into a thousand pieces ... And yet Titans cannot die, any more than we gods can. Whatever is left of Kronos is still alive ... still hungering for power.’

“Which we have always known,” Apollo grumbled. “So why no one listens ...”

‘He’s healing,’ I said. ‘He’s coming back.’

Poseidon shook his head. ‘From time to time ... He enters men’s nightmares and breaths evil thoughts.

“You can’t tell me that Luke was just the first person to listen,” Thalia said with a frown.

“He probably wasn’t,” Will said. “But he was a dangerous person to get hold of.”

“Why’s that?” Hermes asked, sounding like he wasn’t really sure he wanted the answer.

Will sighed. “Because Luke was the camp’s big brother. You’d don’t mistrust someone like that.
There were three types of demigods – the people who didn’t believe the dreams. The people who did believe, but did nothing about it. And the people who believed, and listened. The thing is, the second group was bigger than it normally would have been, I think, because Luke was listening.”

“And he’s getting stronger anyway,” Apollo said. “He would never have been able to get into a god’s dreams before. Which …”

“I know,” Zeus interrupted. “You have been warning me. I think we can all agree that several mistakes have been made, and by more than one of us.”

Knowing that was the closest he would ever get to messing up, Hera started reading again.

… But to suggest he could rise from the pit is another thing.’

“But not impossible,” Amphitrite murmured, finishing his thought.

‘That’s what he intends, Father. That’s what he said.’

Poseidon was silent for a long time.

“You believe him,” Hestia said quietly. “You know the threat.”

“Probably,” Poseidon conceded. “However, there is little I can do without support.”

‘Lord Zeus has closed discussion on this matter … You have completed your quest … That is all you need to do.’

“Well, he’s right about that,” Amphitrite said, squeezing Percy’s hand. “No one should ask any more of you.”

‘But –’ I stopped myself. Arguing would do no good.

Nico raised an eyebrow. “Alright, what did you do with Percy?”

“I know when to pick my battles,” Percy said.

“Yes you do,” Annabeth said matter-of-factly.

… ‘I must take some blame for that … The sea does not like to be restrained.’

“She should have done that earlier,” she added. “I know Lord Zeus would do nothing else, but it must be rather intimidating.”
‘You must go, child. But first, know that your mother has returned.

Sally breathed a sigh of relief. Of course she knew she must have done, given that Percy’s friends had met her. But she couldn’t deny that she wasn’t a little worried.

… Hades sent her when you recovered his helmet. Even the Lord of Death pays his debts.’

“I think you’ll find he’s better at it than some of the others,” Persephone murmured. Her father, in particular, was not very good at it, which was probably where Hercules got it from.

She tended to be a little more understanding of Hercules’ actions – after all, if he actively acknowledged that he had help on his labours, he would have another added.

However, he still made a lot of promises he couldn’t keep, which was just as bad, as far as she was concerned.

… I wanted to ask if Poseidon would come with me to see her …

“He can’t, sweetheart,” Sally said gently.

“She’s right,” Amphitrite said softly. “I certainly wouldn’t have a problem with it, but I cannot say the same for the others.”

… there was Smelly Gabe to think about.

Poseidon’s eyes darkened. “If I had known about that, I certainly would go with you.”

… ‘When you return home, Percy … You will find a package waiting for you in your room … No one else can choose your path, Percy. You must decide.’

“What path?” Percy asked curiously.

Amphitrite narrowed her eyes. “Poseidon, if you’ve done what I think you’ve done …”

“What?” He asked.

His wife smiled. “Then you’re a genius.”

… ‘Your mother is a queen among women … I had not met such a mortal woman in a thousand years.

“I will certainly agree with him there,” Amphitrite said, smiling at Sally who had turned bright red. “But please stop talking there.”

Still … I have brought you a hero’s fate, and a hero’s fate is never happy. It is never anything, but tragic.’

“I think I’m doing okay,” Percy said, dropping a kiss on Annabeth’s forehead.

His younger self appeared to be deflating, and his stepmother slipped an arm around him. “What your father’s trying to say is that he regrets the pain that you are destined to experience simply by being a demigod. I think all the gods do, but that does not mean they regret their children.”

… ‘I don’t mind, Father.’
‘Not yet, perhaps,’ he said. ‘Not yet. But it was an unforgiveable mistake on my part.’

“For Olympus’s sake, stop talking,” Amphitrite said. “This is why you should all be able to talk to your children more – then you might be able to manage it without inserting both feet first.”

Some of the gods might have been insulted by this, but Hestia and Artemis, neither of whom had their own children and both of whom interacted with demigods far more than the rest of their family, were laughing.

… I was five steps away when he called, ‘Perseus.’

“Fix it,” Amphitrite murmured.

… ‘You did well … You are a true son of the Sea God.’

“It’ll do, I suppose,” Amphitrite said with a smile.

As I walked back through the city of the gods … People and satyrs and naiads all turned towards me … they knelt, as if I were some kind of hero.

“Well, you did stop a war,” Thalia pointed out.

“I had help,” Percy repeated.

Fifteen minutes later … I caught a taxi to my mom’s apartment … and there she was – my beautiful mother, smelling of peppermint and liquorice …

Nico sat up straight. “That makes no sense!”

“What doesn’t?” Sally asked, startled.

“Well, you only just got back from the Underworld,” Nico said. “Surely the peppermint and liquorice comes from your job – you wouldn’t smell like that after the Underworld. No one goes through that and then just … goes to work!”

Persephone was frowning. “He’s right.”

Sally looked resigned. “He is. I daresay Gabe had something to do with it.”

Amphitrite frowned. She had only heard about Gabe second hand and she didn’t like what she heard.

‘Percy! Oh, thank goodness …’ We stood in the hallway as she cried … I’ll admit it – my eyes were misty, too.

Percy immediately began blinking, trying to clear them.

“I dread to think what I’d been going through,” Sally whispered, holding her son close.

… She told me she’d just appeared at the apartment that morning, scaring Gabe half out of his wits.

“Good,” Artemis muttered.

She didn’t remember anything since the minotaur …
Sally breathed another sigh of relief.

… and couldn’t believe it when Gabe told her I was a wanted criminal …

“I guess that was before the press conference then,” Thalia said.

Percy scowled. “He would probably have told Mom that anyway.”

… She’d been going out of her mind with worry all day because she hadn’t heard the news.

“How?” Lee asked. “You’re a New Yorker, it would have been broadcast.”

Gabe had forced her to go into work, saying she had a month’s salary to make up and she’d better get started.

Aphrodite looked furious. “Why that … that …” She sighed. “Why am I not surprised?”

I swallowed back my anger …

Percy shifted, feeling the echo of his protective fury rescind a little. Thalia’s hand left Annabeth’s to settle on the back of his neck.

… and told her my own story.

“Heavily edited, I bet,” Sally said with a weak smile. “Or rather, I hope. I’m not sure I could have coped.”

I tried to make it sound less scary … I was just getting to the fight with Ares when Gabe’s voice interrupted … ‘Hey, Sally! That meat loaf done yet or what?’

Sally stiffened, her heart rate picking up a little. The sedatives Will had given her were still working, so it wasn’t too bad, but she knew there was more to Gabe than had already been said; something she had been able to hide from Percy – and everyone else thus far.

She closed her eyes. ‘He isn’t going to be happy to see you, Percy. The store got half a million phone calls today … something about free appliances.’

The Stolls laughed, but Percy sighed. “Sorry, Mom. I didn’t think you were coming back.”

“It’s alright, honey,” Sally said, glancing over at him.

He knew. She could see in his eyes that he knew.

… ‘Just don’t make him angrier, all right? Come on.’

The tension in the room was even tighter than it had been when they were in the Underworld.

Monsters, Percy could fight off. What could he do about a mortal?

In the month I’d been gone, the apartment had turned into Gabeland.

As Hera read through the description, several people started looking vaguely nauseas.

… ‘You got nerve coming here, you little punk. I thought the police –’
“He hasn’t watched the news then,” Michael said.

“Hasn’t got enough brain cells to,” Percy muttered.

‘He’s not a fugitive after all,’ my mom interjected. ‘Isn’t that wonderful, Gabe?’

