Syncretism

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Summary

At the beginning of the New Order, Pangaea was divided into thirteen districts, governed by the thirteen individuals who led the revolutions against Lord Kronos. For decades, the peace was retained allowing the inhabitants to believe that a lasting peace and coexistence under the governance of the thirteen suzerains were highly plausible.

Until everything changed.

Niccolò di Angelo, the illegitimate second son of Lord Hades, learned at a young age that happy endings were nonexistent. Bound by the world's rules and regulations, happiness is only a fleeting emotion. However, Perseus Tzákson begged to differ.
Bound to an oath and with a war looming over their heads, the son of Hades now finds himself serving under a different district, guarding the life of Perseus Tzákson. Together, the two of them are forced to navigate the world while facing the nightmares and regrets of their pasts that they never made peace with. As they partake in this journey to life, Nico will realize that sometimes, it often takes sinking to the bottom of one's misery to understand the truth, and that happiness has to be attained, not offered.

Notes

Note: In this story, the lives of the characters – parentage, events in their lives, etc. – are different compared to the events in the two series. The separation between the Greeks and Romans gods are nonexistent. Thus, characters like Jason and Frank will be sons of Zeus and Ares respectively, instead of Jupiter and Mars. Secondly, this story is not about gods and goddesses. This story is an AU where the Greek gods and goddesses are suzerains – leaders – of thirteen districts. These districts might be called by their specified names or “House of (name of suzerain)” but they basically mean the same place. These districts are elaborated further in Chapter II. Thirdly, mentioned Roman gods and/or goddesses names are either names of mortals or actual gods/goddesses worshipped in this story, but they do not play an active role as they are merely figures for worship. Example of this is Bellona. She will be a mortal here in this story. On the other hand, Jupiter will be one of the patron gods in this story. Fourthly, there would be changes in the characters’ names. They would still be called Nico, Jason, Percy, Annabeth, etc. but their real names in this story would be altered to some extent so as to adapt with the setting of the story. Last but not the least, some characters might have a change in parentage. Characters such as Thanatos, Hazel, Hebe, and many more as the story progresses. Additional notes on characters, translation of phrases/words, will be stated at the end note. For now, sit back, relax, and I welcome you to venture into the world of Pangaea.
Chapter Notes

This chapter is… heavy. But the next chapters are not (I promise that because I have already written up to more than 10 chapters). The characters would not be restricted to only one place. The story is not only about Percy and Nico, but also of other characters.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“But as in ethics, evil is the consequence of good, so in fact, out of joy is sorrow born. Either the memory of past bliss in the anguish of today, or the agonies which are have their origin in the ecstasies which might have been.”

-“Berenice” by Edgar Allan Poe

Monolithic columns with intricate and antique carvings were engaged, the shafts extending a few tens of feet – design, likened to the relentless rolls of ocean waves – from marble pedestals to support the wide arc of the domical painted ceiling. Hardened frosted glass finely encompassed the grounds of the domain, gleaming faintly while accentuating the kaleidoscopic lights emitted by the beaded and shell chandeliers. The alcazar radiated exceedingly of life and abundance; of an untamed freedom that was contradictory to the environment the young man was raised in. The heels of his jet-black combat boots clacked sharply against the glass as the young man stepped further with confident strides into the domain, all the while calculative eyes of the shade of a russet brown assessing the area cautiously despite his evident familiarity of the surroundings.

The members of the alcazar – local residents and military division personnel alike – regarded him with high respects, though the inquisitive yet jovial expression painted across their features did not escape his acknowledgement. It was neither uncommon nor a rarity for members of the foreign districts to venture and announce their presence to their neighboring districts, as such was a luxury – a right – brought forth in the beginning by the proclamation of the New Order. These open and diplomatic relations established between citizens enabled for a harmonious coexistence; a prerequisite measure to ensure that there should not be a repetition of the grim and dark history, twenty-five years prior to the present. What, perhaps, classified for “uncommon” and “rarity” was of foreign heirs venturing to neighboring districts unsupervised; such was his case.

The black medieval tunic loosely clung to the young man’s prepossessing figure, slightly pressed to his torso by a black embroidered doublet vest adorned with the silhouette of a dark serpent; the symbol of his district. Dark leather trousers adorned the expanse of his decently muscled and toned
legs, accentuating the alluring figure underneath the layers of extravagant clothing. By his side, attached to his frame by a silver chain belt, was a sheathed Stygian Iron sword of a midnight-black grip and silver encrusted pommel.

The young man was the embodiment of a royalty, exuding an aura of regality that was only plausible from a strict upbringing. The young man was equally the embodiment of a *dolofónos*, the natural yet dangerous glint of those clear yet unfathomable eyes exhibiting immense danger. The tattoos branded upon the young man’s back seemed to ache – throb dully – as if to fruitlessly remind him of the house which he served; the house which he rightfully belonged to from birth, yet was abandoning at that moment. Not that his father condemned his decision; *not* that his father’s consort condemned his decision.

*Fulfill the oath. No more, no less.*

The young man chanted the two statements in his head like a mantra, his features devoid of any indication to the inner turmoil sprouting up from the recesses of his mind. The given situation was nothing short of a fulfilment of an oath; a blood oath which he had fully committed himself to swear at such a tender age.

“It is a pleasure to see you in good health, young man.”

Said young man halted mid-step, the heels of his combat boots clacking one last instance against the flooring as he halted, his frame shifting completely towards the direction of that modulated voice.

A winsome elder male adorned by flowing robes of the mixed shades of chartreuse and parakeet casually stepped forth, his silken black hair and stray wisps delicately framing chiseled, tanned features. Lively sea-green eyes glinted in partial amusement, surrounded by sun-crinkles that indicated of the older male’s proneness to smiling. Had it not been for the intricately crafted seashell headdress resting atop the older male’s crown, the young man would have admittedly mistaken the individual for *him*.

“Lord Poseidon,” the young man breathed, formally bowing his head low as a sign of respect. “It’s a pleasure to see you in good health as well. I believe apologies are due on my part, had I unintentionally kept you waiting.”

The suzerain dismissed the apology with a sharp flick of his wrist and a slight inclination of his head.
“You should not be too formal with me, Niccolò,” Poseidon responded in a silvery voice, gesturing for the young man to follow. “Despite our status, you should be reminded that we are family.”

The young man, Niccolò, heaved an exhausted sigh.

“I apologize, uncle. It’s difficult to dismiss my upbringing,” Niccolò lowered his head by a fraction as he obediently trailed after the suzerain. “More so now, given the situation.”

“Your status as the second heir to the House of Hades – to Skotádi – and your relations to the family does not change, despite the circumstances,” Poseidon chided him.

“The Lady, Perseus, Tyson and I are well-aware of that, though Perseus is rather displeased of the circumstances you place yourself into,” Poseidon continued, and the young man found his eyes drifting to the suzerain’s flowing robes in clear avoidance of the subject of him. “Triton, on the other hand, still need be… ‘educated’ of the said matter.”

“The first heir need be ‘educated’ of many matters, especially diplomacy and democracy,” Niccolò grunted in a single breath, before pausing as he registered his impudence. “Ah, I mean…”

The suzerain merely laughed, the rich sound booming through the halls and startling the members of the household.

“Ah, you truly are the son of Hades. You possess the same vehemence as your father; it has been a while since I last saw the man,” the suzerain responded with a recognizable fond lilt before his expression schooled to neutrality.

“Triton has been… exceedingly difficult. I have to apologize in advance for that,” Poseidon resumed in a thick voice. “The influences of his mother – the Lady – has not aided in the least of preparing him for his succession. I fear much of the future of my district, more so the future of my other children, under Triton’s governance.”

The suzerain halted before ten-feet ornamental brass double-doors, one of his hands lifted and tracing the intricate pattern carved on the surface. A distant expression was etched onto those sea-green eyes, dulled throughout the ages and years of burdened responsibilities. There was confliction and a hint of anguish in them, one which the young man had been familiarized with throughout the years of becoming acquainted with the suzerain.
Niccolò pursed his lips, uncertain of his right to voice out his opinions. One would assume that those dulled sea-green eyes were induced naturally and solely by years of burdened responsibilities, and perhaps those misconceptions were much acceptable than what occurred behind closed doors.

“Family.” Niccolò vaguely recalled his biological older sister’s voice, thickly laced with immense sadness as she abandoned their House – him – once upon a time. “It will either be the one to make you or break you.”

And break him, it did.

“I suppose, that is why I am eternally grateful of your presence in my House,” the suzerain firmly stated, pushing against the doors. “I entrust the life of Perseus completely to you, Niccolò. I only hope that you entrust yours completely to him as well in return.”

Before the young man could find it in himself to offer a response, the double-doors were fully pushed apart, revealing the grandiose interior of the throne room. Rich lapis blue drapes extended from a singular point on the grand beaded and shell chandelier, exquisitely twisting across the elevated columns. The room was bathed in a kaleidoscope of colors, induced by the rays of light passing through the stained glass windows which depicted scenes of the historical war decades ago. The sight was nothing short of spectacular and picturesque, withholding none of the ancient grandeur that it was patterned from.

The thrones of the Lord, the Lady, and the first heir was situated across the room, elevated by polished marble steps and each of varying designs patterned to the liking of their respective possessor. The family crest of the House of Poseidon, Thálassa – a golden trident framed by the raging ocean waves – was embroidered on a velvet seafoam-green cloth, suspended a mere few feet atop the throne of the lord.

The complete council of the House of Poseidon – comprised of notable military personnel and the female offspring of the suzerain – were seated by the sides, facing towards the aisle, calculatedly assessing the son of Hades with immense scrutiny.

“It’s of improper decorum that you kept us waiting, Niccolò di Angelo,” a soft-spoken voice exclaimed.

Lady Amphitrite, consort of Lord Poseidon and the Lady of the House of Poseidon, was the perfect embodiment of an exquisite woman, with her silken black hair pinned back in a silver net of pearls and silk, and a few wisps draping over her delicate features. The lady was fashioning a simple yet elegant white gown, and adorning an elven circlet with a miniature sapphire teardrop situated to
dangle in the middle. Had it not been for her kind smile and the sheer amusement in those dark mocha eyes, the young man might have assumed otherwise of offending the Lady of the House.

Niccolò gracefully knelt a few feet from the thrones as the suzerain situated himself accordingly to his seat.

“The delay is my fault,” Poseidon dismissed good-naturedly as he delicately clasped his consort’s hands in his. “I engaged him in a conversation regarding his father’s condition.”

“Be as it may, apologies are due on my part for unintentionally having you wait, my Lady,” Niccolò responded while his head remained lowered, permitting remorse to slip through his usually insouciant features.

“Instead of offering your apologies, it would be the best interest of everyone if you strictly practice punctuality. Regardless of your position, it is impudent to have the lords and ladies of the House waiting over a pathetic excuse.”

The monotonous voice subsequently grated the young man’s nerves, though his expression remained impassive despite the harsh remark.

“Triton…” Niccolò heard the Lady heave a displeased sigh before addressing to him. “Rise, son of Hades. And please, forgive our son for his lack of courtesy.”

“Lack” is such a weak word, Niccolò thought to himself as he completely stood, lifting his head only when said heir snorted in response. In his peripheral vision, Triton had his head casted to the side, highly likely attempting to school his features back to neutrality. An innocent brown eye the shade of carob gazed firmly on his russet ones; the high-spirited six-year old brunette, Tyson, seated on the lap of Lady Amphitrite waving enthusiastically at him in greeting. The young man allowed for a small, fond smile to curl his lips in return before schooling his expression once more as he redirected his attention to the suzerain, pointedly dismissing his figure by the side of the Lady’s throne.

Evident disapproval glinted in those dulled sea-green eyes as they regarded the first heir, but was only fleeting as the suzerain redirected his attention to the son of Hades.

“There is nothing to forgive,” the son of Hades responded formally.
“Be that as it may…” Poseidon murmured, more so to himself before heaving a sigh.

“Niccolò di Angelo, Lieutenant Colonel and second heir of the House of Hades,” the suzerain declared in an orotund voice. “My family and council are completely aware of the purpose and circumstances of your state visit. Regardless of the established salubrious relations of Thálassa with Skotádi, these proceedings – as you should understand – is a mere necessity in ensuring the loyalty you offer to my district.”

“I came here with a sworn blood oath,” Niccolò responded in an authoritative voice, demanding attention from the gathered audience. “A sworn blood oath to our ancestral father, Lord Chaos.”

“Prove it, Bloodbringer,” Kymopoleia, daughter of Lord Poseidon and Lady Amphitrite, demanded in a penetrating tone, her unnaturally silver eyes – bordering almost to white – equally piercing.

Dismissing his discomfort and the overwhelming desire to protest, the son of Hades deftly parted his doublet vest, slender fingers unbuttoning the three upper silver buttons that ensured the impeccability of his apparel. Once that was done, the son of Hades simply pushed the tunic off his left shoulder, exposing a prominent brand of eight arrows in a radial pattern atop where his heart palpitated.

The Chaos Cross seemed to burn under the intense scrutiny of a dozen pair of eyes; against his once flawless olive skin.

“The blood oath I had sworn under the name of Lord Chaos…” The son of Hades paused as he gathered his thoughts, his slender fingers subconsciously tracing the branded symbol on his skin. “It is under the condition that I serve the third heir of the House of Poseidon, in the time of the succession of Lord Thanatos to the House of Hades.”

Niccolò sharply yanked the tunic back in place once his discomfort started setting in once more.

“I offer my allegiance to the House of Poseidon; servitude as the guardian of the third heir. Nothing more, nothing less,” the young man concluded as he fixed his apparel into place. “Lord Hades extends his approval of such a highly critical decision.”

“The House of Poseidon perceives this as a possible alliance with the House of Hades. I have had bad premonitions of the House of Zeus, given the district’s deteriorating governance and power imbalance.” Poseidon pointedly dismissed the almost undiscernible displeasure that dawned on the son of Hades’ features at the condition of the aforementioned district. “While our district is not
instigating a revolution against one of the main Houses, I deem it fit that the council should take this possible alliance as an assurance that the House of Hades sides with us.”

“The House of Hades indefinitely sides with no one,” Niccolò responded firmly, his brows creasing at the thought that the lord might have had a misconception to what he was offering. “While the House of Hades highly prefer not to engage in another revolution, Lord Thanatos merely entertains the possibility of alliance at the moment. My prime concern is the well-being of the third prince. My servitude does not extend to the district.”

“The impudence!” Triton bellowed, rising from his seat despite the disapproving and pointed looks he received from his parents. “Your district should be honored that our House considers an alliance with yours. Pray tell, what reason does Thanatos have to refuse?”

The son of Hades did not intend to respond, but his lips seemed to contradict his desire as he found himself snarling his response with vehemence.

“Lord Thanatos finds displeasure in establishing an alliance with the House of Poseidon when its successor is deemed unworthy to his eyes.”

CLANG!

Had it not been for his fast reflexes, the son of Hades was certain that his people might have planned his demise by then. The deafening and grating sound resounded throughout the throne room as a Celestial Bronze broadsword clashed with Stygian Iron sword, inducing various startled noises from several people of the gathered audience.

The Sword of Triton was truly of an excellent craftsmanship; a Celestial Bronze broadsword of strengthened, ridged and lightened blade with a gleaming sapphire embedded close to hilt. And it glinted dangerously close to his face, only expertly parried by his Stygian Iron sword. The primal urge of the serpentine within him salivated on the desire to kill – to spill blood – and it took every ounce of his practiced discipline not to execute a kill.

“You have to tame it, Nico.” Thanatos’ composed and stern voice fleet through his mind. “Our blood thirsts for the kill, but do not let it consume you.”

“Enough!” The suzerain thundered, silencing the feral growls which the son of Hades belatedly realized was seeping past the first heir’s gritted teeth as he maneuvered Triton backwards, cautiously
placing a wide distance between them.

Lord Poseidon levelled his son with a pointed glare.

“We can commence this proceeding with or without you, Triton. You have the option to leave, should you wish,” Poseidon exclaimed, though judging by the tone of his voice, the offer seemed contradictory to the suzerain’s implications.

Growling under his breath, the young lord gripped the handle tighter for a few seconds before he sharply sheathed his blade, turning his back to the son of Hades.

“I disapprove of this vermin’s presence in my House. That is my vote,” Triton barked, storming out of the room and closing the doors with a resounding “Bang!”

“A vote that will undoubtedly be dismissed,” the daughter of Poseidon and Amphitrite commented, disappointment lacing her voice as she regarded of the young lord’s brute actions.

The young man considered the possibility that he had perhaps reflected impudence with his actions; a displeasing thought as he wordlessly sheathed his sword back to its scabbard. He had said too much, he had to admit, in a statement that was worded too offensively for – presumably – the council’s taste.

Foolish, he mentally berated himself. Foolish.

Yet, as Niccolò registered the respective responses of the lord and Lady of the district, the disappointment and displeasure he had been too expectant of receiving were not directed at him. He ingrained it in his mind that he was not entitled to experience gratitude and pleasure from that, more so when he – in his peripheral vision – let out a relieved sigh once the first heir departed from the throne room.

Stop making the same mistake twice, he mentally berated himself, permitting no emotion to seep through his dignified façade.

“I believe that I speak for the council when I state that there should be no reason for us to refuse the servitude that the Bloodbringer offer to young Perseus,” Kymopoleia declared, her eyes darting throughout the vast room as he regarded the gathered audience for any indication of defiance.
There was none.

“However, it would quell the council’s fear if we could ascertain of your loyalty to our House by becoming a part of our ranks.”

Niccolò frowned at the implication of those words.

“That is a matter of discussion for another time, Kymopoleia,” Poseidon concluded, lips pressed into a firm line as he arose from his throne. “The council is dismissed for now.”

The council wordlessly obliged, retreating to their chambers one by one as they exited the throne room until only the main family and the son of Hades remained. The silence was deafening, more so elevating his discomfort when the son of Hades registered that he might possibly be intruding at that moment, given the silent exchange happening between the suzerain and his daughter. Their expressions were indiscernible, permitting the young heir little to no knowledge of what they could possibly be conveying through their eyes alone.

The intensity of his gaze scalded him equally, further submerging him in that state of utter discomfort.

“Rhode would be highly displeased,” Kymopoleia stated after a full minute of silence, leaning back against her seat with pursed lips.

“You sister always has been displeased of Triton,” Lady Amphitrite stated in a matter-of-factly tone, her delicate expression grim for once as she absent-mindedly weaved slender fingers through the dishevelled locks of the oblivious child in her lap.

“For reasons you and I, the entire council…” Kymopoleia furtively glanced at the son of Hades’ direction. “… and the House of Hades know.”

“Kymopoleia…”

“Niccolò di Angelo is right, patēras. If Triton succeeds to rule the district, it is merely a question of time when the people will start a revolution. If the people could be appeased with a different heir –”
“That is not the system by which we govern our district –“

“A district which will slip through your fingers if you pursue the idea that Triton could possibly be “educated”!” The daughter of Poseidon countered in a stentorian voice, leveling her father with an equally menacing glare. “Ouranós stirs, and soon, that bad premonition will dawn upon and shatter the peace established in the New Order. We need an alliance with Skotádi.”

“An alliance which they do not propose,” Poseidon concluded firmly, pointedly casting a glance at the son of Hades who simply remained silent throughout the respectable lady’s and the suzerain’s heated exchange.

“An alliance which they do not propose under the notion of Triton’s succession.” Silvery eyes glinted dangerously, challenging the Lord to rebuke her statement. “Triton– “

A sharp series of tugs on his impeccable tunic had the son of Hades shifting his gaze from the brewing family squabble, only to rest upon the sight of an innocent doe carob-brown eye gazing expectantly up at him. The eyepatch that covered his left eye was a natural sight by then, rather providing a character to the bubbly child. How fortunate – the son of Hades mused as he lifted the child onto his arms, tucking the brunette securely under his chin– is a child, to possess naivety; a bubble of haven from the displeasures of the world.

“Mitéra told Tyson to show big brother Nico his chambers now,” Tyson mumbled against his tunic, cautiously fisting the fabric with his slightly chubby, little hands.

That doe eye glinted with such an innocence that could almost be regarded as an invaluable commodity in their times; in their age where premonitions of an imminent war doomed beyond the horizon. It was, Niccolò had to admit, an invaluable commodity in the age of power imbalance and struggling peace.

Chancing a glance at the Lady, Amphitrite merely flashed a slightly forced smile, her head inclining by a fraction towards the direction of the ornamental brass double-doors.

Go.

The son of Hades need not be informed a second time as he respectfully offered a low bow to the Lady, securing his grasp on the youngling as they briskly departed from the throne room.
Those sea-green irises followed his every movement and miniscule shifts critically, attentively, and the sheer intensity of those gaze on his back slowly and forcibly crumbled his resolution to avoid his gaze, and stare into the deep and seemingly bottomless chasm of those mesmerizing limpid eyes. As it was, the shallow yet excruciating reminder of their status – of where either of them respectively stood – and the successive painful throbs that blossomed in his chest, supported the young heir adequately until he had walked past the double doors.

The tremulous voice of Lady Amphitrite, bellowing “Arketál!” and the brief mention of a forbidden name were the last things that Niccolò registered as he cautiously closed the doors behind him with a soft click.

At a tender age of nine, Niccolò di Angelo comprehended of the indisputable fact that nothing tangible perpetually lasts, as he was summoned to the bedside of his dying mother. Even in the threshold of death, she would eternally be the most pulchritudinous woman in his life – with her deep russet-brown irises delicately framed by her long and tear-dampened eyelashes and her midnight-black hair, splayed across the silken sheets and framing her sickly-thin figure alike an alluringly dark halo. That was the image that vividly depicted itself even in the recesses of his mind, tragically the sole fragment of memory his mind had retained for him to reminisce. The memories of her saccharine voice – of that melodious croon, breathed like a tender lullaby – were comparable to nothing more than a forgotten bittersweet music from a time gone by. The warmth of her touch – of a hearth he used to claim personally as his sister’s and his alone – was nothing more than a faint reminder of what their home used to be, which was composed solely of their serene and quaint family of three.

At the tender age of nine, Niccolò di Angelo comprehended of the indisputable fact that nothing tangible perpetually lasts. It was with that knowledge that he observed, with lackluster eyes, the fading image of the home his deceased mother had built – along with his and Bianca’s dreams – over the distance, as they were escorted to the household of their supposed biological father.

It was shortly – barely a year later, and at the tender age of ten – that Niccolò di Angelo comprehended the concept of imprisonment as he was forced to silently and longingly trail with his dulled russet-brown eyes, then dampened by unshed tears, the slender figure of his biological sister just as she disappeared into the horizon, surging forth to a world unknown.

If freedom could possibly be crafted to a physical manifestation, the untamed and unpredictability of the element of water was undeniably its physical embodiment. It was untamed, in that his fogged memories conjured the vague image of the delicate teardrops that streaked his deceased mother’s cheeks moments after her inevitable demise. It was unpredictable, in that the excruciating memory of Bianca’s abandonment of him prickled his eyes and induced tears that were unshed on a time gone by.
Water was the physical manifestation of freedom, in that it reminded the son of Hades of him; of that sole person who had truly defined freedom for him. Water was the physical manifestation of freedom, for in his alluring sea-green eyes, Niccolò sensed himself being gradually stripped of the responsibilities and duties that his status had burdened him with. In his presence alone, breathing was as natural as existing.

The rich shades of blue and green that adorned the interior design of his chambers – his personal chambers in the household of Lord Poseidon – unintentionally suffocated him, and it was solely of the presence of the youngling in his arms that enabled him to remain grounded. Subconsciously, the son of Hades gingerly weaved slender fingers through the tousled locks of the slumbering youngling, as he – with his eyes drifted close – attempted to regain his composure.

Green was imprisonment; abandonment. Green was Bianca’s color.

“I’m sorry, Nico. But you have to be independent from now on.”

It was not a necessity, the son of Hades heaved a humorless chuckle as the words she had uttered once upon a time, haunted him once more in the shades of green and blue swarming his entire vision. There was not a necessity for her to depart from his side, and yet she did. She did so without a backward glance, without the barest hint of hesitation.

She left him. Just like that.

“You are strong, Nico. You can make it without me.”

Niccolò did, truly he did, though just barely. Barely. For he was but a mere child then when the sole family he had known and come to cherish in his entire existence had abandoned him completely, deserting him under the mercy of an adulterous man who claimed to be his birthright father, and his “family”. Niccolò did make it without her, but not as intact if she had not selfishly deserted him by himself.