… ‘Bad enough I had to give back your life insurance money, Sally,’ he growled.

“How dare he?!” Aphrodite shrieked.

To everyone’s surprise, Percy smirked. “Oh, don’t worry. He’ll get what’s coming to him.”

“Percy …” Sally began.


‘Get me the phone. I’ll call the cops.’

‘Gabe, no!’

“No, let him,” Thalia said. “The only thing he’s got is the car, and that was an accident, the police won’t care. He’ll just get fined for wasting police time.”

… He raised his hand, and my mother flinched.

Amphitrite sucked in a breath. “Oh dear … How often?”

“I learned how to avoid it,” Sally said quietly, hugging Percy to her. “As long as it kept Percy safe, I could deal with it.”

“You shouldn’t have had to,” Percy mumbled into her shoulder. “‘S’not fair.”

For the first time, I realized something … Maybe it had been going on for years, when I wasn’t around.

Artemis was fuming, but she held herself in check. From the sounds of it, Sally had saved herself.

A balloon of anger started expanding in my chest.

Percy suddenly yelped, grabbing his chest. “Not an actual balloon!”

Some of the tension broke, but not even Travis and Connor were in the mood to laugh right now.

Sally had been so nice to all of the demigods, not just Percy and the people she knew would become his friends, that they were all angry at the idea of her being hurt.

I came towards Gabe, instinctively taking my pen out of my pocket.

“Points for trying,” Rachel said. “But he’s mortal; he won’t feel anything.”

He just laughed. ‘… You touch me, and you are going to jail forever, you understand?’

“Also not true,” Thalia said. “You’re only twelve and you were protecting your mother. That’s extenuating circumstances.”

Percy looked over at her. “When did you become so well-versed on the law?”
Thalia shrugged. “On the streets, it helps to know when the law is and isn’t on your side.”

‘Hey, Gabe,’ his friend Eddie interrupted. ‘He’s just a kid.’

“At least one of them’s got some sense,” Demeter muttered. “Whatever passes for ‘sense’ with those people.”

… ‘I’ll be nice to you, punk … I’ll give you five minutes … After that, I call the police … He ran away … Let him stay gone.’

Sally was shaking her head, keeping Percy held close to her.

“Can’t you kick Gabe out?” Artemis asked, more gently than she felt.

“Not safely,” Sally said sadly. “And I can’t leave – I have nowhere to go.”

I was itching to uncap Riptide but … Gabe, by the loosest definition, was human.

“Barely,” Aphrodite muttered, simmering with anger.

Silena shifted beside her, and she breathed deeply, relaxing enough to cause her daughter to do the same.

My mother took my arm. ‘Please, Percy. Come on. We’ll go to your room.’

… My room had been completely filled with Gabe’s junk.

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?” Thalia scowled.

… ‘Gabe is just upset, honey,’ my mother told me. ‘I’ll talk to him later. I’m sure it will work out.’

“I didn’t realise he had always been so awful to you,” Sally said with a sigh. “I thought it was just me and you two just … butted heads from time to time.”

‘Mom, it’ll never work out. Not as long as Gabe’s here.’

“I would have ended up killing him,” Percy said with certainty. “Not sure how I’d have done it, but I would have.”

She wrung her hands nervously. ‘... I’m trying, Percy. I just … I need some time.’

“What you need is to get away from that man,” Artemis said. “Somehow. There must be a way.”

A package appeared on my bed … It was a battered cardboard box … The address on the mailing slip was in my own handwriting … Over the top … was the address of our apartment, and the words: RETURN TO SENDER.

Hera stopped, looking over at her brother. “You sent him Medusa’s head?”

Poseidon shrugged. “I don’t want it.”

… I looked at my mother. ‘Mom, do you want Gabe gone?’

‘Percy, it isn’t that simple. I-‘
“It is now,” Percy said, frowning. “You don’t need to protect me anymore. I know now, so it wouldn’t work anyway, right?”

“Probably not,” Sally said with a weak smile. “But that’s not what I mean.”

‘Mom, just tell me … Do you want him gone or not?’

She hesitated … ‘Yes, Percy … But you can’t do this for me. You can’t solve my problems.’


… I could solve her problem … I could start my very own statue garden, right there in the living room.

“Do it!” Travis whispered.

“Don’t do it,” Katie said. “Sometimes, the damsel needs to save herself.”

That’s what a Greek hero would do … But a hero’s story always ended in tragedy … I remembered the Underworld … Did I have the right to send someone there? Even Gabe?

“In this case, I would say yes,” Persephone said. “But Katie’s quite right.”

… ‘I can do it … One look inside this box, and he’ll never bother you again.’

“Did you ever tell her what was in it?” Nico asked.

“No, Mom just knew,” Percy said. “I had told her about sending the head to Olympus.”

… ‘No, Percy … You can’t.’

… ‘You deserve better than this, Mom … You don’t need to protect me any more … Let me get rid of him.’

Sally smiled, pressing a kiss to her son’s head. “You sound so much like your father.”

“He can go a bit overboard at times, can’t he?” Amphitrite said.

She wiped at tear off her cheek. ‘You sound so much like your father … He thought he could solve all my problems with a wave of his hand.’

“I think we’re all guilty of that,” Hermes said quietly.

‘What’s wrong with that?’

“Everything,” Annabeth said quietly.

“I get it now,” Percy whispered.

… ‘I think you know, Percy … If my life is going to mean anything, I have to live it myself … Your quest has reminded me of that.’

Athena smiled. “Excellently put.”

… ‘I’ll leave the box,’ I said. ‘If he threatens you …’
A smirk spread across Thalia’s face. She had only heard whispers about what had happened to Sally’s first husband, but she had heard enough to put the pieces together.

She looked pale, but she nodded. ‘Where will you go, Percy?’

“Rephrase that,” Sally said. “You’re going to Camp.”

Percy sighed. “It’s already happened, Mom. Of course I went back to Camp.”

‘Half-Blood Hill’ … We would see how things stood at the end of the summer.

“Would you have stayed?” Annabeth asked.

Percy shrugged. “I considered it.”

“Is it safe though?” Lee asked. “For you to just be a summer camper, I mean.”

Percy thought about it for a second. “Well … I think if I was further away than Manhattan, maybe not.”

She kissed my forehead. ‘You’ll be a hero, Percy. You’ll be the greatest of all.’

Rachel smiled. “Sounds like Sally could have been the next Oracle.”

“I’m glad she didn’t try,” Percy said immediately, barely suppressing a shudder at the thought of his mother becoming like May Castellan. “Better no one else tries until the curse is lifted.”

I took one last look around my bedroom. I had a feeling I’d never see it again.

“Oh ye of little faith,” Annabeth said. “Your mother can look after herself.”

… I was leaving here without saving my mother.

“Trust me,” Percy said, seeing the doubt in his younger self’s eyes. “Mom doesn’t need saving.”

‘Hey, Sally,’ he yelled. ‘What about that meat loaf, huh?’

“Oh, make it yourself!” Artemis snapped.

A steely look of anger flared in my mother’s eyes … I was leaving her in good hands after all. Her own.

Percy grinned proudly.

‘The meat load is coming right up, dear,’ she told Gabe. ‘Meat load surprise’ … The last thing I saw as the door swung closed was my mother staring at Gabe, as if she were contemplating how he would look as a garden statue.

“Percy, your mom’s awesome,” Connor said, causing Sally to blush bright red.

“She really is,” Percy agreed. “But you ain’t seen nothing yet.”

Hera cleared her throat. “That is the end of the chapter; there’s only one more left. Who would like to read it?”

“Well, everything’s going to come to a head in this one, I should think,” Percy said, rubbing his hand
where the pit scorpion had stung him. “So preferably someone who can stay calm.”

“I can do it,” Katie offered, a little meekly.

“Very well, my dear,” Hera said, passing her the book.

With a deep breath, and a worried glance at Luke, Katie turned to the last chapter.
If you haven't figured out that this story includes a Luke redemption arc, there is no hope for you. Please keep character bashing out of the comments. Thank you.

Also, this chapter contains a heck of a lot of headcanon about Luke. It's probably not correct or will be/has been debunked by canon at some point. Watch me skip away not caring.