Day by agonizing day rolled by, with him repetitively and fervently begging towards the sky that his “new” life was a mere figment of a haunting nightmare; that he would awake to the melodious morning hymns that was of his mother’s voice and the tinkling laughter that was of Bianca’s. Day by agonizing day rolled by, with his faith on everything dissipating bit by gradual bit.
There neither were melodious hymns nor that tinkling laughter. Only the haunting clanging of Stygian Iron swords as they were parried, and the erratic pounding of his heart on his every verge of collapsing from unbidden exhaustion.

“I love you, fratellino.”

No, she did not. Bianca abandoned him. That was what Niccolò convinced of himself in the past seven years of his existence without her presence in his life; seven grueling years of trying to keep all aspects of himself intact.

He was broken because he had been weak.

“I love you.”

He was broken because Bianca selfishly abandoned him.

“I love you.”

Bianca was a liar.

A cool yet calloused hand cautiously cupped his right cheek, startling the son of Hades from his lugubrious musings as his eyes fluttered open, gazing directly onto swirling sea-green irises that seemed perturbed. Russet-brown eyes instinctively darted – as that calloused hand delicately caressed his features – to the slumbering youngling on his lap, belatedly noticing that his own grip had tightened considerably on the brunette and was causing the child to whimper softly in his slumber.

“Is it her?” the newcomer breathed as another calloused hand gingerly pried his slightly trembling fingers off of the youngling, settling Tyson to rest at ease atop the scented azure silken sheets.

Niccolò avoided the subject and those eyes like a plague, diverting his attention to the rays of light streaming through the casement windows.

“Are you in need of my assistance, Lord Perseus?” the son of Hades formally inquired, his voice surprisingly levelled and monotonous.
Even the mere utterance of his name was already burning his tongue; burning him internally.

The young heir heaved a sigh in response, the expression on his sea-green eyes morphing to undisguised sadness and displeasure.

“It’s Percy. And I am “in need”,” The young heir made quotations in the air, to which the son of Hades had to repress his desire to roll his eyes at the immature gesture. “, of you to talk to me, Nico. This is the first time we have seen each other in two years. You have been avoiding me.”

There was an accusatory note in the young heir’s tone of voice, one which Niccolò – Nico – had to deem as reasonable, considering as the young heir’s statements were not mere fabrication.

Two uneventful years had passed, and yet that duration was inadequate – far too insufficient – to permit his obdurate heart to cease its meaningless, erratic palpitations for a person that was not his to have. Two uneventful years and relentless immersion on his district’s development were inadequate for his obdurate heart to progress and abandon his first and unrequited love.

Not that it would mean anything at all for the older male who would eventually be betrothed for the mere sake of his family’s name.

“We are at that age where freedom from our responsibilities are restricted to a minimum, Pers—Percy,” Nico breathed the name through gritted teeth, once the heir levelled him with a pointed look. “You are already a full-fledged adult, at your age of twenty-one in a few months’ time. You should consider where your priority lies.”

“My priority lies with my people and my family,” Percy countered, his eyebrows creasing in displeasure at the garnered accusation. “Not with the council and their meaningless proposals of the district’s expansion.”

“You know what I am addressing with my statements, Percy!” Nico bellowed, sharply arising from the bed and simultaneously gripping the hilt of his sword as he instinctively placed distance between them. Their proximity; it scarred him.

“You know the exact reason why I swore that blood oath. No! The audacity of you to look at me like that!” The son of Hades glowered at the older male when the latter seethed at the reminder of his actions. “If you do prioritize your people, your family, it would be in your best interest to consider
succeeding over Thalassa.”

“That is not what our law –“

“I do not care of your laws and the prejudices that filled your mind!” Nico growled, his hands trembling erratically on his sides.

Turning away, the son of Hades stalked towards the casement windows and breathed in the crisp breeze to quell his bubbling rage.

“I do not care,” Nico repeated in a softer tone, his somberness seeping through his hushed voice. “Not if it means that you could live.”

The silence that resonated throughout the entirety of the room was deafening, so critically fragile that neither of them seemed to be certain whom should shatter it. How amusing it was that throughout the years of their established platonic relationship, neither seemed to be of a better mind on approaching such delicate matters. Nico’s hands incessantly trembled, rebelling against the will of his mind for them to cease movement, in a clear display of his crestfallen state. He hated it; that which signified the barest hint of weakness and the desire for comfort. He loathed that he had to crumble before Percy, of all people.

The poignant image of that shattered and abandoned ten-year old child of lackluster russet-brown eyes surfaced from the back of his mind.

Toned and tanned arms delicately enclosed his suddenly rigid frame, cradling and pressing him against a firm chest. In that proximity, Nico could swear of the rapid palpitations of the older heir’s heart through the layers of extravagant apparel adorning the Adonis-like physique. The rhythmic beating quelled his raging emotions, lulling him to a comfort he had known, once upon a time forgotten. Their proximity scarred him, as did the lingering affectionate caresses against his partially flushed cheeks, yet the desire to pluck himself of that comfort was subdued by his shock of the sudden gesture.

“Seven years ago, you would have grasped so quickly at the aspect of people coming close to you,” Percy breathed against the crook of his neck as he nestled his head against his right shoulder, the scalding warmth of his breath prickling his skin like a dozen tongues of fire ablaze.

“Seven years ago, I was desperate to have the home I once had,” Nico responded in a hushed voice,
slowly regaining his composure as he struggled within those toned arms. “Seven years ago, I was blinded by naivety as a child. Seven years ago, I was weak.”

“Seven years ago, you were strong. You still are, more so with each passing day,” Percy chided him, though his statement seemed to only barely register on the mind of the son of Hades as the warm puffs of breath against his skin induced miniscule shivers and goosebumps all over his body.

Registering his discomfort, Percy hesitantly yet gradually retracted his hands though he himself remained in place behind the younger heir.

“You have no need of anyone’s protection. Or rather, you desire none that would remind you of events of the past. You have always been your own person, Nico, and I have always highly respected that aspect of you. Yet, if you wish for me to entrust to you my life, I ask that you entrust yours just as completely on mine,” Percy requested, slowly annunciating the words as if carefully weighing each before uttering them. “You offer servitude, and call it as you may, but I request companionship.”

“Companionship cannot be offered by a mere servant to the House,” Nico responded in an instant as he cautiously turned to face the son of Poseidon.

“And you are not – by any terms – a “mere servant”. Regardless of your proposed position on this House, you remain as the son of Hades – second heir and Lieutenant Colonel to the House of Hades,” the son of Poseidon smoothly countered, his head tilting to the side as if to incite his incredulity to challenge his claims.

“The sole purpose of my offer remains intact,” Nico critically dismissed the subject, invoking a wince from the son of Poseidon as they were dragged once more to the initial point of their exchange.

“The House of Zeus offers dark premonitions. Father and Thanatos believes just as much,” the son of Hades murmured, his expression wary as if he were breaching a forbidden subject. “Rumors are that the citizens of Ouranós are going to start a revolution soon, and that Herakles is prepared to counter with military retaliation regardless of the vote of their council. With Triton’s impending succession over the district, the whole Pangaeæ need not an alarming alliance between the two main districts, governed by individuals of questionable morals. Thálassa needs a righteous suzerain – you – to succeed over Lord Poseidon.”

The son of Poseidon gnawed inconspicuously on his plush lower lip as he simultaneously turned his back to Nico, approaching the slumbering figure of his youngest brother with practiced caution.
Tyson was the embodiment of innocence; of a quality which the son of Hades had been forced to strip off at a young age. The youngling was the embodiment of everything which Nico had been incapable of protecting; of all that the son of Hades despised on himself during those years of self-depreciation and loathing. Yet, he was everything that Nico undeniably felt an inclination to defend; to protect with his life, seconding that to the third heir to the House of Poseidon.

Slender fingers extended towards the tousled brown locks, brushing stray wisps from the child’s chubby features. As the youngling unconsciously leaned into the tender caress, an affectionate smile curled Percy’s lips before the said male lowered his head, delicately brushing his lips against the expanse of his brother’s forehead.

“Theseus would have wanted the same.”

The smile on Percy’s lips instantly dropped at the remark, a flash of immense grief fleeting past his sea-green eyes for a mere second before disappearing once more.

Nico despised having to bring forth that forbidden name in the presence of the older male; despised more so that the name would just casually slip past his lips at inappropriate instances. The name and the history revolving around it was indisputably not flexible for any forms of discussions, and for due reasons.

“Please do not do onto Tyson, and to your father, what Theseus had done onto you,” Nico urged as he slowly approached his bed, taking a seat beside the youngling’s resting figure. But the despondent male had his lips pressed firmly onto a thin line, refusing to remark or voice a scintilla of his thoughts.

“If that did not matter enough, then I beg of you, please do not repeat history and cause… and cause Lady Annabeth to suffer through with the consequences of your decision.”

“Annabeth and I are nothing more than mere close acquaintances, Nico,” Percy stated firmly as he withdrew back his hand, clenching them onto tight fists atop his lap. “Please do not encourage Triton in his manic proposals of forming an alliance through the means of a meaningless marriage.”

“That is beside the point, Perseus,” Nico barked in a condescending tone before he continued in a hushed whisper upon noticing the son of Poseidon’s deteriorating mood. The excruciating ache in his chest, induced by the mere mentioning of the young lady’s name, mattered little. “You and I can only defend ourselves so much.”
“I will never abandon you, Nico. That, I promise to you,” Percy breathed, gazing at the son of Hades with a firm conviction and an unfathomable expression swirling on those alluring eyes.

“I stopped believing promises seven years ago, Percy,” the son of Hades answered with a humorless chuckle.

“Seven years ago, you did not have me,” the son of Poseidon offered good-naturedly, earning a roll of the eyes from the younger heir. “If I have to swear that to our ancestral father as well, then so shall it be.”

The son of Hades slowly shook his head as he detached his blade from his side, resting the full weight of the sheathed weapon against the frame of the four-poster canopy bed. The silver encrusted pommel glinted against the light casting against it, accentuating a scintilla of the fine craftsmanship of the House of Hephaestus which was executed in forging the blade.

“It is enough that you consider the idea of succeeding over Thalassa, regardless of what Lord Poseidon perceived of a possible beacon of hope for Triton’s well-being,” Nico concluded, that tone of finality firm on each of his words. “If this discussion is as pointless as I conclude for it to be, I would like to request that I may be allowed to rest in private.”

The son of Poseidon hesitated, lips parting for a second as if to refute the conclusion made by the son of Hades. In the end, all that the third heir managed was a hint of a forced, casual smile.

“I’ll consider.”

It was a lie, and the sons of the two main Houses were well-aware of the unwarranted deception. Yet, instead of invoking another cause of a squabble, Nico simply offered a curt nod before turning his back from the older heir.

The bed dipped once more as Percy gingerly scooped the brunette younling onto his arms, protectively cradling the child’s body against the expanse of his torso as he silently crossed the distance towards the ornamental brass double-doors.

The son of Poseidon paused at the threshold, glancing back at the son of Hades whom had not moved an inch from his position since the last he had spoken. It pained Percy immensely to observe the young man’s hunched and guarded form, undeniably an instinctual reaction that he had procured once more in the past two years since their last encounter.
It pained Percy immensely, as the knowledge that Nico had once more reserved himself – reserved from him – settled onto his mind. Nico was once more shutting himself from the entirety of the world.

It pained Percy immensely because it was Nico.

“Nico,” Percy called out to the younger man, but the son of Hades did not budge from his position. Taking a deep breath, the son of Poseidon simply resumed.

“I can’t be what you wish for me to be.”

As the doors slid shut with a resounding click, the son of Hades gradually nestled under the covers of the bed, allowing for the darkness to consume him as he curled in on himself with his russet-brown eyes firmly screwed shut.

Nico was well-aware of what Percy was implying with his words – Percy could not be the suzerain which the people and Nico desired for him to be, regardless of the high approval bestowed upon him by the council of majority of the other districts. Percy would be the last person to entertain the mere idea of losing faith on his brother; his family, despite the atrocities that the first heir had committed, unproven due to lack of substantial and credible testimonies.

Percy simply stated that he could not be the suzerain of Thálassa, which Nico desired for him to be.

That was all that his statement meant, yet the dark recesses at the back of his mind forced Nico to consider otherwise. His heart throbbed excruciatingly at the twisted implications he placed on those words, wounding himself unintentionally.

Every part of my being aches.

“I know,” the son of Hades breathed, deeply breathing in the scent of the ocean – his scent – that lingered on the fabric of the covers, forcibly lulling himself to sleep. “I have always known, Percy.”
Character(s):
(Nico di Angelo) Niccolò di Angelo
====== Niccolò: Victory of the people

Meaning(s):
suzerain: a feudal overlord (historical)

Translation(s):
Dolofónos:
It is basically a term coined around an assassin or of a person who commits murder on someone else by stealth, etc.
Patéras: Father
Mitéra: Mother
Arketá!: Enough! / That’s enough!

This story is updated every Monday. Next chapter will be covering the first meeting of Percy and Nico. The full names of most of the characters are provided at the link below. That page is subjected to change as the story progresses.

Thank you very much for reading! I hope you enjoyed the first chapter!

Link: HERE
The Story of Us

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Pangaea – the entirety; the motherland and birthplace of their ostensible ancestral father and primordial god, Lord Chaos. Pangaea had been originally comprised of seven main continents; an axis of seven unified powers, up until the end of the *Skoteina Chronia*. *Skoteina Chronia*, or the Dark Ages as the history depicted, was the macabre epoch under the reign of a barbarous madman of the name Kronos, upon which modernization flourished as with the unfortunate degradations of an established society. For aeons, dissonance was evident within the societal groups, and with the deteriorating conditions due to military interventions – of martial law – revolutions surfaced like wildfire, spreading throughout the entirety of Pangaea.

Then arose the New Order.

The New Order was the aftermath of nearly a decade of revolutions which strategically evolved to an insurmountable regime change, led by the youngest heir of Lord Kronos and his Lady Rhea, Lord Zeus, along with twelve differing individuals across the seven continents of Pangaea. The establishment of New Order formulated the possibilities of further modernization while simultaneously diminishing societal hierarchy, though the prognostication of a succeeding martial law did not dissipate regardless. In the need to quell the trepidation of the whole Pangaea, the original seven continents of Pangaea had been strategically altered, thus the establishment of thirteen districts from the seven continents. The strategic distribution of territory appeased the majority of Pangaea’s population, and freewill was offered to the inhabitants of the former seven continents to determine which district they wished to belong to. The thirteen districts were bestowed upon the thirteen lords and ladies of the revolutions, as the suzerains of their respective districts.

Ouranós – the House of Zeus – was bestowed upon the son of the deceased Lord Kronos and his Lady Rhea, and was assessed as the main and highest district due to Zeus’ considerable prestige; thus its derivation of the term *Heaven*. Under the governance of Lord Zeus and his consort, Lady Hera, the district was the domain of the nobilities, and the plot of land on its own was far superior in magnitude comparatively to its neighboring districts. Due to it being a partially enclosed plot of land, the economy of the district was much inclined to agriculture and commerce, and had to be dependent of its two neighboring districts to sustain better access to trading canals and the riches of the sea.

Thálassa – the House of Poseidon – was bestowed upon Zeus’ second-in-command and right-hand man, and by hierarchical means was the second main district. Geographically, the district was formerly a whole continent itself, and was naturally enclosed by miles of bodies of waters; thus its derivation of the term – the body of water, “*Sea*”. Under the governance of Lord Poseidon and his consort, Lady Amphitrite, the district was affluent; their prosperity unhindered due to the district’s strategic and unblemished location.
Skotádi – the House of Hades – was bestowed upon Zeus’ left-hand man, and was by hierarchical means the third and last main district in Pangaea. Geographically – alike Thálassa – Skotádi was formerly a whole unblemished and rather uninhabited continent by itself, and was strategically located close to the equator of Pangaea and enclosed by miles of bodies of waters. The district was affluent, but such was attributed to the land’s abundance in riches by means of natural resources. Under the governance of Lord Hades and his consort, Lady Persephone, the once barren land astoundingly flourished and had been acknowledged the richest district by means of its economic status.

Agápi – the House of Aphrodite – was a neighboring district to the top of Ouranós, solely dictated by Lady Aphrodite. The district was subpar to the three main districts, with its economy highly dependent on the fertility of its agricultural lands. The district mainly housed maidens – sirens, as Lord Zeus deemed in amusement – and thus the general population of the district was the female occupants.

Pólemos – the House of Ares – was a neighboring district geographically located at the bottom of Ouranós, and solely dictated by Lord Ares. Ruled with an iron fist, the district was of a strict military governance, – thus the name being a derivation of the term “War” – housing both genders in the percentage of seventy-to-thirty, with the majority being of male natives.

Fotiá – the House of Hephaestus – was a former whole continent of Pangaea, solely dictated by Lord Hephaestus. Despite the districts limitless access to bodies of water and substantially fertile lands, the economy of the district was attributed to its residents. Fotiá was subsequently deemed the “Land of Fire” and “District of Craftsmen and Smiths” for the inhabitants centralized their livelihood in technological advancements and were pioneers of metallurgy.

Gi – the House of Demeter – and Krasí – the House of Dionysus – were the two main agricultural districts of the Pangaea and was situated in the central region of the largest former continent, along with two neighboring districts. Lady Demeter governed Gi while Krasí was under the governance of Lord Dionysus – and his eventual consort, Lady Ariadne. The districts’ economies were heavily dependent on the abundance of agricultural produce, as were most of the foreign districts whose agricultures were challenged by the critical shifts in the climate. The inhabitants of the districts were naturally farmers – the population evenly distributed to accommodate both genders – but there was surprisingly a distinct lack of societal hierarchy in either district. Such, mostly was attributed to the satisfactory economic status.

Selíni – the House of Artemis – was a district of indefinite location, mainly due to Lady Artemis’ status as a hunter. Selíni was assumed as a district in the mountain regions that surrounded the former largest continent, though residents of the district – not exceeding a few thousand – were scattered throughout the eastern and southern archipelagos. Disregarding the indefinite location of the district, members of the district were peculiarly and solely of maidens that were subsequently trained as huntresses.
Ílios – the House of Apollo – was a district situated along the borders on the left of the former largest continent, and was governed by Lord Apollo, the twin brother of Lady Artemis. The district’s economic status was subpar to that of the other districts, but was widely acknowledged for its medical advancements and as the pioneer of the Second Renaissance. Societal hierarchy was a matter that incurred abhorrence within the district, and thus was deemed almost nonexistent.

Anemoi – the House of Hermes – was one of the two districts of the former second smallest continent, situated to the northern area and possessing complete access with the trade canals. Under the governance of Lord Hermes and his consort, Lady May, Anemoi was the main district for commerce and had made significant advancements in terms of transportation. The population was evenly distributed to accommodate both genders, though most residents were either merchants or travelers.

Sofía – the House of Athena – was the second district situated to below of Anemoi and was almost mainly land-bound. Under the governance of Lady Athena, Sofía was the district of diplomats and aristocrats, to some extent. The district’s economy was mainly dependent on agricultural produce, though was slowly expanding on venturing with other possible aspects of the economy in the governance of its suzerain. Equally populated by both genders, societal hierarchy was heavily condemned within the district and the concept of democracy was highly practiced.

Lastly, Spíti – the House of Hestia – was a district utterly subpar and isolated from the foreign districts. Situated at the most southern end of Pangaea, Spíti was ruled by Lady Hestia and was the most uninhabited of all the districts with its population only to a few thousand. The district was acknowledged as the “Land of the Pariahs and Expatriates”; the final dwelling of all that wandered, thus the derivation of the district’s name under the term “Home”. Due to the harsh climates and infertile lands, the district remained highly dependent on the support of the foreign districts, in accordance to a signed treaty.

The thirteen districts comprised that of Pangaea, established with the inhabitant’s demanding need of an assurance that the Dark Ages would not repeat its course once more, and of a lasting peace under the New Order. For decades, the peace was retained and Pangaea was restored to its former glory once more, and the inhabitants permitted themselves to believe that a lasting peace and coexistence under the governance of the thirteen suzerains were highly plausible.

That was, until a stirring arose once more.

“Coincidences, in general, are great stumbling blocks in the way of that class of thinkers who have been educated to know nothing of the theory of probabilities – that theory to which the most glorious objects of human research are indebted for the most glorious of illustration.”
Seven years, prior to the present time

The entirety of Niccolò di Angelo’s world had always and solely been within the family property of a quaint country cottage situated atop a precipice which offer picturesque view of the vast ocean. It was the only world that he had acknowledged throughout his childhood, being a child – along with his older sister, Bianca – strictly secured and sheltered from the barbaric and harsh influences, and realities, of the world beyond the faded and slightly chipped walls of their household. It was a safe haven; the only haven he had acknowledged throughout his entire life.

With the demise of Maria di Angelo and the departure of Bianca di Angelo, the vintage imagery of his haven diminished as if it were a memory of a distant past. Perhaps, it had been just that; a fabricated paradise that gradually faded onto the bleak and monochromatic background that was reality.

He was Niccolò di Angelo, second son – illegitimate – of the suzerain Lord Hades and the second heir to the House of Hades, Skotádi. But those were, at that point of time, empty titles attached to his name, bestowed upon a child so that he might not condemn his very existence. They were too late – his father was too late – if they had a scintilla of desire to ensure that he remained intact. Not that the young heir would permit their acknowledgement of him tearing at the seams; not that their acknowledgement could aid in reclaiming that world – that life – which he had lost.

“Are you all right, Nico?”

Said child had come to detest that inquiry, uttered to him in distinct variations of voices, laced with a concern and sympathy he had no interest on being the recipient of. The adults were impeccable liars; that was the conclusion he derived, a year after residing on the household of his biological father. His father was ever the impeccable liar, inquiring of his well-being in his presence, then condemning his existence the next for his features were a bitter reminder; a male replica of the beautiful features of the late Maria di Angelo.

Bianca’s was… tolerable.
“My name is Niccolò, Father,” the child responded, voice low and firm, dodging in offering an answer that had always been unchanging.

No, I am not. I did not desire any of these.

“Do not worry, Niccolò. You would not be… forced in the room during the proceedings of the Summer Solstice. I have the impression that you are much inclined to exploring Thálassa as you please – with the supervision of the guards – and see how different their culture is, compared to ours,” the first heir intervened, before the suzerain could reprimand the younger, suggesting in kind and offering the young child a warm smile as he cautiously grasped Nico’s lax left hand.

Thanatos, first heir and legitimate son of Lord Hades and Colonel of the military division of Skotádi. At the age of twenty, Thanatos’ physical appearance was much inclined to the Lady’s side of the family, with him possessing rich honey golden eyes that seemed molten under the glaring lights, and a complexion the shade of teakwood. Thanatos was undoubtedly a captivating man – that much Nico was certain of – possessing a lean and muscular physique, and a regal face that was alluringly framed by silky jet-black hair that flowed down to his upper back.

Thanatos was a brotherly figure that Nico had come to acknowledge, for it there had to be someone – anyone – in that palatial prison that properly acknowledged his mute lamentations, it was solely Thanatos. Regardless, the older male would be foolish should he express a scintilla of hope that he might permanently occupy the barest of void in Nico’s which the departure of his biological sister left widely gaping. Not that Thanatos indulged on him than to the extent of offering him a temporary sense of freedom and the companionship of a sibling.

“Will you accompany me?” Nico inquired politely, cautiously lifting his dull russet brown eyes to meet his older brother’s.

Nico was uncertain what expression he was adorning then, as Thanatos features had naturally became inscrutable once more. The warm smiles were fragments of his once fabricated paradise, Nico thought to himself, slipping rarely and presumably solely for him. In actuality, Thanatos’s personality was contradictory, attributed to the strict upbringing of the suzerain and his consort. The young man was believed to be merciless and undiscriminating, emitting an aura of danger which Nico had by then found himself accustomed to. The first heir possessed a dark sense of humor, similarly to their father, which burdened most individuals with utmost difficulty in distinguishing the fine line between his witty remarks and lethal threats.

And Thanatos was, by all means, lethal. The sheer sight of the first heir brandishing his sword, with a fluidity attributed to years of being under the tutelage of their father, would have any impudent
human cowering in immense fear.