Katie cleared her throat.

Chapter Twenty Two

The Prophecy Comes True

"Here we go," Percy murmured.

We were the first heroes to return alive to Half-Blood Hill since Luke …

"Which sounds less impressive when you consider that no one else has gone out," Silena said.


Chiron frowned. "We haven't had any quests."

AnnaBeth's shroud was so beautiful … I told her it seemed a shame not to bury her in it. Thalia sniggered. "She wouldn't have been buried anyway. We burn our dead."
… I didn’t have any cabin mates, so the Ares cabin had volunteered to make my shroud.

“That was nice of you,” Silena said.

“That’s not why we did it,” Clarisse predicted confidently.

They’d taken an old bedsheet … the word LOSER painted really big in the middle.

It was fun to burn.

“They usually are,” Annabeth said, trying not to remember the time they burned Percy’s shroud in place of his body.

As Apollo’s cabin led the sing-along … I was surrounded by my old Hermes cabinmates, Annabeth’s friends from Athena and Grover’s satyr buddies, who were …

Katie paused, a smile crossing her face.

… who were admiring the brand new searcher’s license he’d received from the Council of Cloven Elders.

The campers cheered; Sally gave Grover a hug and Percy slapped him on the back.

The council had called Grover’s performance … ‘Brave to the point of indigestion. Horns-and-whiskers above anything we have seen in the past.’

Grover turned redder and redder.

The only ones not in a party mood were Clarisse and her cabinmates … That was okay with me.

“Did you tell us everything?” Beckendorf asked suddenly. “Or did you summarise?”

“We told you most of it,” Annabeth answered. “While Percy tried to summarise.”

“Most of it,” Will muttered. “I don’t recall hearing about most of that last bit.”

Even Dionysus’s welcome-home speech wasn’t enough to dampen my spirits.

Hera sighed. “Really?”

‘Yes, yes, so the little brat didn’t get himself killed and now he’ll have an even bigger head. Well, huzzah for that …’

Amphitrite sighed, shaking her head. “Lovely.”

I moved back into cabin three, but it didn’t feel lonely anymore.

Sally smiled. “Good.”

… As for my mother, she had a chance at a new life.

Her smile froze. “What?”

Percy smirked. “Did you …?”

“I don’t know, dear,” Sally said.
... Gabe had left mysteriously ... She’d reported him missing to the police, but she had a funny feeling they would never find him.

The campers cheered again – several of the gods joined in.

Sally looked worried. “How do you hide a life-sized statue?”

Katie read ahead and giggled. “You don’t.”

On a completely unrelated subject, she’d sold her first life-size concrete sculpture ... to a collector, through an art gallery in Soho.

“That’s cold,” Thalia said gleefully.

Finally, Sally relaxed, laughing herself. “I can’t believe I got away with that!”

She’d got so much money for it, she’d put a deposit down on a new apartment and made a payment on her first term’s tuition at NYU.

“So you were right,” Rachel said. “You never did see your bedroom at that apartment again.”

The Soho gallery was clamouring for more of her work, which they called ‘a huge step forward in super-ugly neorealism.’

Sally laughed. “Thank goodness for art critics!”

But don’t worry ... I’m done with sculpture. I’ve disposed of that box of tools you left me.

“What did I do with it?” Sally asked curiously.

“I think you took it to Montauk and threw it on a bonfire,” Percy answered.

... I’ve found a good private school here in the city. I’ve put a deposit down ... But if you want to go year-round, I’ll understand.

“I wouldn’t have done,” Percy said. “Not with Gabe gone.”

Annabeth raised an eyebrow. “It took you long enough to come to that conclusion.”

“I know,” Percy said. “I had some thinking to do.”

... Every night ... I’d read it again, and I tried to decide how to answer her.

“I would have understood,” Sally said.

“Oh, I know,” Percy said. “I just genuinely hadn’t decided yet. There was something to be said for staying at Camp with people who got it.”

On the Fourth of July, the whole camp gathered at the beach for a fireworks display by cabin nine.

Beckendorf smiled.

“I love those,” Silena said. “They’re always amazing.”
They’d anchored a barge offshore … According to Annabeth … they’d look like frames of animation across the sky.

“Wow,” Sally whispered.

As Annabeth and I were spreading a picnic blanket …

The Stolls whistled, Annabeth blushed, and her future self rolled her eyes. “We were twelve.”

Seeing Sally’s confusion, Percy explained. “Taking someone to the fireworks is kind of the only real way to take someone on a date at Camp.”

Grover showed up to tell us goodbye.

“You’re leaving?” Silena asked.

“I’ll be going on the search for Pan,” Grover said, beaming with happiness.

In the last few weeks, he’d started to look older … he now had to wear his rasta cap all the time to pass as human.

“Just from getting a Searcher’s Licence?” Sally asked.

Grover shrugged. “I don’t entirely understand how it works.”

‘I’m off,’ he said. ‘I just came to say … well, you know.’

I tried to feel happy … I’d only known Grover for a year, yet he was my oldest friend.

“I’d take you with me if I could,” Grover said.

“I know buddy,” Percy replied. “Just be careful.”

Annabeth gave him a hug … I asked him where he was going to search first.

“I won’t be able to tell you,” Grover said, looking nervous and excited all at the same time.

‘Kind of a secret … I wish you could come with me, guys, but humans and Pan …’

“Not a good idea,” Hermes said.

‘We understand,’ Annabeth said. ‘You got enough tin cans … remembered your reed pipes?’

“Annabeth,” Thalia began.

“Learned it from you,” Annabeth said promptly.

Thalia paused. “Alright, I can’t argue with that.”

‘Well,’ he said, ‘wish me luck.’

“Good luck!” The campers chorused.

‘Hey, Grover,’ I called … ‘Wherever you’re going – I hope they make good enchiladas.’

Grover smiled. “Thanks, Percy.”
… ‘We’ll see him again,’ Annabeth said.

Percy opened his mouth to reassure the campers, but nothing came out.

“Nico said it earlier,” he muttered under his breath to Annabeth. “How does that work?”

“He was talking to Thalia,” Annabeth said. “Maybe he wasn’t talking loud enough for them to hear.”

I tried to believe it … Grover would be the first. He had to be.

Katie paused. “You will be,” she said with certainty.

July passed.

Percy took a deep breath, casting another glance at Luke.

I spent my days devising new strategies … making alliances with the other cabins to keep the banner out of Ares’s hands.

Annabeth and Percy exchanged a high five, and Clarisse grumbled something under her breath.

… From time to time, I’d … think about the Oracle. I tried to convince myself that its prophecy had come to completion.

“Well, it did, didn’t it?” Connor asked.

“Not quite,” Percy said grimly.

… You shall be betrayed by one who calls you a friend.

A ripple of unease ran across the campers.

This line still bothered me. Ares had pretended to be my friend … That must be what the Oracle meant …


… I’d failed to save my mom, but only because I’d let her save herself … So why was I still uneasy?

“Your instincts rarely lead you wrong,” Thalia said. “You just need to trust in them.”

… The campers had one last meal together … the senior counsellors awarded the end-of-summer beads … The design was pitch black, with a sea-greid trident shimmering in the centre.

Percy went bright red.

‘The choice was unanimous,’ Luke announced … The entire camp got to their feet and cheered … I’m not sure if I’d ever felt as happy or sad as I did at that moment … I’d finally found a family … And in the morning, most of them would be leaving for the year.

“That bit always sucks,” Will said. “Especially when you’ve got younger siblings staying. Kayla cries for hours every time.”
“Kayla?” Lee asked.

Will nodded, not quite looking at him. “I think she arrived either next summer or the summer after.”

The next morning, I found a form letter … I knew Dionysus must’ve filled it out, because he stubbornly insisted on getting my name wrong.

“He does that with all of us,” Michael muttered with a grin. He didn’t mind – he answered to Matthew as easily as he did Michael by now.

Katie read through the letter – even Sally smiled a bit, by now used to the perhaps unorthodox way of doing things at Camp Half-Blood.

… I still hadn’t answered my mother, or the camp, about whether I’d be staying … The decision should have been easy … But there was my mom to consider.

“Don’t come back just on my account,” Sally said. “I want you to be happy.”

For the first time, I had the chance to live with her for a whole year, without Gabe.

“Oh,” Sally murmured, tightening her arm around her son once again.

… I remembered what Annabeth had said … *The real world is where the monsters are.*

… I thought about the fate of Thalia, daughter of Zeus.

“Oh, for goodness sake,” Thalia muttered under her breath.

… If I stayed in one place … would my mother and I even survive until the next summer?

“You should be alright,” Chiron said. “As you’ve said, you’re only in Manhattan so you’re not miles away if you do need assistance.”

That was assuming the spelling tests and five-paragraph essays didn’t kill me.

“I’d rather take the monsters,” Travis said bluntly.

I decided I’d go down the arena and do some sword practice.

Percy took a deep breath, feeling Annabeth press into his side. This would be harder on her, he knew, but at the same time – he’d forgotten how much he genuinely liked Luke.

The campgrounds were mostly deserted … I got to the sword-fighters’ arena and found that Luke had had the same idea.

Luke stiffened. His father squeezed his shoulder.

… He was working solo, whacking away at battle dummies with a sword I’d never seen before … The guy was an incredible fighter. It made me wonder, again, how he possibly could’ve failed at his quest.

“Yeah, how did that happen?” Connor asked.

“It’ll come up,” **Percy** said. “You don’t have to answer.”

**Finally he saw me, and stopped mid-swing. ‘Percy … Just doing some last-minute practice.’**

Lee frowned. “But you’re still at Camp while you’re at college – you don’t live on campus.”

Luke sighed. “I don’t think he’s planning on staying.”

‘**Those dummies won’t be bothering anybody any more.**’

**Thalia** snorted quietly.

… **Now that his sword wasn’t swirling around, I could see something odd about it. The blade was two different types of metal – one edge bronze, the other steel.**

Luke’s eyes widened. “But that would hurt mortals as well, wouldn’t it?”

“It would,” Hermes said, “which makes me wonder where you got it from.”

“I don’t have it now,” Luke said.

Hermes smiled at him. “I know.”

**Luke noticed me looking at it. ‘Oh, this? New toy. This is Backbiter … Works on mortals and immortals both.’**

“‘Seriously?’” **Thalia** asked. “Are you trying to tip him off?”

**Luke** sighed. “Maybe I was, I don’t know.”

… ‘**I didn’t know they could make weapons like that.**’

“We can,” Beckendorf said. “But we don’t. It’s a big no-no.”

‘**They probably can’t,**’ Luke agreed. ‘**It’s one of a kind.**’

**Thalia** bit her lip, sliding a hand into **Annabeth**’s.

… ‘**Listen, I was going to come looking for you. What do you say we go down to the woods one last time, look for something to fight?**’


**Percy** sighed. “Too late.” He managed a weak smile in his direction. “Everything worked out.”

**I don’t know why I hesitated.**

“Trust your instincts,” **Thalia** murmured, though she knew it would do no good.

**I should’ve felt relieved … Ever since I’d got back … he’d been acting a little distant. I was afraid he might resent me for all the attention I’d had.**

“No, you deserved it,” **Luke** said. “I just knew what was going to come next.”

“You could have stopped listening,” **Thalia** said bitingly.
“No, I couldn’t,” Luke said. “Everything I did, everything I managed to justify to myself, it was like it upped my tolerance, so I could do a bit more, justify a bit more. It’s not that bad, it’s for the best … In my head, it made perfect, logical sense.”

“Well, of course it did,” Rachel said, doodling on her jeans again. “Kronos made sure it would.”

… He rummaged in his gym bag and pulled out a six-pack of Cokes.

Thalia raised an eyebrow. “Where did you get those?”


… Of course, the magic dinner goblets would fill with anything you want, but it just didn’t taste the same as a real Coke, straight out of the can.

“Well, he’s right about that,” Michael admitted.

Sugar and caffeine. My willpower crumbled.


… We walked down to the woods … but it was too hot. All the monsters with any sense must’ve been taking siestas in their nice cool caves.

“It was warm that day,” Annabeth remembered. She was starting to get twitchy. Percy’s arm pressed against her side, pulling her close, but all she could see was the wound that he’d come back with.

We found a shady spot … sat on a big rock, drank out Cokes and watched the sunlight in the woods.

“It was quite peaceful actually,” Percy said. “Pity it didn’t last.”

After a while Luke said, ‘You miss being on a quest?’

“Are you kidding?” Silena asked.

‘With monsters attacking me every metre? Are you kidding? … Yeah. I miss it … You?’


… I was used to hearing from the girls how good-looking Luke was …

The Stolls whistled, but it was half-hearted.

… but at the moment, he looked weary … I could imagine him as an old man.

“Kronos is like a parasite,” Apollo said softly. “Once he’s in, he starts eating away at you.”

‘I’ve lived at Half-Blood Hill year-round … Ever since Thalia … well, you know.

Thalia took a shaky breath. She had never been told everything that happened when Percy got hurt. She knew he had been – that had been part of the ‘convince Thalia to believe us’ plan – but the
actual contents of the conversation between him and Luke remained, until now, a private matter between them, more or less.

... Then they threw me one quest, and when I came back, it was like ‘Okay, ride’s over. Have a nice life.’

“But you like it at Camp,” Silena said, frowning. “Don’t you?”

“I do,” Luke answered for his past self. “I miss it. There was … There was certain amount of that thinking, and once I listened, it seemed to … get louder.”

He crumpled his Coke can and threw it into the creek …

Thalia frowned. “You wouldn’t even do that on the streets – you were meticulous.”

... which really shocked me.

“Yeah, that’s not like Luke at all,” Connor said, frowning.

... ‘You make it sound like you’re leaving.’


Thalia sighed. “Luke, this already happened. However much you hate it, there’s nothing you can do about it now.”

... ‘Oh, I’m leaving … I brought you down here to say goodbye.’

“Well, that sounds ominous,” Travis said, trying to lighten the mood.

“I think it’s meant to be,” Sally said.

... A small fire burned a hole in the ground ... Out crawled something glistening black ... A scorpion.

Persephone sucked in a breath. “Oh, that’s not good.”

“Why not?” Silena asked. “Scorpion stings are nasty, but they’re curable, right?”

“That’s a pit scorpion,” Persephone said. “It’s really not good.”

Katie cleared her throat.

... ‘Pit scorpions can jump up to five metres. Its stinger can pierce right through your clothes. You’ll be dead in sixty seconds.’

Thalia reached around Annabeth to grasp Percy’s shoulder. She couldn’t look at Luke any more.

... You will be betrayed by one who calls you a friend.

“We’re going to fix this,” Percy said calmly.

... The scorpion ... crawled onto my shoe.

Sally’s only reaction was to squeeze Percy’s shoulders.
Amphitrite watched her for a few seconds, then looked over at Will. “That pill is incredible.”

Will blushed, but smiled. “Thank you, ma’am. We’ll see if it holds until the end of the book though.”

‘I saw a lot out there … Didn’t you feel it – the darkness gathering … They should’ve been overthrown thousands of years ago, but they’ve hung on, thanks to us half-bloody.’

“I wouldn’t say ‘should have’,” Thalia said, her voice wavering ever so slightly. “Would have, maybe.”

“What do you mean, Thalia?” Zeus asked.

Thalia shrugged. “Well, no one other than demigods believes anymore, do they? Without us, your prayer base is essentially a group of people in Greece who dance naked at the foot of Mount Olympus once a year. And without prayer …” She trailed off, but no one needed her to finish her sentence.

… ‘Luke … you’re talking about our parents,’ I said.

“By that point, I didn’t care,” Luke said quietly.

… ‘That’s supposed to make me love them? Their precious “Western civilization” is a disease … The only way to stop it is to burn it to the ground, start over with something more honest.’

“Well, that’s one word that could never be used to describe Kronos,” Demeter said, a little sniffily.

“But … I don’t think that,” Luke said. “I don’t believe that.”

“Of course you don’t,” Hermes said. “He’s in your head.”

‘You’re as crazy as Ares.’