“Perhaps I might. I offer no promises,” Thanatos responded, paying no mind to their father’s close scrutiny. “I do believe though that Lord Poseidon’s third heir offered to take you to where you please to venture. It might be a good idea, and you may appreciate better the company of someone closer to your age.”

A frown creased the child’s delicate features at the response, more so at the offered company of a suzerain’s son – a mere stranger. He need not the companion of another pair of prying eyes. He need not need a false sense of hospitality; a mere façade solely for the sake of establishing good relations with foreign districts.

He need not be a key player in such a flamboyant yet putrid society.

Thanatos noticed his reaction.

“Let us settle with an agreement then.” Thanatos halted mid-step, kneeling before the child and resuming in a hushed voice that was solely audible to them. “If you do not enjoy the third heir’s company, I shall accompany you for a whole day to anywhere you please in Skotádi. That – I promise to you.”

Russet brown eyes widened by a mere fraction in response, and as Thanatos extended his right hand upon utterance of his offer, Nico’s eyes narrowed to slits out of sheer suspicion at the older male’s bold proclamation.

The first heirs of the districts were raised upon a strict upbringing, molded at a young age to the ideal succeeding suzerains of Pangaea. Thanatos was not an exception, and his upbringing was rather much austere under their father’s supervision. The young man was educated in all aspects, groomed to regality but with the blood of a natural warrior; all of which under Lord Hades’ tutelage. It was uncontestable, seeing as Skotádi had come such a long way from what it had been, to the astounding glory that it now possessed. It only deserved a rightful heir to continue the legacy of the first suzerain, Lord Hades.

Time was such a precious factor for Thanatos, and the young man would never risk bargaining it – of conducting in a bargain, in general – unless he was assured of emerging victorious.

“You know Lord Poseidon’s son.” It was not a question, but rather a statement with an accusatory
note, “And you are sure that I will like his company.”

The fleeting amusement that crossed past those molten honey gold irises was enough confirmation.

“All right,” Nico nodded begrudgingly, his tone hushed as he clasped his hand against the young man’s to seal their agreement. “I will hold onto that promise, Thanatos.”

“That is quite an endearing sight,” an amused voice lightly remarked.

The first heir heaved a barely audible sigh, his expression twisting quite indefinitely.

“You should polish on your manners, Lord Theseus,” Thanatos breathed, vague disappointment in his tone as he gracefully arose once more to his full height, directing his attention to a young man leaning against one of the monolithic columns on the Lord Poseidon’s palatial household.

“In my defense, it was a rarity to see you reflect… compassion and fraternal love. It quite contradicts the popular belief of people regarding you.”

Nico barely registered that they had already ventured into the grand hallway when his eyes landed on the form of a winsome young man, roughly the age of fifteen or sixteen, with long and curly raven locks and murky sea-green eyes which appealed as unnatural to the child. No, not unnatural. For some reason, it simply did not befit the young man perfectly.

The young man – Theseus – adorned a full regalia of Brandeis blue with various embroideries of the riches of the sea and the family crest of the House of Poseidon on the section just beneath the area of where his heart palpitated. With a practiced yet fetching smile curling his lips, it was evident that the young man was of nobility; perhaps a son of the suzerain of Thálassa.

“Anyway, it has been quite a long while since our last encounter,” Theseus proclaimed casually as he cautiously stepped forward, kneeling a mere few feet from the suzerain of Skotádi. “Lord Hades, it gives me utmost pleasure to welcome your family into our humble abode in the duration of your stay.”

“I express our utmost gratitude, on behalf of my family,” the suzerain responded formally, though there was the barest hint of disappointment in his tone. “Though, customarily so, I believe it should have been your older brother, the first heir, to have welcomed us into your… ah, “humble abode”.”
“Triton had been… preoccupied with the company of Herakles, under the insistence of Lord Zeus,” Theseus provided slowly, as if carefully weighing each word against his tongue, as he slowly arose to full height once more.

Nico did not miss the subtle grimace on Thanatos’ features at the aforementioned names.

“Lord Zeus has always been invested with forging a diplomatic alliance with our House, for some inexplicable reason,” Theseus concluded, randomly gesturing his hands in circles.

However, upon sensing a drastic plummet to the pleasant mood, Nico was partially certain that his father and Thanatos apparently had that “inexplicable” reason completely figured out; one which Nico would not register in his mind until a couple of years in the future.

“Ah, enough of that adult gibberish. I am sure the suzerains and the first heirs would divulge on that in the duration of the proceedings of the Summer Solstice,” the son of Poseidon offered good-naturedly as he redirected his attention to the child, kneeling a mere feet from the latter.

“You must be Nico. Thanatos rather fondly mentioned you once when we encountered each other on a visit to Gi,” Theseus remarked, his lips curled at ease to a friendly smile as he regarded the child. “As you might have heard, my name is Theseus. Second son of Lord Poseidon and the second heir to the House of Poseidon. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, young one.”

“My name is Niccolò, not Nico, Lord Theseus,” the child countered, a dangerous lilt in his voice as he regarded the older male with a certain defiance.

No one was allowed to address him with such familiarity. It was now solely a right of his deceased mother, and once the right of a sibling who had abandoned him.

The young lord blinked in surprise, sea-green eyes evidently widening at the cold treatment he had received from a child. For a second, the second son of Hades was contemplative of his action – weighing in his mind that he might have overstepped some social boundaries and might be receiving a reprimanding from his father – before the son of Poseidon loudly heaved an amused laugh.

“Truly you are siblings!” Theseus chortled, regarding the child with evident respect. “Thanatos has already influenced you much with his personality.”
“Theseus has a… vexatious habit of bestowing nicknames,” Thanatos offered to his younger brother, in place of the shortlancing heir, before he turned his firm gaze onto the said heir. “I hope you respect my brother’s request of addressing him properly by his actual name. I would not wish to invoke agreement from you through… unconventional means.”

“At ease,” Theseus offered once his laughter subsided, lifting his hands up in a gesture of surrender. “I shall respect your brother’s request, though he might have to convince Percy otherwise. I might or might not have introduced your brother – my brother’s potential friend – by that short name.”

Theseus redirected his attention once more to the second son of Hades, who was then offering a quite intimidating glare. *Ah, a true son of the House of Hades.*

“My younger brother had been truly looking forward to your arrival. Regardless of our short age difference – just a little over two years – he needs someone who is rather… ah, less acquainted with these adult proceedings,” Theseus offered to the child with a warm smile, pausing briefly in mid-sentence as he struggled to construct his words appropriately. “And he is most delighted to meet someone that is like him. I truly have high hopes that you could establish a friendship with him…”

The young man trailed off, though there was a subtle twitch in those full lips that indicated otherwise. The name of Thanatos and the first heir of Thalassa, Lord Triton, vaguely registered in his ears as Theseus almost inaudibly mumbled, a remorseful and distant expression fleeting past those sea-green eyes. His curiosity was piqued, though a subtle warning in his head indicated that it was not his position to question any personal matter regarding Thanatos’ profile.

Perhaps, he had the right, but there was a certainty in his mind that Thanatos would not completely disclose such personal information to him.

“Enough idle chit-chat,” Theseus finally exclaimed when the second son of Hades offered nothing but his silence. *The blood of Lord Hades truly flows through his very veins.* “With your permission, I would be honored to escort you to the council room.”

“I suppose your presence is tolerable,” Hades remarked, suppressing his desire to heave a resigned sigh. “Lead the way.”

With a practiced and formal smile curling his lips, the son of Poseidon naturally folded his hands behind his back before gesturing for the family to follow.
The heels of their shoes sharply clacked distastefully against the unnatural hardened frosted glass of
the flooring, seeming to resound throughout the empty hallway. Nico inconspicuously surveyed the
area with inquisitive eyes, temporarily basking in the presence of a differing cultural atmosphere.

Thálassa was a complete and utterly glaring contradiction to his homeland, though it was rather not
distastefully so. There was a certain sense of abundance in Thálassa that was nonexistent in his
homeland; not necessarily so pertaining to riches. There was an abundance in life, and a sense of
freedom that hauntingly resembled that which he used to have in a time that had long gone by. There
was a glaring radiance that naturally reflected in the expressions of the residents; a radiance that
reminded him a crystalline memory of what was once his naivety.

The new environment was unintentionally scarring his bruised and battered soul, yet the familiar
sensation of wanting to covet these – all of these flickering reminders of what was once his happiness
– haunted him most.

“Can you manage on your own for a while?” Thanatos inquired in a hushed murmur from above
him.

Nico was certain that his expression had unintentionally slipped, permitting the vacancy of his dull
russet brown eyes to make itself known. The child schooled his expression once more, naturally
stripping his features of any emotion.

When had it been that such deception was something he could manage off as naturally as if it were
breathing itself? Nico could neither grasp for the answer, nor offer a scintilla of concern for his
slipping humanity.

“I will be fine.”

No. He never had been; not in a long while.

It was a lie Nico had been feeding everyone with; a lie which only a handful was attuned to. No one
could salvage him. No one could possibly accomplish such a feat.

Thanatos easily registered the lie, his lips parting for a split second as if he desired to respond to such
blatant lie. Those lips parted, quivered for a split second, before slipping shut once more, yet much
taut than what it had previously been. There was displeasure in those honey gold irises, yet the barest
hint of practiced patience and respect as well which had always – always – been applicable to Nico.

Thanatos despised lies, and that much Nico was certain of. Yet, for his sake, he caved in with Nico’s deceptive lies.

The mere presence of a child in such a critical gathering – his mere presence as the second son of a suzerain – was merely a public façade. A public façade he had no desire of partaking in, had he possessed a choice. In reality, he was just the son of a deceased Maria di Angelo, and that was the only fact of his life that he had come to know and to accept. He did not belong in this lavish world of deceptive lies and saccharinely maddening croons.

This was not his life.

“Oh, Theseus. How pleasant of you to escort Lord Hades and the young heirs to the council room,” a modulated voice remarked, startling the child from his musings as he risked a glance up towards the owner of that levelled voice.

“It was my pleasure, Father. Though I believe that Lord Hades rather found my presence… unexpected,” Theseus responded, an amused lilt in his tone as he took larger steps, halting once he reached the side of said man.

Theseus was only the barest of a replica of his father, Lord Poseidon – as Nico recognized from various portraits that cluttered the hallways of the alcazar – as the only distinct feature which the young man possessed that was of his father’s was his sea-green eyes and jet-black locks. The suzerain was adorning a warm and natural smile that almost had the child caving in to the desire to drop his heightened guard.

“For valid reasons,” Hades commented, a glint of amusement briefly passing through those dark eyes as they regarded the suzerain of Thálassa. “I had rather expected your first son to welcome us to your… ah, humble abode, as Theseus had phrased it.”

“Zeus… encouraged my son’s company to Herakles,” Poseidon slowly stated, his expression contorting to displeasure for a split second before smoothing out once more with a practiced ease. “As for the Lady, she had to… ah… “address” to the present female suzerains. Nonetheless, I do apologize to you and your sons.”

“There was none to forgive, Lord Poseidon,” Thanatos offered. “Theseus had been rather…
“I am pleased to hear that,” the suzerain stated with a genuine smile, though one of his eyebrows arched while his expression became amused and inquisitive at the first heir’s brief pause and choice of words. “Just as I am pleased to see you and your father in good health. Though, I would prefer that you do drop such formality when it is only us present.”

“Perhaps when there is much privacy,” Thanatos said, allowing the barest hint of a smile to curl his lips, though it was rather professional rather than natural. “It would be improper to address the suzerain of Thállassa with such familiarity regardless of the close ties of our families.”

“You and your strict upbringing,” Poseidon remarked with an amused chuckle, shifting an almost accusatory glance at the suzerain of Skotádi, whose features simply remained neutral.

The personality of the suzerain before his presence was a complete contradictory to that merciless depictions perceived from mere portraits; a contradiction which had caught the child off-guard. The suzerain radiated no hint of hostility and lacked of an intimidating aura, despite that his presence demanded respect. Lord Poseidon, Nico gathered in his mind as he cautiously scrutinized the older male, strayed from the stereotypical image attached to a suzerain. In Nico’s presence, he was but a hospitable host and a father; a father, which Nico had to admit and with guilt, who he would have rather had instead.

No, the child mentally dismissed of such thoughts, his free hand clenching onto a tight fist. He did not need a father. He needed his mother and his sister; his entire family and the life which they had built on that quaint household of faded and chipped walls.

Sensing the conspicuous gaze directed at him, warm sea-green eyes drifted to the small figure nestled against the side of Hades’ first heir, gazing directly onto dull russet brown eyes. The child unintentionally flinched upon being the recipient of a sudden attention, before the child meekly lowered his head out of respect.

“Ah, you must be Niccolò,” Poseidon declared, a half-amused smile curling his lips as the child tensed upon being addressed. “What is your verdict of my district so far, young man?”

“It is… abundant with life,” Nico responded with caution, his grip on Thanatos’ hand subconsciously tightening. “It feels… overwhelming.”
“I am glad you think so of my home. I believe that the environment here is… utterly different with your homeland, but I am pleased that you are accepting of such a jovial environment,” Poseidon responded with a nod, his expression immensely pleased. “I hope in time, you may consider Thálassa your second home. I have a feeling that I will see you much often in the future.”

The child’s brows furrowed; creased out of confusion at the vague statement uttered by the suzerain of the district. The implication was evident, but what piqued the child more was that high level of confidence the suzerain possessed upon making such declaration. It reminded him of Thanatos’, his father’s even, when they possessed utmost certainty when establishing a bargain.

Was it the same? Or was the suzerain – though unlikely – burdening him with the expectancy of his future frequent visitations?

Before the child could contemplate further on the thought or question what the suzerain was trying to imply, the Lord of Thálassa had his attention diverted, those warm sea-green eyes widening by a fraction and – if possible – gaining more warmth as a fond and proud expression settled onto those features.

Russet brown eyes followed the lord’s line of sight, settling onto a dark space between two pillars… Nothing. There was nothing there. Glancing towards the suzerain, the expression on his features remained intact, and was then equally reflected on his second heir’s features as the young man directed his attention towards that same direction.

“Ah, Percy. Why are you hiding there, brother?” Theseus questioned, his tone possessing a playful lilt. “Come forth now.”

The child had his eyes fixed onto the space between the pillars, evident and sheer curiosity swirling on them as the young man’s request was answered with the faint rustling of apparel. The shadows seemed to shift as well, along with the resonance of that shuffling sound, indicating that there had been movement; a movement that Nico could only register with certainty was coming from that space between the pillars.

Seconds passed, almost a full minute, before a figure slowly emerged. It was of healthy tanned complexion that the child registered first, followed by a lean and fit physique adorned by a full Brandeis blue regalia identical to that of Theseus. When the figure stepped completely away from the shadows and to the glaring lights of the beaded and shell chandeliers, molten sea-green eyes immediately connected with dull russet brown irises.

For once in that full year of a bleak and meaningless existence within that monochromatic world, the
child found his heart palpitating once more, in a tune so fine and familiar that was solely invoked by the only family he had come to acknowledge throughout the entirety of his life. His heart palpitated erratically, to the point that he could register the healthy pounding of the blood coursing through his veins in his ears.

The figure that had stepped forth was of a young man; slightly younger and possessing a slightly less defined built compared to the second heir of Thalassa. The young man possessed silky jet black hair, dishevelled yet so naturally alluring despite its state, and a natural smile was creasing those full lips. The young man was astoundingly winsome, perhaps more so than Theseus despite his age, but it was not his physical allure that had the child drawn to the newcomer.

It was those sea-green eyes – naturally vibrant, yet seeming like molten lava pools under the glaring lights. They swirled with unbridled and raw emotion, of a ferocity that was equally breath-taking and overwhelming. There was a depth in those limpid pools which Nico found himself being submerged onto, offering such an overwhelming and heady sensation that had his lips parting by a mere fraction.

The young man was, in his mind, comparative to one of those historical figures he had ingrained in his memory at such a fine age, depicted in children’s books and literary works alike. A knight; an authentic blue-blooded warrior of a nobility descent.

“I apologize for the intrusion. Mother, the Lady Amphitrite, requested for you, Father,” the young man – “Percy” – declared in a low voice that had an inconsistency to it, induced by currently undergoing through his pubescent years.

The young man occasionally strayed his eyes to Nico, who refused to fidget or squirm under the scrutiny despite being perturbed of the rather conspicuous attention directed at him. There was unbridled fascination within those irises; perhaps the slightest indication of captivation, as if the child were a rare and fine specimen.

“I see. I suppose it is time to commence with the Summer Solstice,” the suzerain acknowledged with a curt nod, the serious expression on his features fading in a split second as he firmly grasped the young man’s shoulders once said teen was within his reach.

Lord Poseidon cautiously shifted the young lad until the latter was a mere few feet from Nico.

“Well. I believe that introductions are due first. Perseus, this is Niccolò di Angelo, the second son of your Uncle Hades. Niccolò, this is my third son, Perseus Tzákson.”
The son of Hades unintentionally had one of his brows arching in response at how casually the suzerain of the district addressed his father as “Uncle Hades”, which immediately earned him a subtle twitching of lips – a gesture of amusement – from the third heir, Perseus.

“I hope you do cease from ingraining it in your children’s minds that I am their “uncle”,” Hades countered firmly, naturally arching his brow as his second son did just moments before.

“We are all a family regardless of how you perceive it, Hades,” Poseidon responded, flicking his right hand in dismissal of the other suzerain’s statement. “I would prefer it much that your children register that and address me with less formality, especially now that it is a luxury of the current generation.”

“I believe mother has requested that the proceeding should commence now, Father,” Theseus interjected immediately before the suzerain of Skotádi – with furrowed brows and a displeased expression – could respond, and a squabble could commence instead.

“Ah, true. Let us make haste,” Poseidon declared with finality before regarding his third son.

“I trust that you act in accordance with your upbringing, young man. Please accompany young Niccolò wherever he pleased to venture in our district. I hear the young lad is quite piqued with our cultural heritage; something I hope would rub off on you as well, Perseus,” Poseidon commented, the barest hint of mischief and amusement glinting on his eyes as he uttered the last part.

Those molten sea-green eyes critically solidified for a split second, like a frozen expanse of the ocean – glazed and cold – yet still possessing depth underneath that hardened surface, before they reverted to their original appearance. It was a fleeting sight, yet it registered so profoundly to the child.

The icy cold hands of Thanatos snapped him from his musings; that hand cautiously ruffling his already disheveled locks before the man departed with a lingering and critical look directed at him.

**Be safe. Come to me immediately should anything to your displeasure occurs.**

Nico wordlessly offered a curt nod, his eyes diverting to the side when his father fixed a look towards his direction. It was evident that he was expressing rebellion; distancing himself rather distastefully from his biological father who merely offered a disapproving expression at his defiance.
It was not what Nico would have desired – what his mother or Bianca, perhaps, would have desired – but it was ingrained onto his mind as if it were basically instinctual. He harbored no filial piety – could not do so at that point of time – with a supposed biological father who remained a mystery; nonexistent for majority of his life.

The sharp clacks of exorbitant shoes resounded through the hallway, echoing in a seemingly rhythmic pattern as the suzerains and their heirs headed for the council room, leaving the third son of Poseidon and the second son of Hades by themselves. There was but a slightest tension in the air, attributed to them being no more than mere strangers, that had the child valiantly resisting the urge to squirm.

“You need not accompany me. I would rather not be a burden, and I can manage on my own,” the son of Hades offered while his eyes remained casted to the side, his tone hinting finality.

The son of Poseidon heaved an amused chuckle at that, the young man tilting his head partially to the side as he assessed the child under heavy scrutiny.

“You don’t need to be so formal with me. Formality is for adults,” the third heir huffed, his tone portraying a slight childish lilt that had Nico redirecting his attention to the older boy. Perseus was almost… pouting.

“You are… You were being formal just now, Lord Perseus,” Nico offered slowly, his tone seeming cautious at the sudden change in demeanor of the older boy.

“Ah, I’m sorry,” Perseus murmured, bowing his head low for a second before lifting it once more to meet russet-brown irises. “While I am no first heir to the Thálassa, Dad demands for Theseus – my older brother – and I to conduct ourselves as if we were the ones succeeding over the district.”

To some extent, Nico could understand the suzerain’s upbringing of his children, regardless that they were not of direct succession to the district. An heir was an extension of his or her respective district, truly, and it was often merely a matter of conduct that define where establishments between districts were initiated; each desiring to emerge at the top.

Though for some reason, the child could not completely dismiss the nagging thought that there were hidden intentions between such fine lines; reasons behind the suzerain’s conduct that his still partially naïve mind could not establish there and then.
“Oh, and it’s Percy.”

“What?” Nico breathed, snapped back to reality; from his musings.

“My name. Lord Perseus is too formal, and I don’t like it. Please call me Percy,” Perseus – Percy – offered with a dazzling smile, extending his hand for a handshake before pausing. “What should I call you then?”

His response then, up until the present, remained an undecipherable mystery, so profound that none could concretely process an understanding of what his mind and subconsciousness were mutually perceiving at that moment.

The moment Nico had grasped that outstretched hand, a warm tingle encompassed his hand, and there was an instance that a thought he had deemed as forbidden resurfaced from his mind. That warmth enveloped him with emotions – without the excruciating pain brought forth by the remembrance of which – he only was aware existed in the presence of his loving mother and Bianca; in an illusion once upon a dream. It resurfaced fond memories – of wintry nights cuddled by the hearth; of annual mediocre cakes freshly baked which either tasted too bitter or too sweet, yet ones he had always deemed as the best delicacy he had ever consumed. It reminded him of memories; of fragments from a paradise that was his past.

*Home.*

That warmth reminded him of home. That warmth was like coming home. And when he parted his lips to offer a response, Nico could then only think that perhaps – just *perhaps* – there was a person in this monochromatic world that could come to completely comprehend him; *understand* him.

“… Nico.”

Niccolò and Nico were defined as victorious; conqueror of the people.

“Nico.”

di Angelo was defined as “from the angels”.
And to Percy, he was nothing short of a gift that was heaven-sent.

Chapter End Notes

Character(s):
(Percy Jackson) Perseus Tzákson
====== "Tzákson" is just a different form of "Jackson"

Translation(s):
Skoteina Chronia: Dark Ages

Thirteen Districts of Pangaea:
Ouranós: The House of Zeus
Meaning: “Heaven” or “Sky”
Thálassa: The House of Poseidon
Meaning: “Sea”
Skotádi: The House of Hades
------ Meaning: “Dark” or “Darkness” or “Obscurity”
------ Obscurity – n – the state of being unknown, inconspicuous, or unimportant; the quality of being difficult to understand.
Agápi: The House of Aphrodite
Meaning: “Love”
Pólemos: The House of Ares
Meaning: “Fight” or “War” or “Warfare”
Fotía: The House of Hephaestus
Meaning: “Fire” or “Light”
Gi: The House of Demeter
Meaning: “Earth”
Krasí: The House of Dionysus
Meaning: “Wine”
Selíni: The House of Artemis
Meaning: “Moon”
Ílios: The House of Apollo
Meaning: “Sun”
Anemoi: The House of Hermes
Meaning: “Winds”
Sofía: The House of Athena
Meaning: “Wisdom”
Spíti: The House of Hestia
Meaning: “House” or “Home”

The full names of most of the characters are provided at the link below. That page is subjected to change as the story progresses.
Link: HERE

Please leave a comment so I may know how you like the story thus far. Thank you so much for those who have left feedback on the previous chapter! Thank you for reading this one as well, and until the next update (18/04/2016)!
What We've Become

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Your memory is a monster; you forget—it doesn't. It simply files things away. It keeps things for you, or hides things from you—and summons them to your recall with will of its own. You think you have a memory; but it has you!”

— “A Prayer for Owen Meany” by John Irving

Nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return to a fragmented time gone by; a suffering caused by fragments of memories. It was in reminiscent memories that an individual could progressively distinguish his personal demons; of fallacious societal perceptions that would imminently degrade a person immensely. It was in reminiscent memories that Niccolò di Angelo concluded that an established distance and a façade of naivety would salvage the tatters on the seams of his being; would precisely and truly piece him as he should – as was expected of him. He had to admit that he was undeniably wrong to great extents.

Two years neither mended nor salvaged him. Rather, it bestowed a thousand more burdens upon his shoulders; burdens he had come to excruciatingly endure as he ascended within the military ranks of his district. The responsibility over the lives of his people plagued him of prodigious thoughts, none of which entertaining the enormity of his role. It had taken much for his complete acceptance of his position – accomplished solely with the tutelage of his father and Thanatos – and it was a rewarding privilege when he was acknowledged as family amongst his subordinates, rather than a superior.

Nico believed he had actually established – built – something for himself. Apparently, he had yet to perceive that that might never be a concept fully established in reality.

Stirring from a dreamless sleep, the son of Hades had almost deluded himself that he was within his personal chambers – his actual chambers – with the events of yesterday supposedly a mere figment of a twisted illusion within a dream. But as such, with the jubilant greetings of servants scuttling beyond the doors of his chambers, and the gradual increase of volume as the streets bustled with people, the events of a supposed illusion… was anything but an illusion.

“Lord Niccolò? May I come in?” A heavily-accented and tremulous voice of a woman inquired from beyond the brass double-doors.
“I…” The son of Hades hastily assessed his state. Recollecting with his presently hazy mind, he had apparently shed his doublet vest and tunic, exposing the pale yet olive tint complexion of his entire upper body. “I believe I am not properly attired at the moment.”

“So long as you are not as naked as the day you were born, it is nothing that I have not seen, young man,” the woman responded, delightfully heaving a chuckle.

“Then… please do enter,” the son of Hades offered, repressing a heavy sigh as he cautiously pushed down the covers and pushed himself to sit with a practiced and dignified posture.

A middle-aged woman courteously parted the doors open, casually stepping into the room with a radiant smile curling the corners of her lips. Auburn hair had been daintily pulled into a neat bun with merely a few stray wisps caressing against her slightly wrinkled features. Caramel brown irises gleamed with that bright disposition the woman possessed, surrounded by sun-crinkles.

“You have changed so much, Niccolò,” the woman breathed as she slowly approached the side of his bed, placing a set of neatly folded apparel at the bottom of his bed before kneeling in front of the son of Hades. “I do hope you still remember my name.”

The young lord allowed for a smile to curl his lips, a fond expression gracing his features for a fleeting second as he regarded the woman.

“Lady Anaítis,” the son of Hades greeted, delicately grasping the woman’s hands and guiding her to sit on his bed. “I would not forget you. I highly appreciate your boundless hospitality on the duration of my stays.”

“Anaítis would suffice, young man. I am, after all, a mere servant of this House,” the woman chided gently just as she raised her calloused hands, delicately cupping his cheeks. “You have no idea how much I have worried of your well-being.”

The young man did not repress his sigh while his eyes casted down, expressing his reluctance as he concluded where the conversation was heading.

“I do not approve of the suzerains’ lack of objection on subjugating their offspring to partake in bloodshed,” Anaítis continued, delicately caressing his cheeks with her thumbs before they drifted down to his chest, caressing the faded scars that littered the expanse of his skin. “You were but
“I am my father’s son,” the young heir stated matter-of-factly. “Just as Thanatos’ ascension had to be done, it is inevitable that I serve my people in time of dire need.”

The son of Hades paused as his eyes rested upon his open hands, etching firmly onto his mind once more the dozens of scars that adorned the skin, induced by years of bloodshed.

“It is inevitable that these hands would be covered with blood,” Nico concluded, transfixed on the illusion of the haunting shade of crimson red blood seeming to cover the expanse of his hands.

“You are still my young Niccolò,” Anaíthis breathed with a remorseful undertone in her voice as she gently clasped his hands in hers. She could only envision the turmoil these bloodshed was committing to his mind. “These hands… True, they might be covered with blood. But you did what you had to do to defend your people. These hands… they are meant for goodness; a goodness that your heart fully reflects.”

“That does not make my actions justifiable,” the young man responded. “I have killed people, and I will continue to do so, whether it is what I desire or not.”

Nico cautiously pulled his hands back, opting to rest a hand against one of his shoulders instead.

“The people I have slaughtered might as well possibly be innocent civilians, subjugated by that damned bastard of a suzerain to stage attacks in exchange for the safety of their beloved ones,” Nico gritted his teeth as he continued, his hand tightening against his shoulder. “They deserve better, but none of the suzerains would risk a declaration of war.”

“Slaughtering these people are not justifiable. But…” the young man paused. “Is it justifiable to desire shedding Lord Zeus’ blood – Lady Hera’s and Herakles’ even – with my hands? Even if I do so, their deaths would not be a sufficient compromise to those that have fallen…”

For a mere second, there was a mad glint within those russet brown irises which darkened drastically as the young man continued to speak. It was only for a mere second, but in that mere second, Anaíthis could conclude the degree of the damage done to that young man’s mind and sanity.

That was not the young man she had come to know. The coldness seeping through those eyes at that
moment petrified her.

“And I… I am fearful of what I’m becoming,” Nico concluded, wrapping his other arm across his stomach, as if the gesture would ensure that he remained whole.

“You inherited your father’s flaws.”

A soft-spoken voice remarked, the tone of the woman’s voice laced with sympathy and sincere remorse. The surprised son of Hades and the female servant lifted their gazes towards the threshold where the Lady and the third heir stood with refined grace, their gazes exceedingly calculative. Though, there was evident concern in them – more so in Percy’s eyes.

Belatedly remembering his inappropriate lack of apparel, the young man hastily wrapped his body with the sheets.

“You need not be abashed, son of Hades. I have seen much of the male anatomy, given that I have… quite a number of sons,” Lady Amphitrite offered with a reassuring smile, though it disappeared immediately as she crossed the threshold to stand before the young heir’s bedside.

“You truly are Hades’ child.” The reminder had Nico internally cringing. “Hades possessed much strengths, and formidable as they are, they pose flaws on him just as equally. And these… I believe, you and Thanatos have inherited.”

“Killing has never been justifiable, more so the circumstances as to why it had to be executed. You have every right to fear what you presume you are to become, but you should know that it is a part of you that your father has bestowed upon you; a part of you that is the embodiment of his legacy,” Lady Amphitrite murmured, cautiously clasping the hand that excruciatingly gripped Nico’s shoulder.

“Hades’ blood, your blood, thirsts for the kill. Just as much, Zeus’ blood – which Herakles has inherited – thirsts for power and an absolute monarchy over the entirety of Pangaea. These are attributes you possess, but they do not identify who you truly are,” the Lady remarked. “Your desire to shed the blood of Zeus and his kin is a manifestation of the justice you seek for the lost lives that had been subjugated to commit Zeus’ heinous acts. Killing does not place justice upon your hands, but your intentions do not make you a monster.”

“I –“
“If you think you are one, does that make me a monster too, Nico?” Percy interrupted firmly just as the son of Hades was about to rebuke the Lady’s claim. The third heir had not shifted from his position by a fraction, his feet planted firmly against the floor.

The son of Poseidon offered a pointed look at his stepmother and at the female servant, requesting for privacy which the females reluctantly granted despite the son of Hades’ evident reluctance. Nico had not even registered that his frame was partially trembling until Lady Amphitrite firmly squeezed his hand before cautiously letting go.

The sound of the door closing was most deafening.

“I have slaughtered dozens – hundreds – of innocent lives. I have the blood of fathers and sons, of husbands and children, coating my hands. But just as much, I am willing to kill for the sake of the future generations, if that could compensate for the lives I have taken with my own two hands. Is it so wrong? Does that make me a monster to you, Nico?” Percy questioned with evident sadness and a hint of perturbation.

“That’s not a fair inquiry,” was the hushed response that the son of Hades uttered.

Never had it been a fair inquiry. Regardless of the hundreds of lives that Percy had executed, Niccolò di Angelo could never perceive the son of Poseidon as a monster. In Nico’s mind, the sole image he would ever have of Percy was of that boy in that time gone by on that fated day of their meeting. Percy could shed Nico’s blood with his hands, could execute the son of Hades’ life in a million varying ways or force him to continuously endure excruciating pain – both physically and emotionally – but he would never be a monster to Nico’s eyes.

“You do not see me as I see myself, Percy,” Nico responded with firm conviction.

“As I don’t see myself as you do, Nico,” the son of Poseidon replied, seeming forlorn at that moment. “You still have your humanity intact, Nico. Otherwise, you would not perceive yourself as a monster. If I can’t even perceive myself in that manner, doesn’t that make me more of a monster?”

“But you’re not.”

“To you, I’m not,” Percy corrected. “If you think you are becoming one, then so am I. We shed the same blood with our hands. We fight for the same cause. If such things makes us monsters, then so
shall we be. But know this.”

The son of Poseidon paused, crossing the distance between them in a few strides as he knelt before the son of Hades’ bedside without breaking the contact between their eyes.

“Should that happen, we would pull the other back – one way or another. That is how things always had been, Nico. That is the enormity of faith I place on you.”

“I always pull you back, Percy,” Nico responded, a brief flash of amusement and playful wickedness in his eyes. “Never the reverse.”

“True,” the son of Poseidon agreed, a smile breaking across his features and imminently dismissing the subtle tension that existed only moments ago between them. “Look…”

The smile disappeared within seconds from Percy’s lips as he raised one of his hands, lifting it to the tanned expanse of his neck. Cautiously, the son of Poseidon tugged at a simple necklace comprising of five beads and clasped them in his palm.

“You might have forgotten what we used to be…” Percy paused once more, his eyes drifting to the younger male’s neck where the same necklace should have been. “But I would never forget you, Nico. Five years don’t easily go away just because you choose for it to.”

“I have never forgotten. But I did try to,” Nico admitted, casting his eyes to the side once a flash of pain fled past those vibrant sea-green eyes. “It was easier to do so, with all the bloodshed that would ultimately lead to another war. It was easier to try to forget, hoping that these bonds would not force me to hesitate on taking your life, should that time have come.”

“Would you kill me, Nico?” Percy inquired, lowering his hands to clasp Nico’s. To a certain extent, it prohibited the younger male from escaping. “If it had to come to that, would you do so?”

The answer was evident, but both of them needed an assurance; a verbal assurance.

“You know I could never do so. I would rather take my life than take yours,” the son of Hades breathed in a hushed response. “More so now.”
The third heir of Poseidon heaved a sigh, freeing one of his hands and cautiously placing it atop the younger male’s heart; atop the Cross of Chaos. His expression was forlorn once more, expressing no indication that he noticed of the accelerated palpitations of the heart beneath his fingertips.

“I wish to offer the same promise. Yet, I believe that doing so would imminently push Ouranós to declare a war. As if our fathers’ displeasure was not enough,” the third heir mused, a sad smile curling his lips as his fingertips brushed against the mark.

“We don’t need another foolish son of the Big Three committing himself to a sworn oath to Lord Chaos,” Nico casually responded, forcing a miniscule smile to his lips as he pushed that hand off of his chest, ignoring how those butterfly caresses ignited his entire body in flames. “Besides, I think you give your father enough trouble with the mischiefs you cause.”

“Achieving adulthood does not necessarily mean that I have to give up the little things that do entertain me,” Percy defended with a broadening smile as he retracted his hand. “Besides, Tyson is under my tutelage. He would be so disappointed if I do not set the examples he tries to follow.”

“For the sake of the Lord and the Lady, I believe one of you is enough,” Nico mused, a grin naturally spreading his lips.

The melodious laughter that parted the son of Poseidon’s lips was enough to permit the grin on Nico’s lips to last, if only a few seconds longer. Within that close proximity and with the aid of the rays of light passing through the open windows, the son of Hades could clearly discern the physical changes two years had casted upon the older male.

Those untamed jet-black locks remained naturally disheveled, stylishly trimmed to emphasize the definition of his jawline, yet adequate to frame those vibrant sea-green eyes. Two years had dimmed those eyes considerably; a dullness and an edge of hardness lingering along the edges. Nonetheless, they were alike molten liquid as the son of Hades vaguely remembered, framed delicately by long eyelashes. Full lips were partially chapped, moistened the slightest bit due to the third heir’s persisting habit of licking his lips. The mischief of that former thirteen year-old teen was still prominent by the manner which those lips curled and that knowing gleam in those sea-green eyes. But with his features much refined and defined, the changes were evident to the son of Hades.

Two years had aged them; changed them. They had transitioned to the harsh and cruel truth that was of the reality, burdened then with their respective responsibilities towards their people. Bloodshed had ultimately and indisputably damaged them, but that was more so evident with the son of Hades. Circumstances had changed, they had changed. Yet, gazing once more into those sea-green eyes, all that Niccolò visioned was of that blissful memory, seven years into the past.
“You have changed.” Nico found himself murmuring absent-mindedly while he remained transfixed onto those sea-green eyes.

“I did, yet so did you,” Percy agreed, leaning against the hand which the son of Hades had subconsciously extended forward to delicately caress the older male’s features. “I missed you, Nico. More than you could have ever known.”

The son of Hades retracted his hand by instinct, but was prohibited as the third heir clasped it with one of his, keeping it pressed against a tanned cheek.

“Please tell me that you did as well. If I matter as much to you…” Percy trailed off, averting his eyes to gaze at the sheets.


“I missed you as well, Perseus,” Nico breathed the older male’s actual name, expressing how serious he was of what he had uttered. “I always worry constantly of your well-being.”

“You could have visited anytime you wished to, Nico,” the son of Poseidon heaved a sigh – equally of content and exasperation – just as he clasped the calloused hand with both of his own. “You know my circumstances. It was impossible for me to depart from Tyson’s side, given the… circumstances. But you could have visited me. I was constantly worried about you too.”

Niccolò di Angelo was certain that his reason was unjustifiable; inadequate for the third heir to comprehend and deem acceptable. In truth, it was unjustifiable, and much so immeasurably selfish. Solely one individual could comprehend the extent of these selfish measures he subjected himself to, and that one individual was another… *companion* he had distanced himself from in the past two years, having had a wedge driven permanently onto their relationship.

“I am here now. To stay, so to speak, whether you wish for me to be here or not,” Nico responded solemnly despite having avoided the accusation that was directed to him. “I don’t think I can leave as well, until I have undergone Lady Anaítis’ thorough “interrogation”.”

“Ah, yes. How horrifying is the thought of being smothered by blueberry muffins,” the son of Poseidon playfully retorted, though there was evident displeasure along the edges of those sea-green eyes. “Was that what the Lady and I have walked into earlier?”
“Partly,” Nico admitted, tugging the sheets up his upper body when those sea-green eyes travelled the expanse of his exposed skin. “Though that can be discussed at a later date. Why were you and the Lady in my room though?”

“Aside from missing breakfast, which caused concern for my family – minus Triton – and displeasure within the council – with, again, the exception of Triton who might have been internally debating whether you being in a room would quell his anger or fuel it more for your “lack of respect”…” Percy paused, rolling his eyes at the absurdity of his stepbrother’s behavior. “The council has decided on the grounds by which you are to… serve under this House.”

“I believe I stated formerly that my servitude is to you. Not the entire district of Thálassa,” Nico responded, forcing himself to remain calm at the offending information; that a crucial decision had been established without any regards to his opinion of the matter.

“Lord Poseidon and Lady Amphitrite noted of your stand, but it was… extremely difficult to reason with the council, more so when Triton simply decides to involve himself with,” Percy explained, growling out with vehemence his stepbrother’s name, as if it was utterly vile on its own. “They managed to settle with a compromise, but I believe that is one which we can discuss further when you’re … well … dressed.”

The son of Hades has to repress tremors as the third heir assessed his naked physique once more, sea-green eyes attentively travelling down the expanse of his upper body, as if committing every contour and miniscule scars that adorned his skin.

“If that is the case, I would wish to request for my privacy then. I shall join you in about half an hour,” Nico calmly stated.

The son of Poseidon nodded his assent.

“I shall await outside. Once you are finished, we’ll head to the barracks. Once we get there, I shall explain everything that was discussed,” Percy asserted, gripping the younger male’s hand tighter for a mere second before cautiously letting go, placing it atop the younger man’s lap.

“I can simply meet you there. You need not wait in discomfort outside of my chambers,” the son of Hades stated, fully sitting up once more as Percy, with long strides, headed towards the brass double-doors, pausing once he had one of his hands gripping the doorknob.
“The last time I turned my back to you, you slipped from my grasp for two years,” Percy breathed, almost in a hushed murmur that the son of Hades had to attentively listen to his response.

With a ragged sigh, the son of Poseidon shifted his frame adequately for Nico to properly register full lips that were rather curled with mirth, yet sea-green eyes hardened with an unfathomable expression. True, it was unfathomable, yet there was something in that gaze that had the son of Hades leaning to an inclination of recoiling.

“I swore to myself that that would never happen again. I will not let you leave my side again,” Percy resumed, the smile on his lips broadening, exposing a perfect set of pearly-white teeth. “So you better be prepared to bear with me.”

Percy inclined his head partially to the side for a second as if daring the younger male to challenge his statement otherwise. A few seconds passed, and once silence started to settle uncomfortably between them, the son of Poseidon simply heaved a light chuckle as he vacated the chambers, closing the doors behind him with a soft, yet resounding click.

Though in the silence of the vast chamber, the son of Hades registered nothing but the increased palpitations of his heart, attributed to sheer adrenaline ignited by the expression that fleeted past those sea-green eyes.

It was an expression that Nico was utterly unfamiliar and unaccustomed with; an absolute contradiction to the mischievous and happy-go-lucky disposition that the son of Poseidon possessed.

It was absolutely for certain that they had both undergone changes; changes which distinctively established a barrier between the two of them. They had changed, and at that point, even Nico was uncertain as to how much two years had done for Perseus Tzákson.

The separation between the barracks and the residence of the suzerain was distinctly evident, not solely from the structure alone but a difference in the atmosphere. Such fact was what Niccolò di Angelo immediately gathered upon stepping into the premise, sauntering by the side of the third heir who seemed rather unperturbed of the shift in setting. It was not as if it were the first occasion that the son of Hades ventured within the barracks; he had done so at a tender age due to Percy’s rather unwelcomed influences. Regardless, that instant was the first circumstance by which he had stepped into the premise with the comprehension of what being a part of it – of the district’s military – actually entailed for all individuals.
There was a lack of hostility in the air, should the son of Hades place a comparison of the barracks between the districts of Thálassa and Skotádi, yet it unnerved Nico regardless as the soldiers’ piercing gazes critically assessed him; assessed his worth. Despite his state of discomfort, he did not visibly express such emotions as his russet-brown eyes remained solely focused on the path ahead.

The barracks were stereotypically dreary in setting, faded brick walls adequately illuminated by ablaze torches that strategically lined the vast corridors, and the natural light casting down to the building. Aside from that, Nico could not describe the setting beyond its simplicity and predictability.

The sheer idea that he would be a part of this setting had him tugging at his apparel – which much to his distaste had multiple embroidered pieces that absolutely embody the district. He despised it to a certain extent, recognizing the apparel as nothing more than to brand him as a servant – ‘member’ rather, according to the council – to the district.

“I suppose we do have to request a change in apparel. That shade does not do you justice at all,” the third heir commented with a playful lilt on his tone.

Nico vaguely registered his right hand atop his sword twitch in response to the displeasing comment.

“Shut it, Percy,” the younger male grumbled under his breath, his features remaining neutral. “Rather than kidding of this distasteful attire, I would appreciate it greatly if you can fill me in with the details of the council’s decision and of our purpose here.”

Russet-brown eyes critically scanned the surroundings, never lingering too long on any of the soldiers whom attentively observed them – him – in return. Pure instinct, Nico reasoned with himself as he registered his jittery tendencies. Pure battle instincts.

“So uptight,” Percy mumbled, though Nico simply chose to ignore the comment. “To summarize their dragged, pointless meeting, the council wants you to take a position within the First Division.”

“The First Division is within my direct command; their undivided loyalty is with me. That was the compromise that Dad and the Lady had managed to bargain for, so to speak,” Percy explained slowly. “While it ensures your… allegiance, it is also a precautionary to ensure your well-being since…”

The son of Poseidon trailed off, his lips pressing firmly onto a thin line which Nico concluded that the older male would not elaborate further. That, Nico could understand, knowing that such delicate
matter could not be disclosed within an area where the soldiers’ loyalty were divided and questionable.

“I don’t believe that is the best decision,” Nico remarked, a frown settling onto his features. “You cannot expect your soldiers to simply welcome me within their ranks just because the council has decided upon it.”

“The council offers a position, not acceptance,” the son of Poseidon chided lightly. “The latter, you have to earn through my soldiers. Though, given that you have been acquainted with most, your presence is… adequately accepted.”

“‘Adequately’ certainly is –” was the curt yet absent-minded response from the son of Hades, left unfinished as a flash of silver glinted in his peripheral vision.

Unsheathing his dagger, the son of Hades only had a split second to situate himself in front of the third heir, brusquely deflecting the silver broadhead of an arrow. A sharp “CLANG!” reverberated across the vast premise, though the son of Hades registered neither the resounding noise nor the deafening silence that followed as his eyes firmly remained fixated at the shadows; towards the direction where the arrow emerged from.

A tall man of military-cut black hair and focused brown eyes cautiously emerged, his muscular physique severely emphasized despite the military attire as he lowered a recurve bow with his left hand. There was a sheepish smile curling full yet thin lips as the man fully emerged from the shadows, fully illuminated by the torches and natural light.

“Fai Zhang,” Nico breathed in an inaudible whisper, unable to suppress an expression of surprise from gracing his features. It lingered just barely for a few seconds, before the son of Hades’ features contorted with suspicion and immense rage. Son of Lord Ares and heir to the district of Pólemos. “What do you think you are doing?”

“A test. I thought Percy had briefed you that you still have to earn your position here? Are you okay though, Percy?” said man questioned, shifting his gaze back and forth the two heirs, evident concern gracing his features completely.

“Yeah, I’m fine, Frank. You just startled us both,” Percy dismissed the man’s worries as he waved his hand, though in Nico’s peripheral vision, the hand was trembling just the slightest. “I did not expect the council to send you for… what you just did.”
“They did not,” Fai Zhang – Frank – commented with a sigh, cautiously approaching the two heirs as the son of Hades was still in a defensive stance before the son of Poseidon, his dagger glinting dangerously. “They requested that a member of the First Division assess Nico. The decision on who was assessing Nico was left to the soldiers and, well, here I am.”

“Assess?” the son of Hades repeated the word as if it were utterly vile.

“This so-called assessment is merely for show. The soldiers of the First Division worship you, especially since the encounter with Minos,” Frank offered in a hushed murmur, pausing briefly when the son of Hades winced at the mentioned name. “Though disregarding that, they are well aware of your purpose here. In truth, they are rather relieved that you are here to defend Percy.”

The two males tastefully chose to ignore the disgruntled “I am perfectly capable of defending myself” from the son of Poseidon as Frank continued.

“It is the best option that we indulge the soldiers of the other divisions with a small duel, simply to fake the notion that you are under strict assessment.”

Nico indulged himself for a second, arching a brow as he smoothly sheathed his dagger before straightening his stance. Wordlessly, the son of Hades unsheathed his Stygian Iron sword, stabbeing the point sharply onto the ground before leveling the son of Ares with a cold and calculative gaze.

“Unsheathe your weapon soldier,” Nico bellowed, garnering the attention of soldiers within the vicinity, before he stepped onto the training area with the soldiers departing from his path, clearing the area entirely.

The Stygian Iron blade gleamed menacingly under the illumination of natural light.

“He… knows that this is just a mock duel… right?” Frank inquired, a flash of fear and trepidation crossing his eyes once the son of Hades turned his back.

Percy suppressed the urge to laugh, lifting a hand to his mouth to cover the broad grin that then stretched his lips. Regardless of his sheer amusement of the situation, there was but the slightest hardening of sea-green eyes along the edges as they assessed the taut posture of the son of Hades, noting how the hand that gripped the formidable blade tightened excruciatingly around the grip.
“Honestly? I believe he knows, but would not indulge you on it. His pride would not permit him to
take anything half-heartedly,” the son of Poseidon responded, patting the back of the other man in a
gesture of sympathy before heading to a corner where Nico had utmost visibility of his position.

Frank barely suppressed his entire frame from trembling once he had turned around and gazed
directly onto russet-brown eyes that lacked of any form of warmth; merciless. No mercy, those eyes
informed him, just as the son of Hades stabbed the point of his sword once more to the ground with
the deafening sound of bricks cracking reverberating throughout the area.

Squaring his shoulders, the son of Ares firmly secured his recurve bow behind his back before
withdrawing a Lucerne hammer, twirling it back and forth his hands before securely gripping it with
his hands.