Hera clamped a hand on her son’s shoulder again.

… ‘Ares is a fool. He never realized the true master he was serving.

“Though he should have done,” Hera muttered, glaring at her son.

If I had time, Percy, I could explain. But I’m afraid you won’t live that long.’

“Get out of there,” Michael whispered.

… ‘Kronos,’ I said. ‘That’s who you serve … He spoke to you in your dreams … He’s brainwashing you, Luke.’

“Yes, he is,” Thalia muttered.

‘You’re wrong. He showed me that my talents are being wasted.

“You’re teaching kids how to defend themselves so they can go home,” Thalia said. “That’s not a waste.”

“Thalia, I know,” Luke said tiredly. “This already happened for me, and he’s stopped listening.”

Thalia sighed. “I know. It’s just exceptionally frustrating.”
You know what my quest was … to steal a golden apple from the Garden of Hesperides and return it to Olympus.

“Wasn’t that one of Hercules’ quests?” Chris asked.

“Yes, it was,” Hermes grimaced.

After all the training I’d done, that was the best he could think up.’

“Not exactly,” Hermes admitted. “I was still thinking about May’s prediction that you had a terrible future ahead of you. Honestly, I’d rather have not sent you out at all, kept you at Camp where I knew you were safe – I don’t think any of us like sending you lot out unless we have to … Well, most of us,” he added, glancing at Ares. “But I couldn’t stop hearing her voice. So I picked one that had already been done, that I knew could be done, to give you a plan to fall back on. I didn’t intend it to feel like I didn’t care or that I didn’t have faith in you.”

… ‘Where’s the glory in repeating what others have done?

“It’s not meant to be about glory,” Thalia said.

My heart wasn’t in it … and when I came back, all I got was pity.

“Sympathy,” Lee corrected. “None of us pitied you. Not when it could go just as wrong for any of us. Besides, you came back alive.”

I wanted to pull Olympus down stone by stone then …

“That’s momentary anger,” Thalia said, waving her hand. “We all feel like that sometimes.”

“I think most kids do,” Sally said.

I began to dream of Kronos. He convinced me to steal something worthwhile.


“I know,” his future self said. “I was short on time.”

… You wouldn’t believe how easy it was … Their security is horrible.

“Make a note please,” Hera said to Hephaestus. “We need to fix that.”

I was halfway across New Jersey before I heard the storms … they’d discovered my theft.’

Hermes couldn’t help half a proud grin. He didn’t like why Luke had done it but a good job was still a good job.

The scorpion was sitting on my knee now … ‘So why didn’t you bring the items to Kronos?’


… ‘I got overconfident … it was Ares who caught me …’

No one interrupted now, as Katie read through everything that had happened on the quest from the other side, how Luke had summoned the hell hound and cursed the shoes.
… ‘You should have died in Tartarus, Percy … I’ll leave you with my little friend to set things right.’

Luke was glaring daggers at his future self now.

_Percy_ caught his eye. “I’m right here.”

“So is Luke,” _Annabeth_ muttered under her breath.

“Yeah, well, let’s sit on that,” _Percy_ muttered back.

‘Thalia gave her life to save you … And this is how you repay her?’

“Ouch, low blow,” _Connor_ said.

“No, it’s an excellent point,” _Thalia_ said.

‘Don’t speak of Thalia!’ he shouted. ‘The gods let her die! That’s one of the many things they will pay for.’

“Oh, for …” _Thalia_ lurched to her feet, grabbed the nearest item (which happened to be a cushion, thankfully) and began hitting _Luke_ with it. “Don’t … do … this … for … me!”

“Thalia!” _Annabeth_ protested, not attempting to physically stop her. “That’s not going to help anyone.”

“She’s right,” _Hestia_ said gently. “Sit down, my dear.”

_Thalia_ stopped, sinking back in to her seat.

“Luke,” _Hestia_ said, “would it be alright if you explained more, so we can understand exactly _why_ you listened? Then maybe we can make sure no one else does.”

_Luke_ cleared his throat, looking over at his past self. “I’ve got this one. My mind’s a bit clearer now.”

He sighed. “It started after the quest. To start with, I didn’t realise it was someone else. I thought it was just the voice in the back of my head. It wasn’t anything I hadn’t thought before … Heck, Thalia and I used to talk about it on the streets. It’s hard to believe someone cares when you’re trying not to starve to death, or freeze to death. So to start with, I … I didn’t ignore it, exactly, but I didn’t engage with it either.”

“So when did that change?” _Hestia_ asked. The other gods seemed to have decided to let her be the spokesman now, her calm demeanour rippling through the room and settling the tension.

“I don’t know,” _Luke_ admitted. “At some point, I must have realised it wasn’t my voice, but I couldn’t tell you exactly when that happened. Most of the kids at Camp have spent at least one night in Cabin Eleven, and I tried not to discriminate between my siblings, and the people that are only staying until they get claimed. I couldn’t, because they could be there indefinitely. But that means that it’s not just _my_ doubts I was dealing with. Everyone at Camp has come to me at some point or another, asked me if I think their parents really care. I mean, can anyone in this room, hand-on-heart, say that they have _never_ doubted that? Ever?”

Lee, Michael and both versions of Will put their hands up.

Everyone else just looked down and refused to meet their parents’ eyes.
“And then the unclaimed kids …” Luke sighed. “Do you have any idea how hard it is? Most of these
kids have nowhere to go; it’s hardly ever the kids with good families. The mortal world doesn’t want
them, and they come to Camp full of hope and dreams and ‘Hey, someone wants me after all!’ And
then I watched the hope die. And every summer, I lost a couple, because they leave to prove
themselves, and I want to believe they found a home, or someone to love them, but I know they’re
dead. And those were my brothers and sisters. Not people who happened to be staying until their
parent decided that they wanted them.”

Several of the gods flinched at that.

“And it made me angry,” Luke admitted. “Really angry. Honestly, the issues with Dad …” he gave
Hermes an apologetic glance. “I’ve been dealing with them for a long time. That alone … I could
deal with it. It wasn’t fair that the kids did too.”

“It was like that on the streets,” Thalia said softly, not looking at him. “We were angry, yes, but we
got angrier after we found Annie, because we could deal with it. She was just a kid, it wasn’t fair that
she had to as well.”

“I guided Annabeth,” Athena protested. “I made sure she found people who could look after her.”

“But we couldn’t,” Thalia said tiredly. “We could protect her from monsters, yes, but we were on the
streets and it was still early spring. It was cold. We couldn’t protect her from starvation, or
hypothermia, or anything like that. We were just kids.”

“And I did think we were going to lose her one night,” Luke added. “Her temperature dropped so
low that Thalia and I didn’t sleep; we just sat with a finger on her pulse point to make sure she was
okay.”

“I don’t remember that,” Annabeth whispered.

“You won’t, sweets; you were half-unconscious,” Thalia said, wrapping an arm around her again,
half-expecting to find her skin as icy cold as it has been that night.

“The thing was,” Luke continued, “that I was angry, yes, but it wasn’t a new anger. It wasn’t like
he’d found someone that was passive and then stirred the anger up. It had always been there, so I’d
got used to managing it. I knew it wasn’t my voice now. I’d started dreaming of the pit; standing at
the edge, unable to move while he talked. Every night, a little bit more of my resolve broke down
and then … Then the dreams changed. At first, I thought he’d given up. Watching Thalia die … it
wasn’t like I hadn’t dreamed it before.”

“We now return to our regularly scheduled nightmares,” Rachel muttered, just loud enough for
everyone to hear.

Luke cracked a weak smile. “Exactly. And he started telling me it wasn’t my fault.”

“It was ours,” Hestia said softly.


“Luke,” Thalia said with a sigh. “Are you telling me that was why you listened?”

“It was the thing that tipped it over, yes,” Luke admitted. “Maybe I was always going to break that
night, but … that was when I gave in.”

Thalia stared at him. “You doomed the world because he promised to avenge me?!”
“He didn’t promise to avenge you, Thalia,” Luke said. “He promised to bring you back.”

Thalia closed her eyes. “I honestly don’t know whether to be flattered or terrified.”

“Go flattered,” Percy advised. “We’re going to have enough to be terrified about.”