“Do you want to wear armor first?” Frank offered with the barest hint of hesitance as he approached
Hades’ heir, an overwhelming sense of danger and trepidation coursing through his very veins.

Niccolò di Angelo was the embodiment of death; that much Frank gathered with crystalline clarity as
he was subjected to bear the full weight of such a merciless gaze. Just as much, the son of Ares had
absolute clarity of why he was being subjected to such a harsh treatment. He had a lot to explain –
his presence alone in a foreign district was questionable alone – and Niccolò di Angelo would
undiably extract answers from him, by hook or by crook.

“No,” was the cold response as the son of Hades gripped his sword and lifted it, plucking the
embedded part effortlessly from the ground.

The two heirs respectively took their stances, their attention completely undivided as their eyes
clashed in a silent yet venomous exchange, daring for the other to initiate the first move as they
circled the training ground. Neither moved, trying to overwhelm the other with their respective auras
that radiated of danger and death.

After a full minute, their weapons clashed.

Swordsmanipsh is a twisted form of art which could neither be accurately depicted nor represented
solely by a single embodiment. It induces carnage; a risky gamble between life and death where
victory is but short-lived. How Niccolò di Angelo could twist such a vile thing onto one of
magnificence was beyond the son of Poseidon’s comprehension.
Every arc created by his Stygian Iron blade was precise – *perfection* – sweeping through the air with an air of grandiose and elegance. Yet, Perseus Tzákson was well ascertained how each sweep of that blade that was directed to the son of Ares was comparative to tentative brushes with the hands of death.

Nico’s movements were highly coordinated, a feat worthy of praise as the son of Hades possessed a speed and agility that was almost bestial. His features were schooled to neutrality, depicting an unnatural calm regardless of the way those russet-brown eyes gleamed mercilessly. It was as if the son of Hades was merely gracing the other heir with a dance – bold and dangerously thrilling. Niccolò di Angelo was undeniably a beautiful embodiment of darkness.

The two heirs dueled at an incredible speed which progressively increased with every deafening clash of their weapons; at a speed that most of the soldiers gathered were either awestruck or intimidated of. Both heirs were cutting it close, dangerously grazing close to their skins, and occasionally shearing the tips of their locks.

Frank thrust ed his polearm sharply, only to be fluidly parried by Stygian Iron blade.

The duel was progressing smoothly, if Percy were to classify one as a mere spectacle. Regardless, the son of Poseidon had unease gradually creeping up his chest as he observed Hades’ heir. Those russet-brown eyes were progressively losing their warmth by the second, exposing a side of Niccolò di Angelo that was rather familiar – yet it escaped his mind at that moment – and alarming him to a great extent.

Their lips moved subtlety, conversing in hushed whispers. Whatever subject they were discussing, Percy assessed the need for it to cut short as Nico’s movements evolved to something much violent with each passing second.

“Do you realize how much Hazel has been looking for you, *searching* for you?” Percy vaguely registered Nico growling at Frank amidst the continuous clash of their weapons, his lips curling viciously. “Do you have the slightest idea how devastated she was when you suddenly disappeared on her?”

The son of Poseidon had to wince at that, silently berating himself for not explaining the situation to the son of Hades when he had the chance the night before, or even just mere hours ago. That was his initial reaction, before his eyes dilated in realization and agitation at how grave the situation was becoming. At the very beginning, this was no mock duel – for Nico, at the very least. Frank must have arrived at the same conclusion as well – perhaps over the duration of their exchanges – as he struggled to parry any advances by the son of Hades.
Those eyes...

Percy straightened his posture, his frame becoming taut as he realized why those eyes had been so familiar.

These were unforgiving eyes – merciless eyes. The eyes that Niccolò di Angelo always possessed when they rarely breached the subject of his biological sister. These were eyes that despised betrayal and abandonment.

Just by existing in the same space as the son of Hades, Frank had already been digging his own grave.

“I had no choice,” Frank responded quietly, his devastation partly seeping through his eyes, yet his focus remained on the younger male when the blade of the sword grazed dangerously close to the skin of his neck. “I had to leave Pólemos if I did not wish to risk being involved with a war against Skotádi. Thálassa was the sole place I could go to, and even then I could not risk my father knowing where I dwelt, or that would be seen as an excuse to instigate war.”

Thálassa was one of those few places that the son of Ares could find refuge due to family connections of Frank’s deceased mother with the suzerain, and even then, familial ties alone had been a fragile bargain. Any form of connection to the districts of Ouranós, Agápi and Pólemos were assessed critically since the unwelcomed stirrings that occurred in the duration of the past two years. Though the suzerains of the neighboring districts had been rather compliant with dismissing individual acts of bands of assailants from any of the three aforementioned districts, none were foolish to buy their façade of innocence.

It was a valid excuse, the sole excuse that Frank possessed, yet Percy was certain that Nico would not accept such reasoning in a heartbeat.

Nico would simply not accept it.

“You could have told her! There were a lot of means which you could have used to accomplish that. Why did you not?” Nico demanded, lunging forward once more, only to have his blade deflected.

“Hazel wouldn’t have understand. She would have blamed herself for my departure,” Frank explained, grunting as the impact between their blades intensified, the strength of Hades’ heir fueled
by rage. “And I would rather she hated me than have her blame herself.”

Nico faltered for a second at the information, adequate enough for the son of Ares to disarm the son of Hades of his weapon. Rather than expressing defeat, the younger male swiftly lunged at Frank, grasping the polearm firmly with one of his hands, frame shifting to the side without losing momentum before delivering a strong roundhouse kick to the muscular torso.

Percy vaguely registered the son of Ares groaning at the impact, subconsciously staggering backwards to the faded brick walls, before the son of Hades conveniently slammed his Lucerne hammer firmly onto the wall, its spike catching onto the fabric of the vest near Frank’s left shoulder. In a split second, a dagger pressed dangerously against Frank’s neck.

There was a wildness in Nico’s eyes which alarmed Percy, a wildness that the younger male was valiantly trying to subdue; to tame. Yet in that moment, Percy was certain that Nico was losing the fight against it, and the son of Hades was well-aware of the fact as well. Those russet-brown eyes were heavily conflicted, a devastated expression flashing through those eyes for a mere second before it dispersed, paving way for a barrage of unfathomable emotions.

“I’m sorry for the pain I am causing her,” Frank managed to heave despite the firm hold the younger male had on his neck.

The way that Frank gazed back onto his eyes, dilated with terror, had Nico gradually relinquishing his grip and staggering backwards. With half a mind, he grasped the polearm and sharply tugged it from where it was embedded on the wall, slamming the spike completely on the ground below.

Niccolò di Angelo had seen that expression countless of times, in the heat of a raging battle; in the climax of an inevitable death. Niccolò had seen that expression countless of times, in the features of the hundreds that he had slaughtered mercilessly with his own two hands.

They looked at him – Frank looked at him – as if he were a monster.

“You should not be apologizing to me. You should be apologizing to my sister. You have no idea how much it kills her, not knowing if you were still alive;” Nico breathed in a hushed voice, though it seemed to reverberate throughout the entire area as deafening silence surrounded them. “Your life is in hers, in Thanatos’ and our father.”

Though as he responded to the uttered apologies, the son of Hades had his eyes shifting across the
soldiers at an alarming rate, illusion and reality slowly blending into one. All he could see was their blood, splattered across the mangled canvass of their carcass and all over his hands.

In the bridge between illusion and reality, the sharp and constricting pain spreading like wildfire on his chest was the sole thing that truly grounded him.

Nico barely registered himself slipping onto the dark recesses of his mind, plagued with the image which the son of Ares presented to him merely a few seconds ago. His breathing was ragged, though not from exhaustion, and an immense pain surged through his entire chest as he struggled to breathe. Small dark spots clouded his vision, which gradually blurred with each passing second.

Muttering a curt excuse, the son of Hades weakly grasped and sheathed his weapons before briskly departing from the training grounds, retracing the steps which he took to arrive at the vicinity. With every stride taken, the walls seemed to close down on him on all sides, constricting him in the same manner as that excruciating pain in his chest.

Nico barely stepped out of the barracks when the spots in his vision enlarged, occupying almost his entire sight, just as he swayed unsteadily on his feet.

The entire world spun as he staggered backwards, and a pair of arms enclosing him firmly and the comforting scent of the sea breeze were the last things that registered in Nico’s mind before everything became black.

Chapter End Notes

The full names of most of the characters are provided at the link below. That page is subjected to change as the story progresses.
Link: HERE

Please leave a comment so I may know how you like the story thus far. Thank you so much for those who have left feedback on the previous chapter! Thank you for reading this one as well, and until the next update (25/04/2016)!
To Start With A Clean Slate

Chapter Notes

The next chapter will be the last chapter (for now) in Thálassa. Their little journey will soon begin.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“What greater thing is there for two human souls, than to feel that they are joined for life—to strengthen each other in all labor, to rest on each other in all sorrow, to minister to each other in all pain, to be one with each other in silent unspeakable memories at the moment of the last parting?”

— “Adam Bede” by George Elliot

Memories of Nico’s reminiscent past were not kaleidoscopic in nature, but rather of varying tints of blue and purple. Once more, in that world of naivety which he had presumed to have vacated, he was but a small bundle that fruitlessly repressed joy as color filled his monochromatic world once more. In that world, the sole things that mattered were miniscule yet significant moments with those two people.

“Put me down, Percy!” his ten-year old self complained from behind the older male, tugging onto jet-black locks out of indignation as he was humiliatingly carried piggyback.

There was a dull ache on his right ankle, inadvertently caused by an unintentional and minor scuffle with Poseidon’s second heir. Conclusively, that scuffle eventually resulted to his evident and excruciating limping which imminently led to their current situation. Percy had been displeased, and the word in itself was a heavy understatement of the third heir’s initial reaction. Percy rarely engaged in a quarrel, let alone a squabble, yet Nico’s situation ultimately resulted to the latter, with Theseus being the ever apologetic and appeasing older brother. Neither appreciated a disgruntled Perseus Tzákson, which was why neither initially uttered a protest when the third heir wordlessly carried the son of Hades on his back, storming off and towards the cloisters-enclosed garth.

“Stop squirming, di Angelo,” Percy grunted, paying no heed to the child’s complaints as the son of Poseidon shifted him up his back so that his position was much comfortable. Nevertheless, the sudden jostle startled the child, evoking a gasp from his lips. “You’re injured; you can barely walk. Just be quiet.”
The child eventually sealed his lips, pursing them for a mere second before settling on an exasperated yet resigned sigh. A disgruntled Perseus Tzákson was indisputably impossible to reason with, regardless of the circumstances. Resigning his fate in the hands of the older male, the child gingerly tightened his arms across the other’s neck, burying his face as much as he was capable of against the crook of Percy’s neck. The comforting natural scent of his companion loosened his taut frame, forcing him to relax against the firm grip. Percy’s scent, in Niccolò di Angelo’s mind, was rather indescribable, for there was solely a single word that could perfectly describe of it – sea.

Over the duration of his visitations, the son of Hades had been familiarized with the distinct scent of the sea; of an unblemished beach and the crystalline water that delicately brushed against the shore. Percy harbored that scent, fresh yet crisp and soothing, with a hint of salt faintly registering in his senses. Significantly, it was a scent that embodied a home; a faint remembrance of that quaint country cottage atop a precipice that overlooked the ocean. If Perseus Tzákson was a scent, then he was the embodiment of the sea; the embodiment of his home.

And perhaps, in his company did Nico truly find a home; a home he desired to finally reside in, as a permanent dwelling. For if there was one sole individual that might come to comprehend the enormity of his sense of wanting to belong, to embrace a permanent home, Percy might. And comprehend, he did.

It was hard to discern that their lives transitioned in a parallel plane; difficult to envision that a rather perky Perseus Tzákson had been in the position which Nico dwelt for as long as the latter could recall. The son of Hades determined a companion – an equal – in the son of Poseidon, and never entertained himself to judge that conclusion once more. Percy had never withdrawn any vital details of his former life, entrusting all that he was to the son of Hades gradually with each passing visitation.

A former life with his deceased biological mother, Salómi Tzákson – or Sally, as the woman preferred to be addressed.

The younger heir had not encountered a portrait or any image of the woman – not questionable given that the reminder of a mistress might provoke the Lady Amphitrite – but with the descriptions fondly offered by Percy, he had to envision nothing but a doting and loving mother of captivating beauty. And Sally was the sole significant person that Percy ever truly valued with his entire life; that sole significant person Percy would trade his life for, without a moment of hesitance. But alas, the cruelty of fate extracted the mother from her beloved son at such a tender age. Had it not been for the fact that Lord Poseidon was Percy’s biological father —... No, Nico could not dare to envision what Percy’s life would have been.

Percy had experienced abandonment; condemning the father that was nonexistent the entirety of his
life while gravely mourning for the loss of his mother, questioning why she had abandoned him to fend for himself. The resentment of the first heir – Triton – of his father’s illegitimate children did not aid in extending a sense of hospitality, of belonging, to the third heir. None of them could come to comprehend the negative emotions that were gradually overwhelming him then at that point. None of them could come to comprehend the sensation of imminently inclining to the realization of how bleak and meaningless one’s mere existence could possibly be. None of them knew what it was like to consider death as the best and sole option left.

No one but Theseus.

And Theseus gradually aided in resurfacing fragments of his old self from that dark abyss he had inadvertently dragged himself to; aided him just as Thanatos was aiding Nico. Percy had been defiant in the beginning, and it had taken much of Theseus to make the third heir comprehend that he was not the sole person enduring that situation.

Regardless of Percy’s nonchalant claims that he had absolutely surpassed the sensation of abandonment, Nico constantly observed – in the rare moments wherein the son of Poseidon was lost deep in his thoughts – that the edges of his eyes would crumble with a fragment of the sensation that mirrored his own. There was no forgetting the sensation; it would eternally haunt them in any moment that they bask in despair. It was only a matter of how best one could conceal it that would entirely make the difference.

“Are you all right? You’ve been quiet,” the third heir’s voice, laced with sincere concern snapped the child from his train of thoughts as he slowly opened his eyes.

“You asked me to be quiet,” Nico dully responded, a small smile threatening to curl his lips once the son of Poseidon grunted at the dripping sarcasm from the younger’s statement.

“Are you angry with me or Theseus?” Nico inquired, changing topics when silence was the response he received. “Or both of us?” he added as an afterthought.

Percy heaved a long sigh, keeping mum to himself for a full minute as he stepped into the garth, the son of Hades still perched onto his back. The child graciously bathed in the rich yet harmoniously fragrant scent emanating from the garden. The barest hint of petrichor lingered in the air, slightly overpowered with the array of flowers that groomed in the area. Sunny garden beds slope away from the main house, planted with small alpines, tiny bulbs, weeping maples, standard wisteria, and tree peonies. Flowers such as hydrangeas, maples, azaleas, and hellebore bloomed vibrantly, bathing the garden in a captivating kaleidoscope of colors.
With long strides, the son of Poseidon situated them both underneath a weeping maple, atop a small pile of lacy leaves tinged a light orange-red color, practicing extreme caution as he settled the younger male on a comfortable position. Wordlessly, Percy propped Nico’s feet atop his lap, disregarding the child’s flustered expression as he examined the injury cautiously with his hands.

“Not really. Maybe just a bit with Theseus,” Percy admitted slowly, pursing his lips as he assessed the sprained ankle. “I thought... Well...”

Percy breathed deeply, holding the breath in for a few more seconds before releasing it in one long sigh.

“I thought it was Triton who hurt you, and I panicked,” Percy explained, a frown creasing his forehead.

The son of Hades unintentionally heaved a sigh at the information, thin arms wrapping across his own torso. In the course of a mere few months, there was an established friendship and overwhelming trust between the two of them, stemming from the parallel transitions in their lives; stemming from the idea that no other person held a greater understanding than either of them. As much as Percy had confided in him his mother, and Nico had confided in him of Bianca – whom remained as a forbidden subject – Percy had confided in him of his eldest stepbrother and the latter’s condemnation of Lord Poseidon’s illegitimate children.

Percy had mentioned once, and only once, of a fourth heir – an illegitimate child born from a noble woman – by the name Cychreus, but the name was forbidden in the household; unspoken, as if the child never did exist. Percy had confided in him once of that matter, of speculations of his eldest brother’s involvement with the child’s “case”, and no more than that thereafter. Any mentions of Triton had Theseus and Percy cringing the barest bit, as if they possessed knowledge that no one else did; a knowledge that was highly lethal in a twisted sense. Aside from the unknown knowledge, Nico was positively certain that Triton – in all sense – was someone to steer away from. Despite his sheer curiosity of what exists – or used to exist – between Thanatos and Triton before their relations became malicious and distant, Nico was not that keen to risk an interaction or a confrontation with Poseidon’s first heir.

“I’m sorry,” the son of Hades murmured, placing one of his hands atop the teen’s folded ones. “I should have been more careful.”

“Theseus was teasing you. You could not have known if someone was actually attacking you, and you only did that to defend yourself.” Percy huffed as he flipped his hands up, encompassing the younger one’s hand in his. “Theseus should have known better.”
“Please don’t be angry with him.”

“I’m not. Just… I was just worried about you that I got carried away,” Percy admitted, pointedly glancing away from him as those sea-green eyes bore on the lacy leaves underneath them. “You’re the first friend I ever had, and I didn’t want to drive you away.”

For once, the son of Hades permitted himself to smile – to actually smile without withdrawing himself back – as he processed the teen’s response in his mind. To another individual, there was that enormous risk that such statement could be taken as an insult; would invoke a negative response and perceived as an accusation. But he and Percy were different, and they possessed an understanding that few could comprehend. Percy knew what abandonment was, as much as Nico did. Neither entertained the probability of it occurring to them once more.

“I won’t go unless you tell me to,” the child promised solemnly, earning the attention of the teen immediately. “I promise.”

The smile he received in return was well worth it, and it was in that moment that Nico did truly believe for once that there was somewhere where he would truly belong; truly be happy if only for the mere presence of a person. That for once, there was someone he could come to treasure without having to fear of losing in the end. Someone whom he could value in his heart in the same manner, in the same intensity, as with his deceased mother and forgotten older sister.

“Promise!” Percy confirmed, lips stretched to a wide grin.

That was the first promise he had made, and at that time, he did not know that that was the sole one he would not manage to keep. That was the first friendship he had established, and at that time, he did not know that that was one of two he would eventually manage to break.

“Percy! Nico! I apologize for being late.”

Illuminated by the radiance of the sunlight, the child could not register the features of the newcomer properly. Yet, by heart, the son of Hades distinctively remembered features – of disheveled military-cut blond hair that seemed to glow in the illumination of the sun, of electric blue eyes that gleamed like streaks of lightning in the midst of a brewing storm. Full thin lips quirked in amusement, tugging at a distinct scar on the upper lip, just as the newcomer knelt down, resting a warm hand atop Nico’s dishevelled locks.
Just as Percy could not remain as a mere memory to him, he could never come to forget that person just as much.

“Are you all right, Nico?” the newcomer questioned. 

Yet, before he could come to respond, his vision was swallowed completely by darkness.

As soon as russet-brown eyes blearily fluttered open, Nico immediately registered of cool liquid seeping from his eyes and cascading down the sides, disappearing within the layers of his dishevelled locks. There was something lodged on his throat, making it difficult for him to speak as unwanted emotions resurfaced from where he had contained them, drowning him in massive waves. For once, he was uncertain whether he desired to be roused or to dwell further on a bittersweet memory of a pleasant time gone by. He had been close to seeing his face once more, and despite the imagery being just a mere memory, it was – at the barest – something.

Raising his trembling hands, he shrouded his sight once more with darkness, attempting to find solace amidst the throbbing ache induced by a haunting melancholia. Perhaps, that was partly an excuse. In the darkness, a sliver of his being coveted to recall that specific memory, to see that face once more regardless that it had only been a sheer product of tatters of what were once his happiness.

He possessed no right to weep. So why did he carelessly and selfishly permit himself to shed a tear or two?

“Who are you crying for?” A voice, so solemn and comforting, inquired from his bedside.

The son of Hades need not open his eyes to identify who the person was, nor did he have to hear that distinct voice to register the presence of that person. That scent of home which the person embodied was the sole indication that Nico needed to register his presence; Percy’s presence. In his disquietude, he shifted his body until he rested on his side, his back facing the older male.

“How would you know if it’s not just some twisted nightmare of something intangible and incomprehensible?” Nico breathed in a hushed voice, his palms still pressed against his eyes.

Percy heaved a small sigh as he tilted his head back, eyes transfixed at nowhere in particular as he gazed at the ceiling.
“No matter how horrid your dreams might be, so long as it’s not regarding a person, you would not shed a tear,” the son of Poseidon answered, pursing his lips for a second before he lowered his gaze at the curling form on the bed. “Painful attachments have always been what has you crumbling to your knees. I remember all of you, Nico. I would never forget something so significant.”

The humorless and bitter chuckle that parted the younger male’s lips should have startled him, yet with the progressive changes which he had witnessed in a span of less than a day, perhaps nothing would surprise the son of Poseidon at that point. Regardless, Percy would not deny how these changes – these tatters on the younger male’s being – induced tatters on his own being. Seeing the son of Hades reduced to such a state, regardless of their ages, resurfaced painful memories when Maria di Angelo and Bianca di Angelo were the sole beings in the entire world that could mentally, emotionally and psychologically reduce the other male to such a pitiful state. Not that Percy would voice his perceptions out loud.

Niccolò di Angelo had always been a strong individual, firmly perceiving in a twisted sense of a personal independence that had always imposed an intangible wall, hindering any individual from coming too close to support him. In the rare moments that Nico would ever permit himself to shed a tear or two, they only meant that he was forced past the brink of what he could endure.

Percy was highly certain that this state of isolation was not what Nico had ever come to desire. Yet it existed, attributed from the excruciating pain of getting far too close to another being, only to be merely abandoned in the end.

“It was someone whom I had abandoned two years ago,” Nico then admitted, his voice remained hushed as he uttered his response. “Just as I had abandoned you.”

“I still question what I did wrong that day,” Percy murmured, a distant look in his eyes as he allowed for his eyes to stray at the open window. “You made a decision, and maybe you regret them, but that decision cannot be solely your fault alone. Some way, somehow, I had done a horrible mistake that had you walking out of my life two years ago.”

“It’s not you,” the son of Hades said indignantly, curling much further on himself.

“If it’s not me, then make me comprehend, Niccolò di Angelo,” Percy answered, a hint of desperation in his voice. “For two years, all that plagued me at night and kept me awake until I pass out was the gravity of the possible mistakes I had committed against you. Did I hurt you? Did I say something that was displeasing to you? Make me comprehend.”
If emotions were easily comprehensible, perhaps Niccolò di Angelo had by then discerned how his father was able to live with himself, emotionally wounding his consort Persephone, with the illegitimate children he had outside of their espousal. If emotions were easily comprehensible, perhaps Niccolò di Angelo might have come into terms with his own complex set long before they had complicated the entirety of his world; of his personal and societal beliefs. If emotions were easily comprehensible, perhaps Niccolò di Angelo had comprehended by then why he could not come close to despising his biological older sister despite abandoning him to fend for his own at such a tender age. If emotions were easily comprehensible, perhaps they would not be having this conversation where Percy had to pry information from him, and he in response would remain tongue-tied.

Emotions were not easily comprehensible.

A pair of hands cautiously pried his hands off of his eyes, completely exposing his distressed features to the son of Poseidon. Percy seemed unfazed of the sight as he wordlessly released one of his hands, a thumb gingerly brushing against the moist streaks at the corners of his eyes from when he had unconsciously permitted a tear to slip from his eyes.

“Maybe you can’t make me comprehend now. Perhaps, it’s too complicated to actually explain,” Percy murmured, pulling his hands back once he had the son of Hades directly meeting his eyes.

“And perhaps I am being too inconsiderate, imposing myself on you with the hope that we could pretend those two years never did happen.” Percy heaved a small chuckle, though the smile that curled his lips did not reach his eyes. “But that is of the past; something we cannot come to change. But we exist now, in the present, and I need you to meet me halfway. Make me understand, at least, all of this.”

With the last word, Percy weakly gestured at his curled frame, of his russet-brown eyes that were dilated with the barest hint of wildness he had observed not mere hours ago. Nico was certain that Percy was withholding himself at that moment, though nagging questions pressed persistently in his mind.

‘What is going on with you, Nico?’

‘What just happened to you?’

‘How long has this been going on?’
'What do I need to do to help you?'

'It’s not uncommon,' the son of Hades started, gradually uncurling from the fetal position as he repositioned himself, leaning back against the headboard. He belatedly registered that he was in Percy’s chambers; a fact he had deemed insignificant at that moment. ‘The progressive killings eventually incurred a negative… side effect, so to speak, with my mental stability.’

‘Once it started, it progressively worsened since. The confrontation with Minos had amplified it,’ Nico admitted, vaguely registering the taut frame of the son of Poseidon as his eyes drifted to the sheets he was clenching under his fists. ‘I still possess some control of myself, but there are triggers. I’m unsure of what it could be. Only a few individuals are aware of my… condition, and they are the only ones who aided me through.’

‘Is Lord Hades one of those few?’ Percy questioned, his brows raised high in incredulity.

Nico clicked his tongue in distaste at the aforementioned name.

“These struggles should be mine alone to endure. I do not need my father’s disappointment in me – in my weakness – to come into the complexity of my life,” the young man answered gruffly.

“A person could only endure so much,” Percy interjected. “I believe you would not want me to delve into the subject regarding your father, and I will respect your wishes – not that I could talk much of the old man. But I told you, Nico. You have to meet me half way. I might not be those people whom you have confided with, but I have to know what to do.”

“I need to know what to do,” Percy rephrased his words, his tone absolutely firm with conviction. “I disliked it… despised it, when I was incapable of treating you. You stopped breathing, you know. I thought… I thought you…”

“Yet you managed to bring me back,” the son of Hades murmured, subconsciously clutching at his chest. He did not allow for the son of Poseidon to finish his sentence, he already knew what Percy was about to state.

‘I thought you died.’
“It was not easy. I had to do a cardiopulmonary resuscitation. I… ah, am qualified. I was trained once during the visitation of representatives from Ílios. I only did the compressing of the chest back then, and on you!” Percy explained quickly and with a flustered expression as Nico squirmed in discomfort, clearly deducing the wrong conclusion. “Then I instructed Frank to call for Lady Anaítis once I believed I had the situation under control.”

“Does the suzerain and his wife know?”

“No,” Percy answered, pursing his lips for a second before shaking his head. “I should have informed them though.”

“Why didn’t you?” Nico inquired, evident curiosity present in his eyes.

Percy shrugged nonchalantly, crossing his arms across his chest before heaving a sigh.

“To be honest, I don’t know,” Percy admitted. “Perhaps, without any prior knowledge of your decisions, I had known that it was not something you wanted anyone to know. Without prior knowledge, a part of me always acknowledged how you tend not to disclose information, regardless of their personal significance.”

“Or perhaps,” Percy continued, glancing away. “I realized that their knowledge of it would result to you being immediately repatriated, and I did not inform them because I was too selfish to allow you to leave.”

“Wouldn’t you be happier then? At least, you would not be burdened with the fact that I was forced into a position beneath yours; a fact you have always condemned,” Nico inquired in a calm voice despite fisting the sheets underneath his palms in a death grip, that his knuckles protruded.

“I don’t know anymore what would make me happy,” the son of Poseidon heaved an exasperated sigh. “With you, there has always been complexities between what I hope is best for you, what you want, and my selfishness.”

“You were never one to indulge on the best and rational decisions in life,” Nico commented, lifting his gaze so that his eyes would settle on the older male’s figure. “What I want for my life is mine to dictate alone. Perhaps, you should consider what you want for once.”
Sea-green eyes narrowed into slits with a distinct and unnatural glimmer that the son of Hades could not fathom just as Percy’s hands clenched firmly onto fists atop of his lap. His lips parted once, twice, but no sound escaped from the son of Poseidon. There was one sole expression that prominently stood out, and Nico discerned it so well – confliction.

“What I want…” Percy breathed, casting his eyes down to his lap, observing the miniscule creases on his apparel intently. “What I need and desire most… questions everything I used to know.”

When Percy lifted his head and their eyes gazed onto each other – unbridled and purely raw – in the intensity of that gaze and confliction within those molten sea-green eyes, Nico had to envisage what the son of Poseidon could possibly covet that contradicted his upbringing. Nico had to question in his mind why, despite the complex yet raw emotions that swirled within those eyes, could he not fathom why such a restricted forlorn gaze was gazing back onto him.

What is it that you want, Percy?

Just as his lips parted to voice out that critical question, a timid knock resounded throughout the room before the son of Ares cautiously stepped inside a brief moment thereafter. Percy forcefully tore apart the connection between their eyes, his expression becoming unnaturally guarded as he fixed a façade of a polite smile onto his lips.

“Nico… You’re awake,” Frank breathed, his expression instantly becoming relieved as he gratefully basked in the sight of the conscious young man. “How is our First Lieutenant feeling?”

“Exhausted. It’s not uncommon. It always happen after –…” His voice trailed off, granting the son of Ares the luxury of deducing what had happened to him. “That aside, First Lieutenant is a high position to bestow upon a resident – an heir, no less – of a foreign district.”

“The soldiers are aware of how things would proceed under these… circumstances,” Frank answered, wincing at his lack of a proper term. “You are most qualified of leading the First Division, and the soldiers highly respect that; more so after the duel. While they anticipate of whichever knowledge in swordsmanship you could share or display to them, they are highly aware that their actions are dictated by Percy alone. In extension, to you, if Percy wills for it.”

“And I do will for it,” Percy confirmed with a nod. “There is no other person I entrust more than Nico.”
Frank offered a curt nod before he sealed his lips shut, keeping his head bowed low in a gesture of mortification. Calloused fingers gingerly fiddled with the hem of a doublet vest; a skittish habit which Nico easily recognized and was highly familiar with.

Fai Zhang – or Frank, as he preferred to be addressed – was the son of Ares and second heir to the district of Pólemos after his half-sister, Clarisse La Rue, and supposed consort to his half-sister, Hazel Levesque. In the years that he had interacted with the son of Ares during the latter’s visitations to their district, he had grown accustomed to his nervous antics and of the odd tendencies he possessed. He had observed discreetly of how a romantic attachment had developed between the young couple and eventually, how that romantic attachment had crushed his half-sister when news of the second heir’s disappearance spread like a wildfire throughout the entirety of Pangaea.

Now here he was, in the presence of the man who had caused his half-sister to endure such an excruciating pain, and Nico did not know what he needed to do for once.

“I am truly sincere with what I mentioned back in the barracks,” Frank started once more, slowly lifting his head to meet emotionless russet-brown eyes. “I know I have absolutely no right to ask you this but… I need your help, Nico.”

“The only safe way to contact Hazel would be through you. It would not be questioned since she is your sister,” Frank explained, lowering his head once more. “I want to assure her at least that I am still alive… but I cannot meet with her. Not… Not at this point in time where the possibility of a war just looms over our heads.”

“Why?” Nico asked. It was a simple question, yet the gravity of the answer he needed to hear was high. Why now? Why after all that suffering you had her endure?

“If I had to grovel before her feet to ask for her forgiveness, I would do so in a heartbeat. If I had to endure everything that you or your family would throw in my way just to prove my worth, I would do so. For her. Nothing has changed with my feelings for Hazel. I do not regret not contacting her if it meant ensuring her safety. But I would eternally regret that I had caused her to endure so much pain by allowing her to believe in false assumptions; that I was dead,” Frank answered, fists clenching along his sides.

The son of Hades pursed his lips at the response, unsure how he should process such a confession. For a few moments of silence, his eyes gradually hardened around the edges as he slowly shook his head.
“Even if I am her brother, the risks of sending a letter to her would be too high,” Nico explained. “Departing for Skotádi now –,” The subtle wince of Percy’s eyes did not escape his knowledge. “– would instigate suspicion amongst the council. That would mean months before I could visit my district.”

“There has to be a way, Nico,” Percy intervened, a frown marring his features. “If there is someone who can come up with a way, it’s you.”

The son of Hades resisted the overwhelming urge to laugh at that statement, a pained expression settling just briefly on his eyes before he closed them. With a sigh, he settled once more against the comfort of the bedsheets, pointedly ignoring the older males’ unease as he contemplated of his limited choices.

As of the current times, risking a letter to his sister which contained of critical information would ultimately result in jeopardy; the risk higher, more so that he was the heir to a foreign, powerful district. As of the present age, it was so effortless to manipulate any individual to veer off-course and support an opposing side, provided a high incentive or a looming threat. Departing for his district soon would merely instigate suspicions amongst the council; suspicions which Triton would no doubt find utmost beneficial against him.

A name fleeted in his mind, and he had to release a loud and resigned groan – which startled both Percy and Frank – at the absurdity of the situation. A chuckle filled with disbelief parted his lips once more as he opened his eyes, mock amusement evident in them.

Of course.

“I can’t believe I have to deal with that bastard again,” the son of Hades breathed, the chuckles that parted his lips gradually alarming the rest of the occupants within the room. “He would truly mock me again when we meet.”

“Nico?” Percy hesitantly called out to him, his features contorted with concern as the son of Hades raised himself upright once more.

“Is there any messenger of Anemoi here in the district at the moment?” Nico dismissed his concern with a flick of his wrist before redirecting his attention to the frowning son of Ares.

“There should be a couple,” Frank confirmed, nodding. “They will depart at the end of the week.”

“Perfect,” Nico remarked, his expression becoming gravely serious before he continued. “Take any of the messengers and pass to one of them a black bell, to be delivered to Colonel Lucas Castellan of Anemoi.”

“Would he understand it? Shouldn’t we attach a simple message at least?” Frank inquired, seeming apprehensive.

Nico shook his head.

“That bastard is no ignoramus. He would know it was from me, and he would likely send his “hound” to accomplish the task in his stead,” Nico answered, crossing his arms atop of his midsection. “If there is anyone who could accomplish such a task, it would be him. Regardless, his “assistance” comes at a price.”

“I am willing to pay for any price if it can be done,” Frank answered determinedly, eyes firm with conviction.

“You will not be paying the price. I am the one who would be requesting his assistance, and thus, he would require the price from me.” The son of Hades lifted his hand sharply when the two heirs parted their mouths to protest. “No. I am the only one capable of striking a deal with him. He knows better whom amongst us would be crippled should he try to take advantage of our districts’ alliance.”

“And that alliance comes with a price?” Percy inquired in a disbelieving tone, arching a brow.

“We prefer to label it as “benefits”,’’ the young man answered slowly, as if carefully weighing each word in his mind before they escaped his mouth. “Anemoi gains a portion of riches and military support from us, whereas Skotádi has unrestricted access to the entirety of Pangaea.”

“Information, in our times, is highly valuable. Attaining knowledge of the movements within neighboring districts, much so. Anemoi has access to information – no matter how limited – with all districts, except Selíni, of course,” Nico’s voice reduced to a low whisper at that point, signifying that the information he was disclosing was highly classified. “The Underground, council decisions, everything. Messengers are undeniably vital with the exchange of information, but Anemoi has professional informants scattered across the entire Pangaea. Luke’s “hound” is one of those
informants."

"Which is how Thanatos is highly aware of the stirring within the Houses of Zeus, Aphrodite and Ares. The three districts are conspiring something that is massive on a global scale and it is only a matter of time before they put their plans into action," Nico added grimly. "All districts are preparing for the worst. Even Spíti."

Both heirs had to wince at the information, the actual gravity of the situation gradually sinking onto their minds. Spíti – the House of Hestia – was a district of absolute neutral grounds, and if such a district was already anticipating a calamitous outcome… one could only imagine what was to come.

The New Order was slowly coming to pass, and a Second Dark Age loomed menacingly beyond the horizon. How ironic it was that the sole person whom ended such macabre would ultimately initiate one that might perhaps be equally colossal in magnitude.

"We could discuss this eventually when you are much rested," Percy declared after a few moments of utter silence. "Right now, I think Frank needs to fulfill the task you assigned to him, and you need to rest more."

The son of Ares conceded with a nod, though there was the barest hint of hesitance and raw curiosity in his eyes. It was not questionable, Nico deduced, that the son of Ares would be intrigued by such information. The knowledge of informants within his home district was tantalizing the older male, beckoning him with the need to derive information of siblings and brethren he was forced to leave behind.

"Your sister is fine," Nico breathed, immediately gaining the attention of the son of Ares. "Her supposed consort, an heir to the district of Anemoi, has a few professional informants discreetly watching over her."

"I…" Frank paused, taking a shaky breath before mustering a small smile. "Thank you. For that. And for helping me with Hazel."

Nico dismissed his gratitude with a shake of his head.

"I am only helping because you are the sole person to make my sister the happiest that I had ever seen her and she chose you as her consort, which makes you family," Nico answered, lips pressed into a firm line. "I could never entrust Hazel to a better man, though at this point, you have lost much
of the respect I had of you.”

Frank repressed the urge to wince at that, his eyes filled with morose understanding as he accepted the younger heir’s words.

“Right now, her welfare matters most to me. Go, and do as I instructed. Do not make me regret on helping you, Fai Zhang,” Nico declared, his eyes seeming to turn a shade darker as a menacing glint presented itself, promising the son of Ares with a world of pain should the latter fail once more.

Frank offered a curt nod, well aware that the son of Hades was more than capable of accomplishing his threats. Offering a hushed excuse, the son of Ares exited from the third heir’s chambers, closing the double-brass doors with a subtle click.

“I would not sleep again, even if you insist,” Nico murmured, facing the son of Poseidon before the latter could utter a single word. “I feel much more at ease when I am awake.”

“I understand that. Though I did hope that you won’t be stubborn for once and just rest,” Percy replied casually, leaning back against his seat as he crossed his legs. “Informants, huh… Does the other districts you have an alliance with aware of that as well?”

“No. Though I have established an agreement with most of their heirs to see to it that we have a solution in the case that the matters become catastrophic. That aside, I thought you want to have this discussion on a later date?” the son of Hades inquired, arching a brow.

Percy smiled sheepishly at that, his right hand gingerly fiddling with the hem of his vest as he offered a small shrug.

“You had this guarded expression when you were discussing the informants with us. I figured that maybe it was not something you would be willing to share with Frank as well…?” Percy trailed off, his statement coming off more as a question in the end. Wrong assumptions at that point was what he least needed.

“That is partially true,” Nico answered, a frown settling onto his features once more. “In reality, I would rather not have Frank be aware of such classified information, especially with his current status. It is best that he remain a neutral party. Getting involved…”
Nico trailed off shortly, pursing his lips before redirecting his attention once more to the son of Poseidon.

“If he gets involved any further, either another party would claim his life to extract information from him, or I would extract his life,” Nico concluded, his voice grave. “I never kid, Percy. No matter who the person is, and regardless of my ties with that person, I am willing to kill for the sake of my family; my people.”

“But you would never kill me,” Percy murmured, remembering the words which they exchanged only mere hours ago.

The son of Hades chuckled bitterly, running his fingers through his already disheveled black locks.

“You and Tyson, and two more individuals are exceptions,” Nico admitted grimly.

“I don’t suppose you would share the identity of those two *special* people,” Percy commented, unnaturally stressing his words towards the end of his statement, as if he were offering implications. Of what, Nico could not be certain.

“I rather take a sadistic pleasure of your boundless curiosity and the means you take to satisfy them,” Nico offered, a small smirk curling his lips when the older male pushed his lower lip out, slightly pouting.

“Of course you would,” Percy mumbled, though there was a glimmer of amusement and fondness in his eyes as he responded. “I have always been fond of that aspect of you, as equally as it irks me.”

“You have always appreciated aspects of what I am that people would condemn otherwise,” Nico noted, the smirk on his lips widening. “You have the oddest taste on what you like in people.”

“Oddity means uniqueness. I appreciate unique individuals, and you are one of a kind,” the son of Poseidon concluded in a playful tone, the fondness in his eyes remaining evident as he focused his attention to the younger male.

“Flattery would not get you anywhere,” Nico remarked with a soft laugh, though his heart was palpitating in a 12/8 crazy tempo and his guts twisted in knots as those molten sea-green eyes remained transfixed onto his frame. “People change, Percy. At this point, I might as well reintroduce
“Harsh. Yet, I would not deny that that is true,” Percy murmured.

This time, Nico observed bitterness not only on his tone of voice, but in the subtle manner that the smile on his lips narrowed and as the edges of his eyes hardened with the said emotion. There was not a doubt in his mind that the past would occasionally haunt the both of them; the past two years would remain as a subject that neither would come to mutually bridge.

That was a contrasting difference between them. While the son of Poseidon was gravely attached to memories and interactions with individuals, Nico detached himself from anything that could possibly establish a connection to him. Connections were critical, and they could either place one on a pedestal or induce one to be trampled upon by no specific means. If the past had educated the son of Hades with a critical lesson, it was that connections always remained to hauntingly severe him. That, he had inadvertently concluded with Percy. That, he had eventually concluded with a son of Zeus.

“Well then. If we wish to start off on a clean slate, I believe introductions are due,” Percy remarked as he arose from his seat, snapping the son of Hades from his musings. “Would you prefer semi-formal introductions then?”

Russet-brown eyes were transfixed for a mere few seconds on the third heir’s upright frame, the words of the latter only slowly setting in onto his mind.

“Whichever you please,” Nico offered slowly, still slightly dazed to absolutely comprehend the situation as the son of Poseidon extended his right hand to him.

“Semi-formal then. Perseus Tzákson, son of Salómi Tzákson and Lord Poseidon, third heir to the district of Thálassa. A man of questionable obsession to the color of blue, and who apparently highly values the presence of a certain young man by the name of Niccolò di Angelo,” the son of Poseidon murmured, mischief and happiness twinkling within those mesmerizing eyes as his introduction caused Nico to laugh. “And who might you be?”

And as Nico grasped that hand, a hundred memories flashed vividly onto his mind. For a mere second, he visualized of his former ten-year old self, gazing up onto those unchanging sea-green eyes as he introduced himself, permitting the then thirteen-year old son of Poseidon to address him with the name his deceased mother used to. He visualized of his visitations to Thálassa, and the many instances wherein he would give chase to a mischievous Percy who dragged him by the hand whenever the latter played a prank to any of the helpers, with him unintentionally becoming an accomplice; Percy’s “partner-in-crime”. He visualized of picnics under their maple tree by the garth,
with the occasional presence of a young Theseus as the latter playfully commented of Nico’s physique; or lack thereof.

He visualized of Percy as the teen embraced his frame, comforting him on instances where the loss of both his mother and sister from his life would be too overwhelming to endure. He visualized of promises the two of them established, with crossed pinkies and sworn oaths, of a future where they would always remain at each other’s side.

And then…

He visualized of the last instance he saw Percy, the latter mentioning of informing him of something important, but he had excused himself from it with the promise to hear it once he had returned; a promise he had not fulfilled.

That is, until now.

The firmness of the grip on his hand offered the certainty that Percy would not allow him to go a second time.

It would prove to be a challenge to start from a clean slate, to pretend as much as what was tolerable that memories of the past were almost nonexistent. Yet, the son of Hades was certain to grasp it, the chance to start from the very beginning once more, if only for the hope that he would not commit himself to another mistake. It certainly would prove to be a challenge.

“Niccolò di Angelo, son of Maria di Angelo and Lord Hades, second heir to the district of Skotádi. As a precautionary measure, I should not name any specific obsessions –,” Nico had to stifle his laughter when the son of Poseidon snorted in response. “– but I believe it would be harmless to share that the presence of a certain Perseus Tzákson intrigues me.”

Niccolò di Angelo was never one to back out from a challenge, and he would certainly and thoroughly enjoy this one.

Chapter End Notes

Name(s):
(Sally Jackson) Salómi Tzákson
Cychreus is an actual character in the Greek mythology. He was the son of Poseidon and Salamis, daughter of the river god Asopus.

The full names of most of the characters are provided at the link below. That page is subjected to change as the story progresses.
Link: HERE

Please leave a comment so I may know how you like the story thus far. Thank you so much for those who have left feedback on the previous chapter! Thank you for reading this one as well, and until the next update (02/05/2016)!
Q: Why are you updating early?
A: My module professors decided that it would be best to bombard us with a lot of work at the second week of the new semester. Unfortunately, with my CCA and impending projects, and tons of works that were assigned to us this week, Monday would not be a good time for me to update. So here is an update, two days in advance. THIS IS THE LAST CHAPTER IN THE DISTRICT OF LORD POSEIDON. THE FOLLOWING CHAPTERS WILL TAKE PLACE IN THE DISTRICT OF LORD APOLLO.

I have seen the trend since first chapter. I'm not too sure if the story has disappointed most of you so far with the expectation some might have of it (for those who followed me on Tumblr), but I would not know if I do not receive a feedback regarding how you find the story thus far. To "Percico", thank you so so very much for the comments you left since Chapter I. I really appreciate each and every single one of them, and it is with his/her words that I look forward to updating. Why? Because I get to read what he/she thinks and every single feedback I receive is important to me. I treasure each of them very much. I know that the pacing is quite slow, but I really would not like to rush into getting them together. I hope you all understand that. For those who have read until this point, thank you so so much for your constant support. If it is not much to ask, please kindly leave a feedback for this poor sap of an author (*points to self repeatedly*). Well then, until the next update (09/05/2016)!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I wondered
if things could feel
the way they did
before nostalgia hit
before life felt
like this
when I wasn’t a piece
lost in the sand
in a desert of coldness
with patches of fire
when temptation was simple
when life wasn’t passion

before we
fell into a pit
of nothingness
— “it’s nothing”;

words by Dominic Riccitello

“Is it not a risk to have Frank within the borders of Thálassa?” Nico casually inquired.

Footsteps crunched across the graveled paths as the heirs of Poseidon and Hades sauntered aimlessly within the grounds of the alcazar’s garth, occasionally bidding greetings to servants and military personnel who they pass by. The latter had been tricky; the previous engagement Nico had in the presence of the soldiers being a rather unpleasant encounter, yet they seemed rather unfazed – or were too professionally trained to act impassive – as they regarded both heirs with admiration and respect.

Niccolò di Angelo was the epitome of stubbornness, vehemently refusing the suggestion of being cooped up within the third heir’s chambers, and managing to convince a rather begrudging son of Poseidon to accompany him for a late afternoon stroll. It was not ideal – the sun glaring down onto their bodies, causing a light sheen of sweat to coat their skin – but it was preferable to being confined within Percy’s bed chambers with only the two of them.

“It is,” Percy agreed, matching his slow pace. “That is why only a handful are aware of his status, and his current situation here in Thálassa.”

“The council then and the entire family of the suzerain?” Nico deduced.

Percy shook his head, a frown creasing his features as he heaved a sigh.

“That is partially true. You see, even his presence is not… shared with my half-siblings,” Percy elaborated, raising a hand once the son of Hades parted his mouth, stopping the young man before he
could interject. “By allowing Frank to live within the borders of our district, we are already risking the probability of Pólemos declaring war upon us. Frank’s… departure from his district was not exactly official – he only had Clarisse informed. Should they find him – the second supposedly dead heir of Pólemos – within our district, it would lead to –”

“Disastrous results. Accusations of imprisoning an heir of a foreign district. And with Pólemos, the probability of a war is higher,” Nico concluded, dismissing the annoyed glance the third heir directed to him when he interjected. “But why keep such an information from your family?”

“Dad knows, and so does Lady Amphitrite,” Percy corrected the young man’s misconception. “And we intend to keep it limited to that. It’s an advantage that Frank was not exactly a well-known figure in his district or to the rest of the foreign districts. Keeping his identity a secret was rather less… tedious.”

“But why keep him a secret still? You are dodging my question,” Nico pointed out, earning a half-amused and half-exasperated expression from the son of Poseidon.

“No, it’s not dodging your question. You’re asking why I’m asking. Your curiosity and persistence are always very welcomed yet annoying,” Percy stated, to which Nico scoffed. “I think you should be well-aware of the reason. It’s the same, highly identical reason as to why Skotádi refuses to form alliance with Thállassa after all.”

The son of Hades visibly winced at the offered response, trying to discern if there was an accusatory undertone to it. There was none, yet that reduced neither the young heir’s inclination to defend nor to positively perceive his district and its actions respectively.