Katie watched them for a few seconds. When no one else spoke, she cleared her throat. “Can I continue?”

Thalia took a deep breath and gave her a tremulous smile. “Yes, Katie, go ahead.”

‘You’re being used, Luke … Don’t listen to Kronos.’

“That’s not the best argument you could come up with,” Annabeth said. “Not when most people feel used by Olympus as well.”

‘I’ve been used? … Kronos will rise. You’ve only delayed his plans.

“I worry that is all we’ve done as well,” Hera said.

“At the moment, yes,” Thalia said. “If you can find a way to convince the others not to listen … although, you recruited quite a few, right?”

“I hadn’t yet,” Luke said. “On saying that, aside from the few I recruited personally, I don’t know how many came from that, or how many listened to the dreams themselves. The person we spoke about earlier – I got the feeling when I spoke to them that they were already listening.”

“So there might be others at Camp,” Thalia concluded. “Great.”

He will cast the Olympians into Tartarus …

“What about the other gods?” Artemis asked.

Percy pulled a face. “I can’t say too much, ma’am, but I think I can say that not all of them opposed him.”

Zeus’s face darkened, but he said nothing.

… and drive humanity back to their caves.

“Honestly, Luke,” Thalia said in exasperation, “what about that sounds like a good idea?!”


Thalia gave his future self one last stern look, then turned to smile at him. “Well, of course you hadn’t. He’s not stupid enough to lead with that.”

“What do you mean?” Hermes asked.

“He’s like a parasite, like you said,” Thalia said, glancing at Apollo. “He starts with something small. You justify it. Makes it easier to justify the next thing. And the next. And everything you do, every time you listen, he burrows a bit more into your head. Eats a bit more away. That’s why there are things you would have done and said, that you would never consider, because he hasn’t got far enough in yet for you to justify them.”

“So I could have talked Luke round then?” Percy asked.
“No,” Thalia said, a little sadly. “He’s too far gone. Am I right?”


“How did you get rid of him?” Hermes asked.


“He did though,” Percy said. “In the end.”

All except the strongest – the ones who serve him.’

“No, they will be as subjugated as the rest of the world,” Hera said tiredly. “As it was then.”

‘Call off the bug,’ I said. ‘If you’re so strong, fight me yourself.’

“It won’t work,” Thalia predicted. “If you wanted to bait him like that, you should have done it earlier, after you mentioned me.”


Thalia rolled her eyes. “You’re ridiculously easy to bait when you’re angry. When you’re calm, you’re too logical.”

Luke smiled. ‘Nice try, Percy … There is a new Golden Age coming. You won’t be a part of it.’

“Yes, he will,” Sally said, scowling. “Or rather, no he won’t, because there won’t be, but …”

“Quit while you’re ahead, dear,” Amphitrite said, hiding a smile.

He slashed his sword … and disappeared in a ripple of darkness.

“I’ve got to admit that was pretty cool,” Percy said, trying to brave a smile over the ache of betrayal that was blooming in his chest. “I never did figure out how you did that.”

“I think it was a trait of the sword,” Luke said. “I never figured it out either.”

The scorpion lunged.

Silena gasped sharply.

Her mother pulled her close.

I swatted it away … and I cut it in half in midair.

Several people cheered and Luke let out a sigh of relief.

I was about to congratulate myself until …

Katie trailed off, looking up at Percy. “I …”

“Just keep going,” he said. “I’ll be alright.”

Will tapped Thalia’s knee and she nodded, slipping off the couch to sit on the floor so Will could scoot up next to Annabeth and close enough to help if he was needed.
… until I looked down at my hand.

The celebratory air in the room vanished as quickly as it had come and Luke turned a shade of grey. “Oh no.”

My palm had a huge red welt, oozing and smoking with yellow guck.

As they watched, Percy’s right hand began to take on that same appearance.

My ears pounded. My vision went foggy.

Percy swayed in his spot, practically collapsing on to Annabeth’s lap.

Will grasped his shoulder tightly, and grimaced. “There’s nothing I can do. The wound is there, but the poison isn’t. He’ll have to wait it out.”


“It didn’t help last time,” Annabeth said, a hint of venom in her voice. “But it couldn’t hurt.”

Luke scrambled to the kitchenette and emerged with a bowl of cold water. Annabeth took it and helped Percy submerge his hand, but the welt didn’t disappear.

… I stumbled to the creek … The poison was too strong.

“It healed chimera poison though,” Silena whispered.

“Pit scorpions are from the depths of Tartarus,” Aphrodite said gently. “The forces down there are a lot stronger than most things on Earth.”

My vision was getting dark.

“Annabeth,” Percy muttered.


… Sixty seconds … I had to get back to camp.

“What if he doesn’t?” Will asked, watching his future self out of the corner of his eye.

“If he didn’t get to camp,” Lee said, changing the tense, “he would have died in the woods, and no one would ever have known, because a monster probably would have found him before we did. Since he’s here, and the others aren’t panicking too much, I’m going to guess he did get back somehow.”

… My legs felt like lead. My forehead was burning.

Will felt it and cursed under his breath. “He’s got a fever.”

“But it’s only the symptoms, right?” Annabeth asked. “I mean, there’s nothing to cure?”

Will grimaced. “Probably.”

“That’s not very comforting,” Thalia muttered, leaning back against Annabeth’s legs.

I stumbled … the nymphs stirred …
Grover brightened. “They’ll help!”

… Two of them took my arms … I remember making it to camp … a centaur blowing a conch horn.

“Only me,” Chiron said with a smile. “I suspect.”

“It was,” Annabeth said, her voice shaking.

Then everything went black.

Percy suddenly stilled on Annabeth’s lap. Will immediately checked his pulse.

“Just unconscious,” he said quietly. “Keep going please, Katie?”

I woke … sipping something that tasted like liquid chocolate chip cookies.

Everyone breathed another sigh of relief and a small smile crossed Percy’s face.

“Come on,” Annabeth said briskly, prodding him in the shoulder. “Get up.”

“I nearly died,” he mumbled into her thigh. “Do I have to?”

“From hero to actual six year old in thirty seconds,” Nico mumbled.

Annabeth sniggered. “Welcome to my life. Percy, my legs are going numb. Thalia …”

“Alright, I’m moving,” Thalia said, getting off her feet. “Come on, Kelp Head; up you get.” She poked him in the side, letting a small amount of electricity out of her fingertip.

Percy yelped and sat up, glaring at her. “That was uncalled for.”

“Get over it,” Thalia said, sitting down next to Annabeth again, Will moving back to his original seat to make room for her.

A few drops of water rose out of the bowl, flew over Annabeth’s head and hit Thalia in the face.

“I’m not going to rise to it,” Thalia decided.

“Please don’t,” Annabeth said. “Katie, please continue, before they start.”

… I was propped up in bed in the sickroom of the Big House …

“Technically that wasn’t the sickroom,” Will said. “It’s one of the bedrooms we use when we don’t want to use the infirmary or when the infirmary’s full. In this case, I think we used it because we weren’t sure you were going to make it.”

… Annabeth sat next to me … dabbing a washcloth on my forehead.

Aphrodite cooed. Those two were just too adorable.

‘Here we are again,’ I said.

“Don’t make jokes now,” Annabeth mumbled. Her mother rubbed her shoulder.

‘You idiot,’ Annabeth said, which is how I knew she was overjoyed to see me conscious.
Thalia laughed. “Yeah, that sounds about right. Although it wasn’t his fault.”

“I know that now,” Annabeth said. “At the time, we had no idea what had happened. The nymphs pulled him, half-dead, out of the forest, with a wound that didn’t come from any monster that should be out there …”

‘You were green and turning grey … If it weren’t for Chiron’s healing …’

“It must have been bad then,” Lee whispered. “We can usually handle it.”

“I could probably handle it now,” Will admitted. “But back then, there was no chance.”

‘Now, now … Percy’s constitution deserves some of the credit.’

“I’m not surprised,” Athena said.

… his face looked weary and pale …

“I don’t fit in the room otherwise,” Chiron admitted.

… ‘How are you feeling?’ he asked.

“Don’t do it,” Percy groaned, doubling over.