“If the situation had been less complex, we would offer that alliance in a heartbeat,” Nico said. “Thanatos is well-aware how beneficial it would be to establish an alliance between two main districts. But with Triton becoming the successor to your district…”

He briefly wondered when they had stopped walking as he gingerly extended a hand to pluck a persenche hyacinth from the flower beds, retracting his hand a second later when his mind ever so kindly visualized the features of his father’s consort. Percy, on the other hand, seemed to hesitate not one bit as he wordlessly extracted the flower, casually plucking a few pedicellate flowers.

“‘I know,” Percy offered with a small smile, a hint of finality in his tone as if to indicate to the young man not to press once more – for the umpteenth time – of the cause of the complexity. “Dad truly acknowledges that as well. My upbringing has prepared me as much of the fact that secrecy within the family often is a necessity; a decision that is often best for the sake of the general population. Triton craves of absolute power, and there is no doubt that he is prepared to use anything – anyone –
to achieve his ambitions. An alliance with your district is a massive gain for him.”

Triton’s ambitions – the absolute and indisputable reign over Thálassa; his birthright. It was a foolish governing law – that the first heir of the legitimate consort possessed direct succession over a district as a birthright – as much as it appeased consorts from their respective suzerain’s acts of infidelity. Regardless that Niccolò di Angelo acknowledged Thanatos – the firstborn legitimate son of Lord Hades and Lady Persephone – as the indisputable and rightful suzerain of Skotádi, he could not offer the same acknowledgement to Triton.

The man committed much abomination to secure his position as the succeeding suzerain. At least, that was what most of them speculated. At least, that was what Percy and Nico, and numerous unnamed individuals, were well-aware of. Lord Poseidon and Lady Amphitrite would not tolerate of the accusations, regardless of their significance or the innumerable anonymous witnesses who offered identical statements. Nico could understand where such denial stemmed from. It was unbearable to acknowledge of one’s firstborn – their supposed pride and joy – committing such heinous atrocities, and becoming that undesirable embodiment of malice and hatred. If it was unbearable for the Lady, Nico could only imagine how it might be for the Lord.

The names Theseus and Cychreus grimly lingered within the borders of Thálassa.

“The more reason why you need me here,” Nico responded after a while, an amused lilt to his voice as if to appease the sudden tension in the air.

“I always need you, Nico. More than what you could possibly comprehend,” Percy answered in a heartbeat, permitting the flowers he had plucked to slip from his grasp and onto the grass before pausing. “Right. No reminders of the past.”

The son of Poseidon harshly tugged another hyacinth from the flower bed, and Nico could have sworn of envisioning Persephone’s resentful features and berating voice as the third heir casually mutilated another flower once more.

“Persephone would murder you if she were to ever chance upon you mutilating plants. Flowers for that matter,” the son of Hades stated, diverting the topic inconspicuously – or so he hoped.

Percy laughed out loud at his statement, the sides of his eyes crinkling the slightest while his lips curled to a broad grin. Observing him then, with his usual cheery disposition and happiness positively gleaming in his sea-green eyes, Nico deduced that his smiles would always be infectious as the son of Hades found himself smiling subconsciously.
“Oh, right. How is the Wicked Flower Queen?” Percy inquired with honest curiosity, kneeling on one knee as he delicately rested the flower against the grass, just beside the flower bed.

“Positively “blooming”,” the young man humored, disregarding the slip Percy made upon addressing his father’s consort with that title they so discreetly bestowed upon her in a time gone by.

“With the succession of Thanatos, Father had exclusive involvement solely on the council and the military. It appeases her that Father could indulge in a much flexible schedule to accommodate himself personally, and her,” Nico supplied. “Though I cannot say the same for Father. With the succession of Miranda Gardinér on Gi, Lady Demeter had been frequenting Skotádi far too much for Father’s liking.”

Percy blinked once, twice, slowly processing the information before laughing once more.

“Right. I apologize. I almost forgot that Lady Demeter is Lady Persephone’s mother,” the son of Poseidon excused himself with a smile as he arose to full height, dusting his apparel of miniscule creases and dirt. “Your family is rather complicated. Not that mine is any better.”

“I’m just pleased that I could vacate my district before Lady Demeter decides to permanently reside there. I’d rather not endure her constant pestering on my health,” Nico winced at the memory, his left eye closing as a strong wind passed them by, effectively ruffling their hair. “I suppose I should have brought Cerberus as well. He could not tolerate her presence, equally so.”

Cerberus was Niccolò di Angelo’s personal hound, an enormous pure bred black Rottweiler of an approximate six years. The pup had been a personal gift of Thanatos and his Father for him, yet eventually became their family’s most beloved and trusted pet. Though, expectedly, his bond to the son of Hades was much prominent and firmly established. Contrary to what others might perceive, Cerberus was a docile hound, yet highly reliable and intelligent; a pride and joy to the young son of Hades.

“You should have,” Percy voiced his agreement, suddenly stepping close to the son of Hades.

Wordlessly, he extended his hands to heavily disheveled locks, plucking bits of fallen maple leaves that rested atop the silky mop of hair. The young di Angelo refused to acknowledge the sudden leap in the rhythm of his beating heart, induced by their close proximity, as he gazed directly onto sea-green irises.
“Though I can see why Cerberus might find it difficult to adjust to Thálassa,” Percy resumed softly. Though in their proximity, his voice seemed deafening. “Not that Lady Amphitrite would accommodate your hound.”

“That is because of your inability to care for one, Perseus.”

The son of Hades instinctively retracted from the grasp of the third heir, spinning on his heels as he redirected his attention to their back where the suzerain – Percy’s father – observed them with a visibly amused glint in those warm eyes. With his chartreuse and parakeet robes brushing delicately against the blades of grass, the elder male confidently stepped towards their direction, stopping short when he was but a mere five feet.

“Lord Poseidon,” Nico greeted, biting his tongue a second thereafter when both father and son audibly groaned at his formality. *Right, no formalities,* Nico berated himself.

“I can take care of a hound,” Percy defended himself before his father could greet Hades’ heir, his hands raised in defense. “I took care of Cerberus before.”

“You had Cerberus dragging you to a fountain, and you allowed the hound – with his mud-filled paws – inside the chambers of Hades and his consort. If not for young Niccolò back then, we might have lost you as Cerberus’ chew toy,” Poseidon supplied, and Nico had to repress the overwhelming desire to laugh at the memory.

As fond as the memory was, the son of Hades highly believed that Percy would not appreciate his amusement at that moment as the latter raised a hand to his face, partially covering it as a bright flush adorned the tanned skin of his cheeks out of embarrassment.

Lord Poseidon seemed not to consider that though, as he freely guffawed at his son’s entertaining reaction.

“Cerberus would not want that. He rather appreciates silence too much to want Percy as his chew toy,” Nico remarked, a small smile managing to curl his lips there and then when he caught sight of the third heir’s intensifying blush in his peripheral vision.

The suzerain nodded in agreement, miniscule crinkles becoming more pronounced against the corners of his eyes as the smile on his lips broadened.
“All right, all right. You have had your fun,” Percy grumbled, sulking. “What do you want, Dad?”

“I hate to interrupt your time with Niccolò, my boy, but I need to discuss some matters with him in private,” the suzerain explained, a smile still present on his chapped lips. Though judging by the expression reflected in those sea-green eyes, the discussion was anything but a laughing matter. “You may accompany Tyson in the meantime. I believe he is in the kitchen, deteriorating our supplies of peanut butter once more.”

The son of Poseidon’s expression slackened for a second before he seemed hesitant to comply, sea-green eyes darting back and forth between his father and the son of Hades. His lips parted once, twice, yet no words escaped from the tip of his tongue.

“I…” Percy hesitated once more, a confliction which Nico could not understand settling onto his eyes as Percy directed his attention solely on the son of Hades.

“Do not worry. I will make sure that young Niccolò won’t wander off,” Poseidon offered in a light, yet disinterested tone, pointedly dismissing his son.

Only then did it occur to Nico why Percy was hesitating on obeying his father’s request; why he seemed conflicted with the sheer idea of departing from the side of the young man. Percy did not trust Nico to stay. The son of Poseidon did not trust himself on committing the same mistake twice, as he did once in a moment two years in the past.

The lack of trust should offend the son of Hades, should incite fury within him, yet all that registered in his mind were emotions of guilt and shame. It was justifiable for Percy to hesitate at that moment, torn between disobeying his father and following through with the request. Percy did not lose by choice his trust in the son of Hades; Nico had forced him to question the trust he once offered to him.

“I will see you at dinner,” Nico found himself breathing, focusing all his attention on the third heir as their eyes clashed; directly meeting.

Those molten sea-green eyes scrutinized his entirety, searching within his eyes of any signs of deceit which would indicate otherwise of the words of the son of Hades. And Nico allowed for Percy to do so, to search his eyes and to comprehend that he would not lie for a second instance.

Only when he found the answer from those russet-brown eyes that the son of Poseidon permitted for
himself to nod at his father’s words, uttering a soft “I’ll see you then, Nico” to the young man before departing, glancing back occasionally as he retraced his steps once more, walking back the graveled paths. Nico did not permit himself to glance away as the son of Poseidon stiffly walked away, watching the older male until he had disappeared completely from his view.

Only then did he redirect his attention to the suzerain, with an apology already worded at the tip of his tongue, yet the elder male himself had his eyes gazing at the same direction where his son had disappeared. There was a contemplative look in those eyes and a hint of choked desolation, both seemed to be etched permanently even as the suzerain redirected his attention to the young man; the son of a good comrade.

“Come for a walk with me, Niccolò,” Poseidon requested, passing by the young man as he sauntered off into the garth, his left hand absent-mindedly brushing against clusters of varying flowers as the elder male walked close to the flower beds.

Without an excuse to refuse such a request, the son of Hades slowly breathed in a shaky breath before trailing after the suzerain of Thálassa.

In full retrospect, Niccolò di Angelo had to begrudgingly admit that Lord Poseidon had been much more of a fatherly figure to him than his own father, the suzerain of Skotádi. Lord Poseidon had always accommodated to his needs and wants as a child, not too excessively to pamper the child, but to enlighten him of how there was no such shortcut to happiness. Comparatively, materialism was a tendency that neither suzerains tolerated nor practiced upon with their children, and Nico had been raised with the rationality that the best forms of happiness had to be attained through one’s merits.

Lord Poseidon had never offered a tangible blessing to him, and Nico could have not been more grateful for that. The son of Hades coveted not to be pampered with materials that would eventually degrade in value or use, in the passing of time. The blessing which Poseidon offered were intangible; of the concept of what a complete family was, of being raised with the presence of a fatherly figure constantly by his side.

Yet, Niccolò di Angelo would not dare to wish otherwise that the suzerain of Thálassa were his father instead. Lord Hades might not exactly embody a father Nico initially wished had existed in the early stages of his life, but the suzerain had educated the young man; had molded him to whom he was at the moment regardless of the countless mistakes he had committed. He was Niccolò di Angelo, and that was the sole fact that mattered most; an identity he could not hope to trade for someone else’s.
The elder male before him had a fixed contemplative expression on his features, sea-green eyes seeming distant yet attentive enough to register the path they wandered off to. Neither minded the silence, oddly finding comfort in the presence of each other and the occasional crunching of fallen maple leaves against the soles of their footwear. Perhaps, Nico mulled, it was much flexible to adapt to the concept of the past two years being nonexistent with the suzerain due to the son of Hades possessing no intense personal attachment. It was plausible, yet all the more discomforting. Attachments could either make you or break you, or so was the conclusion of many. In his case, it proved too much to be inclined to the latter.

“Perseus had never been upfront with his emotions,” Poseidon started, snapping the son of Hades from his musings as the latter entirely focused his attention on the suzerain’s back. “He would not completely admit to it, but the past two years had been… much difficult for him than what he would let on.”

The suzerain halted after a few steps, straightening his slightly hunched frame before facing the young man completely. Weariness was seeping through those sea-green eyes, so identical yet equally vaguely distinct to that of Percy’s. Nico could not gaze directly into them.

“When you disappeared from his life two years ago, he responded to it worse than he did when Theseus died.”

Hearing Theseus’ name, his forbidden name, being uttered by the man’s father nonetheless forced the son of Hades to focus his attention once more on the suzerain. The old man had his eyes gazing off into the distance, unseeing, as if the man was relieving memories of the past at that moment.

“Of course, there was Jason—” The name pricked at an untended wound. “—but your bond with Perseus had always been – will always be – special. Theseus had always been the center of Perseus’ world. But at some point, even before my second child’s demise, you have conquered that spot. When Theseus died, Perseus felt as if he had lost his purpose in life. But when you left, Perseus literally felt as if he had lost his entire world.”

“That cannot be true,” Nico responded, his fists clenched at his sides.

Nico could never be Percy’s world. The entirety of his life, fate never offered any positive mutuality. The moment he decided to leave, to step out of Percy’s life, had been at a time when the harsh reality of their fates – dictated by their positions within the society – had slapped Niccolò di Angelo in the presence of a daughter of Athena. The moment he decided to leave was at the moment when he realized that he could not matter to the son of Poseidon in the same manner that the latter mattered to him. Percy was his entire world since their fated encounter, not the other way around.
To be informed otherwise was such a cruel joke.

“You children get more troublesome as you age,” Poseidon commented with an exasperated sigh – a habit Percy evidently adopted – as he regarded Hades’ son. *As stubborn as his father, and raised just like his father it seems.* “But we cannot blame that on you. You children – children outside of our espousal – always had much complicated lives, and never the best kind. Being raised in such a close-minded society had been a negativity from the very start.”

“In retrospect, you children should blame Zeus and his consort, Hera,” Poseidon added, an amused and mischievous smile curling his lips.

Nico did not feel as amused – incandescent, perhaps – at the vile, aforementioned names.

“Jason would soon be tying himself to a future I believe he desired none of,” Poseidon continued, pointedly neglecting how the son of Hades winced at the name of Zeus’ second son. “If he wishes to proceed, then so be it. But for you and Perseus, Hades and I both want for you to decide on a path that would take you to your respective happiness. No forced betrothal; no marriage for the convenience of alliance. Your happiness is yours to dictate.”

“Why are you telling me all of this, Lord Poseidon?” Nico had to inquire.

Nico *had* to inquire. None of these – the words the suzerain was uttering – made sense.

“Sometimes, it is best to indulge in your emotions, regardless of those risky consequences you formulate in your mind,” Poseidon supplied, just as he faced the son of Hades once more, his sea-green eyes gazing unwaveringly onto russet-brown.

“Two years ago, when you left, you were – still are – in love with my son, were you not?”

The son of Hades was incapable of shrouding his emotions immediately, not when the sudden statement violently pushed him off of his bearings. The excruciating truth was visibly discernible for a fleeting second, before indifference settled once more onto his features. But it was too late; he had been too late. The suzerain had seen the truth in just that split second, and Nico mentally prepared himself for the slew of vulgarities – profanities – which he speculated of receiving.

Seconds turned to a full minute. A full minute became two. When none of the words he had
expected to hear escaped from the suzerain’s lips, Nico cautiously lifted his gaze, only to be met with eyes filled of sincere sympathy.

His throat felt tight all of a sudden, and the young man was not too sure if he would have preferred the profanities compared to what he was receiving then. Never in his life did he desire sympathy. More so from the father of the man he had unintentionally devoted his whole heart and life to.

“I am truly despising Zeus now,” Poseidon commented as the suzerain lifted his eyes to the sky, painted a pale pink and various tints of vibrant orange and glaring yellow. “I accept who you are, Niccolò di Angelo. In my presence, you should not be ashamed of any of your facets. I accept who you are. Though I suppose, it would please you much more if you hear those words from your own father.”

No, this was not what the son of Hades expected. *Please condemn my existence. Shun me. Degrade my being with a slew of vulgarities. Not this. Not this…*

Not this sympathy. He did not know how to handle sympathy. He did not know how to dismiss the stinging sensation in his eyes. And even as the suzerain concluded with that last statement, Nico desired to protest that no, it was immensely pleasing to him for the Lord Poseidon alone to assure of him that he would still be accepted.

Yet, he did not part his mouth. He did not trust himself to utter anything at that moment without his voice breaking, or himself crumbling to his knees.

“I am telling you this because I have always treated you as if you were my own son. If I was your father, my pride in you would be just as equally high as it is now,” Poseidon stated, allowing a small smile to curl his lips. “I have always been proud of you and Perseus, even Jason. You three have always been enduring so much.”

“Why are you telling me all of this? What do you expect of me?” Nico found himself asking, his voice merely a hushed whisper.

“Aside from fulfilling the oath you have sworn under the name of our ancestral father and primordial god, I expect solely one thing from you, Niccolò,” Poseidon resumed, his tone much serious.

“Be selfish of what you want. This time around, I want you to be selfish.”
“What?” the son of Hades found himself vocalizing his thoughts, his inquiry parting his lips in a breathed whisper.

“The purest of your emotions alone is the sole shortcut to your happiness. That is all I am going to say, and I hope you remember it this time around.”

“Perseus, stop bouncing your knees.”

Said son of Poseidon muttered a half-hearted apology as he obliged to his stepmother’s request, only to commit the disturbing action in less than a few seconds out of agitation. Lady Amphitrite heaved an exasperated sigh, tucking a few loose strands of black locks as she shifted the high-spirited six-year old child in her lap whom was preoccupied with devouring peanut butter sandwiches.

Tyson, fifth heir to the district of Thálassa, was another child outside of the suzerain and Lady Amphitrite’s espousal. The status of the mother was a highly classified information; Percy assumed it had to be that unacceptable, for the information to be kept as a secret. It was near impossible to prevent disclosure of information regarding illegitimate children of the suzerains once they were introduced, and for the sake of his youngest brother – or so he was informed – Tyson was acknowledged as an adopted child, rather than an illegitimate child. Yet, Percy was well-aware of the truth. The position of Tyson’s mother – whoever she was – in the society had to be a scandalous matter if associations to her and Tyson’s identity as an illegitimate child had to be kept mum. Not that Percy possessed any complaints. Tyson did not deserve any further the harsh cruelty of reality.

At birth, the child had been blind on his left eye, distinguishing him from the other children. Though eventually, the child tastefully covered his blind eye with a silver eyepatch – an influence made by Perseus and their mutual obsession with myths regarding pirates. Rather than drawing sympathy from peers, Percy observed that the eyepatch offered a distinct and rueful personality for the child, which was why his father and stepmother tolerated the material in the first place.

The child seemed to sense his older brother’s gaze as he lifted his sole carob-brown eye, gazing directly onto distant sea-green irises. With a toothy grin, Tyson squirmed free from his stepmother’s grasp before approaching Percy, gazing up at his brother with that worshipping eye as he offered him a slice of sandwich.
“Big brother, eat!” Tyson encouraged, close to pressing the sandwich against his brother’s lips.

Offering a small smile, Percy indulged the child, leaning forward and taking a rather small bite from the sandwich. Peanut butter was not a mutuality between them; Tyson devoured the paste excessively, and Percy could only tolerate an adequate amount.

“Thank you, Tyson,” Percy murmured upon swallowing, patting his brother’s head.

The child beamed at the gesture, nodding once before clumsily crawling up his brother’s lap, situating himself there. Not that Percy minded, as he wrapped his arms firmly around the child, holding him securely against his chest.

“Where is Patéras and big brother Nico?” Tyson questioned, gazing up at his older brother for a few seconds before redirecting his attention to their stepmother.

The family was situated at the kitchen, surrounded by various helpers as the Lady indulged herself with baking pastries for the youngest child. There was a lack of privacy as the helpers hovered incessantly over them, offering assistance time and time again, but it was a pleasant contrast to the droning political and economic discussions within the council hall.

“They should be here in a few minutes for dinner. The cake should be prepared by then as well, so you may have it for dessert,” Lady Amphitrite offered with a faint smile, her eyes shifting for a mere second at the baking treat, before she redirected her attention to the child. “They must still be preoccupied with their discussions. You both know how your father is.”

But their level of comprehension differ, Percy thought to himself as he silently observed his preoccupied half-brother. To Tyson, it was all tedious tasks that their father, as the suzerain, had to accomplish. Tyson could not comprehend, in his tender age, of the looming macabre series of bloodshed; war. To a child, such matters were insignificant; dreadfully dull. However, the same application was nonexistent to the son of Poseidon.

It had been an hour, perhaps two, since Percy had left them to their discussions as his father requested. Percy simply could not understand why his father had to exclude him from such critical discussions. After all, what other possible private matter could he come to discuss with the son of Hades?

Niccolò di Angelo was another complicated matter altogether. Percy was certain that he had
offended the son of Hades to a considerable extent when he had hesitated to depart from his side earlier on. As much as Niccolò di Angelo would dismiss or vehemently deny it, there was a split second that Percy recognized a raw hurt in those russet-brown eyes when he tried to see if the son of Hades had uttered a lie.

The sheer memory of it drowned him with shame and guilt.

“I don’t understand why Dad has to exclude me in their discussions,” Percy grumbled, his knees bouncing once more, much to Tyson’s delight.

Lady Amphitrite glared distastefully at his stepson’s antics before reaching forward, placing a placating hand on one of his knees. Tyson seemed displeased though as he swung his legs back and forth, silently requesting for his older brother to resume his actions.

“You are just irked because you do not want to depart from young Niccolò di Angelo’s side,” she stated, voice laced with humor, but Percy could see that she was absolutely serious with her statement. “You don’t trust him to be alone. At least, without you by his side.”

Percy pursed his lips.

“Am I wrong to feel that?” Percy asked, leaning back against the wooden chair, wincing when splinters embedded slightly against the fabric of his tunic. “No, that was a stupid question. I am wrong to feel that. How could I not trust someone whom I had been friends with for seven years?”

“Realistically speaking, it was only five,” the Lady interjected, earning a frustrated glare from her stepson. “What? You ask me if you are wrong for feeling that, and I am telling you that you are not. It is justifiable, to feel even the slightest bit of distrust, since the circumstances which he left you weren’t exactly…”

The Lady trailed off, shrugging slightly after a few seconds before she arose from her seat to tend to the baked pastry. Percy could only hope that his stepmother would not frost the treat with chunks of peanut butter paste, just to appease the child. The sheer thought had him internally gagging.

“You children have always been such complicated matters,” she started once more, adorning a faded gray apron before folding blueberry sauce into a prepared cream cheese frosting.
“One would think Hades’ son would be the least complicated one amongst you three since he is the most mature – uncontestably so – regardless of his age, and you would be the most complicated since you possess so much mischief. However, Jason is the only one who managed to stick to his ranking position. In actual fact, you are the least complicated amongst the three of you whereas young Niccolò di Angelo just unfortunately happens to be the most complicated. And that is not only because of his upbringing.”

“What do you mean Nico is the most complicated?” Percy was not sure if he should feel offended for himself or for the son of Hades.

“The young man has always been… excessively considerate. Let us put it as that,” Lady Amphitrite offered, gingerly scraping the finished frosting atop the surface of a chocolate chiffon cake with a spatula before finely layering it. “Even as a child, he always looked after you and Jason, and he rarely indulges in what makes him happy. Believe me when I say this: I believe the son of Hades only had the intention of being considerate when he left two years ago. The young man adored you – still does – too much to resort to that, unless he believed that it was for your utmost best interest.”

“How was losing him my “best interest”?” Percy grunted, earning an amused chuckle from his stepmother.

“That, I think, is something you have to personally ask of your friend.” She looked at him pointedly, brandishing the spatula at his direction.

The son of Poseidon had to wince at her emphasis, sea-green eyes shifting to the side as he contemplated of her words. Even then, Percy lacked the confidence to label their relationship as “friendship”. Regardless of their agreement of focusing on the present rather than reminiscing the past – which would usually end in a ceaseless argument – Percy would not deny that it was a nearly impossible feat. The past was the only connection he had with the son of Hades at this point, and even the past was slowly evolving to a bitter reminder.

The son of Poseidon was at his wit’s end, unsure of how to proceed with the complexity that was Niccolò di Angelo.

“How was losing him my “best interest”? Tyson tugged at his sleeves, snapping him from his musings as he focused on the child. He fixed a smile on his lips as the child clumsily wiped the breadcrumbs off of his lips. “Were you and big brother Nico good friends?”

The smile fixed on his lips broadened at that, a fond expression gleaming evidently on sea-green eyes. The third heir adjusted his younger brother atop his lap, so that the child was facing towards his
“He’s more than a good friend, I guess, Tyson. He’s a really special person to me, even to Mother and Father.” Percy would never address his father’s consort as “Mom”, solely reserving that for his deceased mother. But for Tyson’s sake, he had to address the woman as “Mother” in the child’s presence. “When you first came here – you were so young to remember – your big brother Nico always used to play with you as well.”