‘Like my insides have been frozen, then microwaved.’

“Why?!” Percy groaned, doubling over.

“Amazing analogy,” Thalia said. “How do you know what that feels like?”

“It was the best I could come up with,” Percy muttered. “Leave me alone, I’m in pain.”

… Between sips of nectar, I told them the story.

Annabeth shook her head, rubbing her boyfriend’s back. “I … I couldn’t.”

“No,” Thalia said quietly. “Neither could I.”

… ‘I can’t believe that Luke …’ Annabeth’s voice faltered. Her expression turned angry and sad. ‘Yes. Yes, I can believe it … He was never the same after his quest.’


Annabeth trembled in her mother’s arms.

Athena looked down at her face and, with a sigh, kissed her forehead and released her.

Giving her mother a watery smile, Annabeth scrambled to her feet and ran to give Luke a hug. “You’ve fixed this. It’s not going to happen now.”

‘This must be reported to Olympus,’ Chiron murmured.

Apollo snorted. “Good luck.”
‘Luke is out there right now,’ I said. ‘I have to go after him.’

“You’ll do no such thing,” Thalia said, before Sally could. “You’ll stay there and recover until you can hold a sword properly!”

Percy rolled his eyes. “Yes mom.”

‘Zeus declared the matter closed!’

“You can’t fight this battle alone though,” Thalia said. “Certainly not in that state.”

‘Percy … you must not rush out for vengeance.

“Oh, I think I can,” Percy said, attempting a smile.

Annabeth curled up under his arm, trying to keep her tears from bubbling over.

You aren’t ready.’

“Well, I wasn’t fit,” Percy corrected, examining his hand, which was still looking pretty crusty.

“Oh, you couldn’t have taken me back then,” Luke said.

“Do not underestimate the power of anger over skill,” Percy said darkly. “It wouldn’t have been pretty but … I trusted you. We all did.”


“You keep saying that,” Percy said. “I think we can call it implicit now.”

… I wasn’t going to be sword fighting any time soon.

“A few weeks, I’d guess,” Thalia said, frowning at the wound. “At least.”

‘Chiron … your prophecy … it was about Kronos, wasn’t it?

“Not that I was aware,” Chiron said.

Was I in it? And Annabeth?’

“Different prophecy,” Annabeth said.

… ‘You’ve been ordered not to talk to me about it, haven’t you?’

“Even if I hadn’t, I wouldn’t,” Chiron admitted. “It is such a lot to have on one’s shoulders.”

“Yeah, you can say that again,” Percy and Thalia muttered, not quite in unison.

… ‘You will be a great hero, child.

“Yes, you will,” Will said.

“Oh, don’t tell me it’s me again,” Percy groaned. “Can’t I get a break?”

“We’d have happily given you one,” Will said. “Didn’t really get a say in the matter.”
I will do my best … But if I’m right about the path ahead of you …’

Amphitrite settled an arm around her stepson with a sigh.

Thunder boomed overhead, rattling the windows.

“Subtlety,” Hera said, rolling her eyes. “And maybe a little less paranoia. We are not out to get you.”

... ‘The gods have their reasons, Percy. Knowing too much of your future is never a good thing.’

“That’s why the Oracle is so cryptic,” Apollo said. “Sometimes not cryptic enough in the past.”

“And that’s why we’re not allowed to say anything if we get dreams, isn’t it?” Lee asked.

“Don’t all demigods get dreams though?” Sally asked. “Percy’s talked about his with Annabeth.”

“My children occasionally get actual prophetic dreams,” Apollo explained. “Different to general demigod dreams, which tend to be more subconscious.”

“But we’re learning a lot about our future,” Will said. “How do we know this isn’t going to go wrong?”

“Well, this is a lot more specific than any prophecy I’ve come across,” Apollo reassured him. “Not to mention, the Fates are involved. They have a way of making sure things go their way.”

“Oh, I hope so,” Annabeth murmured under her breath.

… ‘We will not sit back,’ Chiron promised.

“Please don’t,” Luke murmured, Annabeth still curled up beside him.

Hermes hugged him close, trying to push nineteen years’ worth of regret and longing into the gesture. In holding his son at arms’ length, he had forgotten the Golden Rule of Prophecies:

The more you try to avoid them, the more likely they are to come true.

‘But you must be careful.

“Yeah, I’d got that,” Percy muttered, flexing his hand. The wound was still there, but there was no pain, even when he poked it.

Although whether that was the Styx or the effects of the book, he didn’t know.

… Do not give him what he wants.

“Like that’s going to happen,” Percy said, scowling.

Train patiently. Your time will come.’

“If it’s all the same to you,” Sally said, “I’d much rather it didn’t.”

‘Assuming I live that long.’

Sally closed her eyes. “Honey, please think before you speak.”
“I’m fine, Mom,” Percy said. “I’m right here.”

… ‘You’ll have to trust me, Percy … I’ll be back as soon as I can … Oh, and, my dear … whenever you’re ready, they’re here.’

Annabeth frowned. ‘Who’s here?’

… Chiron rolled himself out of the room … Annabeth studied the ice in my drink … ‘I … just took your advice about something. You … um … need anything?’

“What did I do?” Annabeth asked, looking worried.

“My advice isn’t that bad,” Percy said.

“I didn’t say it was,” Annabeth said, “but I can’t remember you giving me any advice.”

‘Yeah. Help me up. I want to go outside.’

“Would it kill you to stay in bed until you’re better?” Thalia asked.

Percy rolled his eyes. “Look who’s talking!”

… Annabeth caught me before I could crumple … A wave of nausea rolled over me.

Percy doubled over with a groan. “Oh, why?!?”

Annabeth rubbed the back of his neck. “Do you want a bowl or something?”

“I don’t think I’m actually going to …” Percy swallowed heavily “… vomit.”

“I’ll get you a bowl,” Luke decided, retrieving one from the kitchenette.

Annabeth took it and rested it on her knees, running her hand soothingly through her boyfriend’s hair.

… I didn’t want to lie in bed … while Luke was out there planning to destroy the Western world.

“Because the rest of the world will be fine,” Nico muttered under his breath.

… By the time we reached the porch … My stomach had twisted into knots.

Percy went completely white and emptied his stomach - thankfully into the bowl, rather than on to his girlfriend’s lap.

Annabeth pulled a face but didn’t move.


“Love you too,” Annabeth said. “But honestly, Percy, I’ve dealt with far worse bodily fluids from you.”

“Careful, Annie, you’ll give people the wrong idea,” Thalia said.

“Blood!” Annabeth sighed. “I was talking about blood.”
… It was dusk. The camp looked completely deserted.

“Just about curfew,” Lee guessed. “There would be some campers left, just all tucked up in bed. In theory.”

… I got the feeling Chiron wanted me to stay year-round … but I wasn’t sure that’s what I wanted.

“Then do not stay,” Chiron said immediately. “The extra training would be very helpful, but not at the risk of your happiness.”

… I’d feel back about leaving her alone, though, with only Clarisse for company …

“Hey!” Clarisse protested.

“I wouldn’t be alone,” Annabeth said. “There are other year-rounders.”

… ‘I’m going home for the year, Percy.’

“I’m what?!” Annabeth asked. “Am I mad?!”

Annabeth shrugged. “It hasn’t been easy, but … it’s all about perspective.”

Her past self looked almost mutinous, but Luke rubbed her shoulder. “You don’t have to,” he said quietly. “No one’s going to make you.”

… Next to Thalia’s pine tree … a family stood silhouetted …

“Finally, we dropped the rest of it,” Thalia sighed. “It only took a whole book.”

… ‘I wrote him a letter … like you suggested … We decided … we’d give it another try.’

‘That took guts.’

“It did,” Thalia said quietly. “I’m not sure I’d have been able to do it.”

“Well, we’re not dealing with the same situation, are we?” Annabeth asked. “You never mentioned a brother.”

Thalia dropped her gaze. “I don’t like to talk about it.”

Annabeth squeezed her hand, and dropped the subject.

… ‘You won’t try anything stupid during the school year, will you? At least … not without sending me an iris-message?’

Nico cracked a smile. “So you don’t mind if he does something stupid, as long as he doesn’t do it without you?”

Annabeth shrugged. “What are friends for, right?”

… ‘I won’t go looking for trouble. I usually don’t have to.’

“That’s every demigod,” Lee said with a sigh.

‘When I get back … we’ll hunt down Luke.

“Was it too much to ask that you stayed safe?” Luke continued.

“Should’ve thought of that before you disappeared,” Annabeth said tartly.

We’ll ask for a quest … if we don’t get approval, we’ll sneak off and do it anyway. Agreed?’

Thalia groaned, rubbing her temple. “I swear, you two are going to give me a heart attack!”

… I watched her walk up the hill … She gave her father an awkward hug … touched Thalia’s pine tree, then allowed herself to be led over the crest and into the mortal world.

“Can’t believe I did that,” Annabeth muttered, scowling.

… I remembered my father saying, The sea does not like to be restrained.

“He’s going home,” Amphitrite predicted with a smile.

… I’ll be back next summer … I’ll survive until then. After all, I am your son.’

“Yes, you are,” Poseidon said proudly.

I asked Argus to take me down to cabin three, so I could pack my bags for home.

Katie closed the book. “That’s the end.”

For a few moments, there was silence, while everyone digested everything.

“Well,” Hestia said finally, “I think it’s time the children all turn in. I believe we have some things to discuss,” she added to Zeus.

“We do indeed,” he agreed. “You say you have no idea what happened with Ares?”

“I honestly don’t know, sir,” Percy said, getting up to dispose of his vomit-filled bowl. “I don’t remember hearing of anything. Then again, it’s rare for Olympus to air dirty laundry, so to speak – his children may have known something.”

“If they did, they never said anything to us,” Annabeth added.

Chiron was already ushering the campers out of the room. Sally was going with them, as there was another bedroom in their suite that she had been given.

“Actually,” Will said, “before you have that discussion, there’s something I need to speak with you all about, if I may?” He looked over to Thalia. “I’ll catch you up.”

“Alright,” Thalia said, following Annabeth out. “See you in a minute.”

When they got back to their rooms, Percy immediately went to the sink and rinsed his mouth out.

“Still taste bad?” Annabeth asked.

“Not anymore,” Percy said, once he’d finished. “Right, I’m turning in. I’m exhausted.”

“I’m not surprised,” Annabeth said. “You’ve been in and out of consciousness all day.” She kissed him goodnight, and he disappeared through in to the boys’ room, Nico following close behind.
Thalia sank on to the couch, bidding a weary goodnight to Annabeth and Rachel as they followed the boys’ example.


“Very,” Thalia agreed. “Alright, sit down; we need to talk.”


Thalia shifted to prop herself up against the arm of the couch, so she could look at him without getting a crick in her neck. “I understand why you listened.”

“I’m not trying to excuse it,” Luke began.

“I know,” Thalia interrupted. “There’s a difference between an excuse and an explanation. An excuse is attempting to justify your behaviour; an explanation is explaining it. In this case, however, I do understand why you listened. I can’t say for certain that I wouldn’t have done that same thing.”

“You wouldn’t,” Luke said with certainty. “You’re smarter than me.”

Thalia smirked. “Obviously. But, seriously, Luke – if the roles had been reversed – if you’d died on that hill, and I’d survived … I can’t guarantee, same circumstances, that I wouldn’t have done the same thing. So I …” she sighed. “I forgive you. For listening.”

“Thalia, you …”

“Don’t tell me I can’t,” Thalia said, scowling at him. “That’s my choice, not yours. I forgive you for listening. Everything else you did … I need to get my head round that. Although I’m not convinced, given your past self’s reactions, that you weren’t practically possessed already.”

“Don’t do that,” Luke said in a low voice. “Once he had possessed me, I blacked out. I know what happened, but I wasn’t present for it. Not until Annabeth screamed and cut through the darkness. But before that … that was me, and it’s on me.”

“Okay, that’s fine,” Thalia said.

Luke sighed. “Speaking of … I need to talk to you about the poison.”

Thalia hesitated. “Do we have to?”


“Alright,” Thalia said. “Let’s hear it. And this had better be good.”


“But you did justify it,” Thalia said. “In your head, you justified it to yourself, didn’t you? That’s why you did it.”

“Well, yes,” Luke admitted. “But there are things I know now that I didn’t know then.”

“Like what?” Thalia asked.

“You’re not dead,” Luke said. “I believed that your … your dead body had been turned into a tree. I know what I saw. By all rights, you should have been dead. I truly believed that it wouldn’t hurt you, because you were in the Underworld somewhere. So I was … desecrating your grave, I
“You’re right; that’s much better,” Thalia said, rolling her eyes.

“I didn’t say it was better,” Luke said. “That’s how I justified it to myself at the time.”

“And now?” Thalia asked. “If you still thought I was dead and it was just … desecrating my grave, would you do it?”

“No!” Luke paused. “You’re going to say ‘I told you so’ now, aren’t you?”

“Me?” Thalia asked. “Would I do a thing like that?”

Luke rolled his eyes. “You’re hilarious.” He sighed. “Look … I’m not justifying it at all. I will never forgive myself for any of this, but I need you to know, Thalia … I would never willingly hurt you. You know that, right?”


The door opened, and Will stepped in. “Well, that was fun.”

Thalia smiled at him over the back of the couch. “Did you get whatever it was sorted?”

“Yeah, more or less,” Will said. “Actually, Thalia, I need to talk to you.” His eyes flickered to Luke. “In private.”

“That’s fine,” Luke said, getting to his feet. “I think we were done.”

Thalia narrowed her eyes, but nodded. “For now.”


“Don’t,” Will said. “I heard why you listened. I get it. I can’t even completely fault you for it. But I am not ready to hear that right now.”


Thalia patted the couch next to her as the boys’ door closed again. “Come on; sit down. You look exhausted.”

“It’s been a longer day than it should have been,” Will said, sinking down beside her. “I think I’ve got jetlag.”

“Can this wait until the morning?” Thalia asked.

Will grimaced. “Not really. Lady Hera says you know about the Roman camp. How much do you know?”

Thalia looked at him warily. “Enough to know you shouldn’t know about it.”

Will gave her a weak smile. “Yeah, well, things got bad. You know I can’t say a lot, but … Rachel’s prophecy about bridging the empires …”

Thalia sucked in a breath. “That’s what it means? The next readers are Roman?”
“Well, they’re a mix,” Will corrected. “The thing is … the more conflict between the demigods, the harder it is for the gods to keep their heads straight. Some of them can cope with the constant switching, others can’t – it depends on how different the two personas are.”

“So what do we do?” Thalia asked. “We’ll have to introduce them carefully.”

“Well, the plan is not to tell anyone,” Will said. “And wait for the books to tell them.”

Thalia stared at him. “You want me to lie?”

“Not lie,” Will said. “We didn’t introduce ourselves as Greek, did we? Don’t say anything; tell them the parents will come up in the books and the Fates don’t want us to say, and everyone will assume they’re Greek. Then, by the time it comes out that they’re not, everyone will like them and be fine with it.”

“Will, that’s risky,” Thalia said, frowning. “What makes you think it will work?”

The door opened and Thalia glanced up as a teenage boy stepped in.

“It worked for me.”

Thalia opened her mouth to argue, but something stopped her.

The boy met her gaze, blue eyes sparkling behind rectangular-framed glasses. His blond hair was just long enough to be a little messy, falling into his face in a way that tugged at Thalia’s memory uncomfortably.

Almost unconsciously, she rose from her seat, rounding the couch to approach this newcomer.

He looked about fifteen – which if he’d come from 2010 (and presumably he had) would make him the right age – and, if his remark was anything to go by, he was also a Roman.

Her eyes roamed over his face, settling on his lower lip, where there was a tiny scar.

She sucked in a shaky breath. “Jason?”

For the first time in thirteen years, her brother smiled at her. “Hey Thalia.”

Chapter End Notes

Right, folks, that's this one done! I have a bit of work to do before I start work on the next one, but it shouldn't be too long.
Hi guys! Fates Intervention: The Poisoned Tree has now been posted!

Please **drop by the archive and comment** to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!