“But he’s here now, yes? So big brother Percy and big brother Nico are friends again, yes?” the child inquired innocently.

Percy heaved a sigh, before forcibly plastering a smile on his lips. It must have been unconvincing as Tyson tilted his head in response, his carob-brown eye gleaming with both curiosity and concern.

“I hope so, Tyson. I hope so too,” Percy answered truthfully.

“I hope so as well, Perseus. Or else, it would be problematic for me if you and your special friend could not cooperate.”

Not again, Percy had to internally groan, dreading every second as he turned towards the doorway where – sure enough – his father had entered mere seconds ago, followed by the son of Hades. Against the dim light along the doorway, the son of Poseidon could not be sure if the flushness of the young man’s cheeks had been a trick of his eyes as Nico seemed impassive on the outside.

The child did not seem to mind, or notice, his older brother’s sudden embarrassment as he squirmed off of his lap, scuttling towards the son of Hades who naturally knelt on one knee just as the child reached him. Tyson curiously gazed up at the young man who naturally smiled at him, his head tilting to the side as he had a contemplative look in his eye.

“You have a pretty smile. Like the angels in the stories that M iterate tells Tyson when he goes to bed. But you are brother’s friend, yes? Are you my big brother’s angel?”

Niccolò di Angelo would have laughed at the child’s inquisitive nature – it was the best and easiest response – but the question had caught him off-guard. Poseidon’s third heir did not seem to be in a better condition, his mouth parted and jaw slightly hanging in surprise at what the child stated.
“Well…” Nico breathed after regaining his composure, fixing a smile once more on his lips. Fortunately, he was capable of repressing the blooming flushness across his cheeks. “Why should I be your big brother’s angel? What if I am your angel?”

“Then Tyson will share you with big brother,” the child answered in a heartbeat. “Because big brother also needs an angel to watch over him, right?”

“What your older brother needs is a sitter, Tyson,” Poseidon answered before Nico could, probably sensing the young man’s unease as the child bombarded him with one question after another.

“Really, Dad?” Percy audibly groaned, hastily running calloused fingers through his thoroughly disheveled locks, not too amused that he was being teased once more.

“Well, his “angel” is here to do a thorough job on that,” the suzerain chirped, ignoring his son’s protest and pointedly glancing at the son of Hades who merely sighed at the incessant teasing, allowing a small smile to curl his lips.

“Stop teasing the boys, my lord. Dinner is about to be served. I suggest we all vacate the kitchen so the helpers may serve the dishes,” Lady Amphitrite interjected before the suzerain could subject the young heirs to further humiliation with his incessant teasing remarks.

“As you wish. But you and Tyson go first, my lady. There is something important I wish to discuss with them before dinner,” Poseidon requested, placing a hand on top of his youngest son’s head, ruffling the unruly brown curls.

“All right. But remember: I want no discussions of that on the table later.”

Lady Amphitrite seemed well-aware of the matter of discussion as she simply offered a curt nod, gingerly placing the faded gray apron atop one of the wooden stools before she ushered herself and the child out of the room. The child followed wordlessly, offering a toothy grin and an enthusiastic wave to the son of Hades as they vacated the room; gestures which Nico returned briefly with a fond smile.

Whether the suzerain noticed Nico’s reaction, the man offered no indication as those eyes followed his family as they disappeared into the hallway. His third son though could not have been more conspicuous, silently observing the exchange with a pleased smile and a thoughtful expression.
“I am positive that you two have not been informed that I have sent Triton to Fotá then Skotádi respectively,” Poseidon stated after a full minute, once upon ensuring that no one would be listening to their discussion. Percy had stepped forward by then, standing beside the son of Hades. “He has departed well before noon today.”

“That explains why it had been so peacefully quiet,” Percy breathed in a whisper, though in a room with only the three of them as the occupants, it was audible enough for the suzerain to react.

“Perseus…” the suzerain sighed, looking pointedly at his third son.

The heir simply raised both his hands in defense, a mischievous smile tugging both corners of his lips. There was no regret in those sea-green eyes for the comment he had just uttered, and if it was not impolite, Nico might have breathed out the same comment out of agreement.

Lord Poseidon seemed to dismiss his son’s comment mere seconds later, though he did pointedly look at the latter, indicating that he wanted his following words to be regarded seriously.

“With Triton well set for these districts, I need you to visit and conduct business at Ílios, Perseus. As one of our allied districts, conducting business with them is a must, and ensuring that no such shady activities are occurring within the district’s borders. We established an alliance with a district we proved to be righteous, and I wish to ensure that we have not made the wrong decision.” Poseidon raised one of his hands before his son could hope to interject. “As with regards to your “issue”, I will appoint Frank to secure Tyson’s safety, and a few more from the First Division, if I must. Hopefully, that would be enough to convince you and young Niccolò to proceed with my request.”

It was not a question then that Percy, despite his father’s reassurance, would still hesitate, the confliction in his eyes resurfacing once more yet for a whole different reason. In the past two years, Perseus Tzákson had not once departed for their neighboring districts outside the borders of Thálassa, regardless of the district’s proximity. Departing for a distant district while Triton embarked on his assigned quest was a highly tantalizing idea, yet the risk of leaving his youngest brother on his own gnawed at his desire to accept.

Raising a hand, Nico cautiously placed it against the third heir’s right shoulder, the coldness of his hand seeping through the tunic enough to garner the attention of Poseidon’s son.

“I will follow you wherever you wish to go,” Nico offered slowly, as if weighing each word on his tongue.
The decision to depart for a neighboring district was not his to make; not since he had entered Thálassa and joined amongst the ranks of its soldiers. The moment he had entered the district, his fate had been bound once more with the son of Poseidon. With absolute certainty, the son of Hades was aware that Frank was more than capable of ensuring the welfare of Percy’s youngest brother; not that he was judging the latter of his reason to hesitate. If Percy could help it – and Percy surely would do so, if that part of him had not changed – he would do everything, absolutely everything, to ensure the safety of that sole person remaining who he acknowledged as a blood brother.

“I…” Percy paused, his features scrunching as if he were reconsidering his answer. “I accept.”

And Percy was looking for the reassurance that he had made the correct decision as he shifted his gaze once at the son of Hades, looking for any indication that would undermine the decision he had made. Yet, Nico could not offer that, for he himself was uncertain which decision was correct, or at the very least, the best that there was. Wordlessly, he slightly squeezed the older male’s shoulder, uncertain what he was trying to achieve, yet hoping that Percy could decipher that for him.

“Splendid. Perseus, I will pass by your chambers tonight to brief you with my demands of what needed be done during your visitation. Lord Apollo has already been informed of a visitation. I expect both of you to depart from Thálassa at daylight on the day after tomorrow. Am I understood clearly?” Poseidon inquired.

“Yes, my lord,” both answered simultaneously.

“Excellent. I shall give you three months to return. Until then, I bid both of you good luck,” the suzerain remarked, nodding to himself as he made a move to depart from the room.

“Three months?” Percy breathed out in confusion, features scrunching up into a distinguished frown. “A few weeks would suffice. We should be back by then.”

“Ah, Perseus…” Poseidon breathed his son’s name, in a knowing tone that possessed a playful lilt. “But with you, you always surprise me.”

And there it was once more – that knowing look that the suzerain possessed earlier when he extracted the truth from the son of Hades. There was that knowing look once more, as if the suzerain possessed knowledge that neither of the young heirs possessed. And in that moment, Nico was certain that Lord Poseidon did. And if that playful lilt in his tone was anything to go by, it was a truth universally acknowledged; an unknown that the son of Hades would eventually come to detest.
The suzerain offered a delighted smile, looking pointedly at the son of Hades.

“I will believe it when I have come to see it.”

Chapter End Notes

Definition(s):
Persenche: a color consisting of 73% ultramarine, 9% red, 18% white

The full names of most of the characters are provided at the link below. That page is subjected to change as the story progresses.
Link: HERE
The Worth of Propriety

Chapter Notes

I decided on two things for this fic. One: I cannot commit to a specific day of update (Reason stated on my Tumblr account. I'd rather keep this note short.) so my update days are either Saturday, Sunday or Monday. Early/Late updates will be stated at the end of chapters, may that case come. Second: I asked for comments once, and I won't do that again since... er... it did not change anything. I do not have ill-feelings regarding it though, but I'll assume that this story is fine thus far. If you guys leave a comment, that's great and I really appreciate that. If not, I don't mind. It's your decision if you wish to do so or not. As long as that hit count is increasing, I'll assume that this story is still being read at least, and that is what really mattered to me. So yeah, I won't ask again, and I apologize for doing so in the past chapter.

Anyway, the next few chapters will occur in the district ruled by Lord Apollo. Please enjoy this chapter! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Always happens with men. They promise friendship. They promise to treat you as an equal. In the end, all they want is to possess you.”
— “The Blood of Olympus” by Rick Riordan

He remembered that day with such crystalline clarity, as if the memory had been embedded onto his mind – branded onto his soul with a searing pain. It was the sole instance he had been incapable of anything, as a sixteen-year old Perseus Tzákson crumbled before his emotionless russet-brown eyes, grieving immensely as his older brother – a man of unnatural and murky sea-green eyes – was veiled in a linen shroud before his mangled body was cautiously descended onto a plain silver casket. It was the first and last instance that Niccolò di Angelo witnessed the lack of a ceaseless, mischievous smile on the second heir’s lips, and at that moment, the son of Hades realized that nothing would be the same once more.

Encompassed within the chilling embrace of Percy as the sky equally mourned of the loss of Poseidon’s second son, he remembered of his lackluster eyes glancing at the mourning residents of the district of Thálassa. Their emotions distinctively varied – most mourning as if the deceased heir was a part of their own family, which held truth to some extent, and most grimly offering their utmost respect with their heads bowed low. But, only one of these emotions garnered his utmost – his unwanted – attention.
“—battered by a storm—“

“—crashed through the rocks—“

“—powerless to stop—“

“—attacked by rogue mercenaries—“

Lies. Lies, lies, lies.

Lies.

“Lies,” he found himself whispering, his voice inaudible amongst the mourning of the residents of the district.

His russet-brown eyes lifted, seeking and glaring defiantly at the glinting, nonchalant sea-green eyes of the first heir of Lord Poseidon. The son of Hades had to praise the older male; he was professional at the façade of a mourning brother that he was executing in the eyes of his people. Never had the son of Hades coveted to tear someone into mangled pieces.

Had Theseus been aware of his fate? Had he processed that his death was inevitable?

“Take care of Percy for me, Nico. Please. He is the only brother that I have; the most precious person in my life. It would kill me to know if anything were to happen to him.”

The words that the deceased heir had uttered to him before his voyage now plagued his mind – in a crackling voice that ceaselessly repeated in a broken loop. At that time, the son of Hades had dismissed it casually, perceiving the words as nothing but the mere vocalizing of the second heir’s concern over his younger brother. He had agreed, uttered a non-committal “Okay” just to offer a response, not knowing that the request pertained to what he had originally thought. Those parting words had been sweet; endearing. Eventually, they sounded like a forewarning; a grave foreboding.
Niccolò di Angelo was not a son of Hades if he could not detect a lie of any form when it was presented before his eyes. And damned, he should be, if he could not detect the lie that was plastered across Triton’s features.

But for that moment, he had to place his speculations aside as he offered his shoulders to the grieving son of Poseidon. As the rain seeped into the fabric of his tunic, the chilling pellets of rain and the scalding tears of the third heir blended against his skin until Nico could not distinguish which was which anymore.

In the howling of the raging winds, and the heavy downpour from the weeping heaven, the son of Hades was unsure when his tears started to blend with the droplets of the chilling rain.

“You’re brooding once more.”

A small sigh parted his lips as he casually shifted his frame, turning towards the son of Poseidon who simply offered a small smile.

“I would not be me if I’m not brooding,” Nico stated matter-of-factly, arching a brow as he tilted his head partially to the side. “How can you tell that I was brooding?”

“Aside from your expression…” Percy trailed off, humming to himself as he casted a pointed glance at the son of Hades’ hands. “You have a habit of twisting your father’s ring when you are brooding.”

A pure silver skull ring glinted against the young heir’s left thumb, contrasting against his pale olive complexion. It was an exquisite jewelry; a priceless heirloom of his father’s lineage, with an intricate and detailed design that seemed to project the skull figure in a haunting realistic image. It had been a possession of his biological sister, and now his. It was a possession he despised with utmost vehemence, yet equally his most prized.

“Old habits die hard. Or so they say,” the son of Hades stated, twisting the ring once more until the skull was facing downwards. “These moments of silence are quite dangerous, especially for a brooding individual.”

“It’s maddening as well, for those who are not so used to silence,” Percy commented, the smile on his lips broadening when he noticed the subtle twitch on the younger man’s lips. “Care to share your
thoughts? It gets quite maddening; sailing out here in the open ocean for days without some form of entertainment.”

"Are you implying that my company is for mere entertainment?” the son of Hades questioned, a hint of challenge in his tone.

The third heir raised both of his hands immediately in defense, just as he slowly shook his head in response.

"Not at all. But your thoughts have to be much entertaining than observing nothing but water for miles,” Percy pointed out, leaning against the wooden railings of the ship as he gestured towards the ocean.

"I’m not sure if it’s something you would like to hear about. I’m quite certain that it would dampen your mood.”

"I’m an adult,” Percy stated matter-of-factly, though his tone sounded begrudging as if he was finally admitting to himself what was inevitable. “Whether a matter would affect me positively or negatively, I should handle it with a mature perspective.”

"You know, I don’t expect that from you,” the son of Hades stated without glancing at the older male’s direction.

A small sigh.

"Everyone else does.”

And that was what mattered – the stereotypical perceptions. Regardless of what the son of Hades would utter to retort or challenge that statement, it was a truth universally acknowledged; a bitter reality. Their own people expect that their lives were nothing but utterly luxurious, pre-judging them with a highly stereotypical perception as pompous by-blows of the suzerains. Perhaps, to some extent, a portion of them were. It was tedious, difficult, to identify other individuals who could connect on all aspects to them. Practically, said other individuals had to be born of the same tragic circumstances.

Niccolò di Angelo pursed his lips, directing distant russet-brown eyes once more, for the umpteenth
time in a week, at the turquoise ocean; of miles of water that stretched far beyond the horizon. Its color and shade was ever-changing – a kaleidoscopic beauty which reflected the light and the color of the sky. The ocean breeze was crisp and delicate against his skin, like a lover’s tender caress. No description could fully capture its majesty, yet only a few words could visualize its beauty from his perspective on the Princess Andromeda – a hundred and fifty meters long galleon ship of Perseus Tzákson, as a gift from the Lord Poseidon, which steadily sailed forth, skillfully maneuvered mainly by a bulky man of the name Butch.

“I was remembering Theseus,” Nico blurted out after a few minutes of silence, his voice a mere whisper.

“What about him?” Surprisingly, the third heir’s voice was calm and modulated.

“I remember the rumors of how he died; his “tragic” deliverance from this world. The day we had to bid our farewells, how the sky mourned equally of his demise… the mourning of your family, your people… and you. I think of how unjustifiable his demise was; how someone with such a heart did not deserve that death – his exact death,” Nico answered, subconsciously twisting the ring on his thumb once more. “I think of how I used to pray to The Moirai how our fates should have been reversed; that I should have been on that voyage instead of him – even without reason – and died in his place.”

“I mourned the loss of my brother, but even that could not make me hope that someone else had taken his position,” Percy said, gripping the railings so tight that his knuckles protruded rather evidently. “Especially you.”

“Your father might have mentioned that,” Nico replied, casting a sideward glance at Poseidon’s son before completely turning to face the older male’s direction. “How are you, Perseus?”

The older male did not turn to face him, but offered a fragile smile as sea-green eyes gazed beyond the horizon with a haunting, distant expression. As if, with the inquiry that the son of Hades had blurted out, Percy was recollecting the past two – approximately three – years that had passed by. A myriad of emotions swirled within those molten sea-green eyes, yet one stood prominently above the rest.

Pain.

“I’m getting better, I guess,” the son of Poseidon chuckled lightly, though the sound reached neither of their ears. “And that alarms me; knowing that I am getting better because I am attached to you in such a way that— … In such a way that if you leave again, I would find myself far worse than I had
“I never intended for it to hurt.” He really did not. “I thought I was doing what was best,” Nico admitted, just as Percy completely faced his direction.

“Lady Amphitrite might have mentioned that as well,” Percy said. “The bond between Jason and me could never compare to the bond I have with you. I always thought, as long you won’t leave, I can sacrifice the company of everyone else. It still stands true.”

“You don’t know what you are saying,” the son of Hades breathed, unsure who he was trying to convince at that moment. “You don’t know what it means to be capable of sacrificing everyone, everything, for your own selfishness; your own happiness.”

“I do,” Percy countered in a firm voice. “You don’t know how much the thought terrifies me; that I could place you even above my family, and that I would not come to regret it as much as I should. If that is not sacrifice, then perhaps we don’t know each other as well as we thought.”

The words stung him, more than it should and perhaps more than what the son of Poseidon had assumed. Regardless, it stung, and it pricked against the gaping wound in his heart that was solely occupied by Perseus Tzákson alone. It never healed – that wound that Percy had inadvertently induced on him. The pain never lessened; only he had grown accustomed to it.

In his mind, Niccolò di Angelo was certain that it would gradually continue to gape; that his existence beside the son of Poseidon would continue to expand the wound in his chest until one day, he would just be numb and emotionless; a shell of the humanity he once possessed. The Moirai had never shown kindness to him; never bestowed his happiness on a silver plate. Perseus Tzákson could not be an exception. Hoping for it would only severe him further.

“I’m sorry,” Percy breathed out in a whisper when the son of Hades did not respond for a full minute. “I always say the wrong things and make our situation more complicated than it is.”

“Why do you keep apologizing?” Nico questioned in return, his voice hushed. His hands clenched tightly onto fists at his sides. “Why do you have to take the blame in everything?”

Despite everything, the son of Poseidon managed to offer a solemn smile as he raised his head, gazing with disinterest at the numerous white sails that hovered above their heads.
“And have you take them instead?” the third heir asked rhetorically, a light chuckle escaping his lips. “You have always been considerate, regardless of its expense to you. All throughout our lives, you have always watched over me, and I had been foolish to take that for granted. This time, let me take as much as I can off of you.”

“Even if I were to say no, you would be stubborn of it, wouldn’t you?” the son of Hades inquired, a small smile curling his lips as the older male simply grinned cheekily in return. “I’ll hold on to your words then, Tzákson.”

“Really?” Percy laughed softly, running calloused fingers through his disheveled locks as a gentle breeze tousled it. “Are we on the last name basis once again, di Angelo?”

“Perhaps we are,” the son of Hades responded with a fragile smile.

Cautiously, Nico stepped closer to the son of Poseidon, applying a tad bit of force as he tugged the surprised older male down by his right ear. The third heir did not manage to vocalize his question, let alone utter a sound as cold lips lightly brushed against the skin of his right cheek, tenderly caressing it with such a gentleness comparable to the faint flutter of a butterfly’s wings.

“I am sorry for all the pain that I caused you. Yet, for old times’ sake, thank you for everything,” Nico murmured, lightly patting the older male’s cheek before withdrawing once more to his former position.

The son of Poseidon sputtered in embarrassment, completely lacking coherence for a full minute, which the son of Hades pointedly dismissed for the sake of the former’s pride. Had the circumstances been different, had neither of them not known that the simple gesture held no deep meaning, perhaps the young heir would have reacted just as equally. Yet, as the son of Hades wordlessly lifted his dagger from its sheath and pressing the blade flat against his left palm, his expression was completely unfazed.

The Imperial Gold dagger glinted menacingly against the illumination of the sun, which traced the engravings that had been carved onto the blade in an elegant and cursive script. *Aut vincere aut mori*; it was written. Its quillons pressed slightly against the back of his right hand as he twisted it, preoccupying himself with the object rather than basking on brooding thoughts.

“You never had that before,” Percy slowly remarked once he had stopped being a sputtering mess. Not that Niccolò di Angelo would point that out. “I’ve seen Thanatos wield your sword before, but never a dagger.”
“Aimatochysía. The name of the sword,” the son of Hades elaborated when confusion dawned upon the older male’s features. “Just like yours is named Anaklusmos, the sword that I wield possess a name of its own. Diplasiázo – that is, the name of this blade – is one of twin daggers. It is a gift, from a valued friend and ally.”

“It seems to have a good story behind it,” Percy said, cautiously stepping close to grasp the weapon securely, twisting the quillons as he assessed it.

“And you wish to know about it.” It was a statement, not an inquiry.

The son of Hades chuckled at the older male’s barely concealed curiosity.

“All right.”

“Palaíá Rómi and Palaíá Elláda had been the main two classification of Pangaeans in ancient times, according to historical records. Throughout the generations, we have adapted the ways of Palaíá Elláda, though we are constantly reminded that Palaíá Rómi existed in the form of its descendants,” the son of Hades started, lifting one of his hands to trace the engravings on the blade. “Ancient relics of Palaíá Rómi had been preserved throughout generations – weapons, family heirlooms, furniture, clothing, etc. Diplasiázo is a family heirloom and a weapon – a twin dagger from the family of Lady Bellona, who are pure Palaíá Rómi descendants.”

“When Hylla, the eldest daughter of Lady Bellona, set forth on her own journey and eventually inherited the title as the Queen of the Amazons, her younger and sole sister, Reyna, inherited the daggers. She was the one who trained me how to handle a dagger, and had been my constant companion for the past two years,” Nico offered the last part almost hesitantly. “She gifted to me the half of Diplasiázo, as a token of our… ah… friendship, so to speak. Though she is more of a sister to me, as I am a younger brother to her.”

“But isn’t Lady Bellona a sibling of Lord Ares? Does that not mean that she is from Palaíá Elláda, or that she isn’t purely a descendant of Palaíá Rómi at the very least?” Percy inquired, his features scrunching up as he frowned.

The son of Hades slowly shook his head.

“Lord Ares and Lady Bellona are children of the same man – a pure descendant of Palaíá Rómi –
but not of the same mother. Lord Ares’ mother was a descendant of *Paliá Elláda,* whereas Lady Bellona’s mother was a pure descendant of *Palaiá Rémi,*” Nico explained. “Like Lady Bellona, there are a rare few that are pure descendants of *Paliá Elláda.* An example is Lord Apollo and a few of his daughters and sons.”

“And you know about Lord Apollo’s… how?”

The son of Hades winced at the inquiry, sharply blowing the stray locks as a scowl adorned his features. Annoyance and displeasure was evident on the younger male’s russet-brown eyes, which seemed to gradually harden along the edges as seconds passed by.

“Skotádi signed a treaty with Ílios approximately a year and a half ago. As Ílios was already in an alliance with Thalassa, Skotádi could not offer the same to the district,” Nico explained, the scowl on his features becoming much prominent by the second. “Ílios is a district valuable in itself due to their knowledge in the medical field, and Thanatos believed that it would be vital to support it for the generations to come. To summarize his thoughts, he would never come to think of claiming the land as his own. But Lord Apollo needed the assurance since all of our alliances surrounded the district.”

“I handled the grounds of that treaty under Thanatos’ orders, and had gotten to know Lord Apollo’s family in the few weeks that I resided at Ílios,” the son of Hades said, before facing his companion once more. “I have to warn you though. Regardless of the fact that Lord Apollo had been… accommodating, his personality is quite… displeasing to a certain extent. He has a reputation amongst the suzerains, and for a good reason as well.”

“And the family of Lady Bellona? They ended up in Skotádi? Why?” Percy inquired.

“The same reason as why our districts have multiple alliances, never offering that to the Houses of Zeus, Aphrodite, and Ares: Protection,” Nico answered in a tone that was matter-of-factly. “Lady Bellona would not risk her family on the side of Pólemos. Perhaps, her initial decision was influenced with our alliances to Anemoi and Sofía. You already know the capability of Anemoi. Sofía, you should know, is amongst the key players in this war. Losing them would be highly disastrous.”

And Perseus Tzákson was indeed well-aware of the fact; that having the House of Athena on one’s side was vital to winning the impending war. The son of Poseidon had encountered the suzerain of the district solely on one occasion, and even then, the male perceived Lady Athena as an intimidating yet prepossessing woman. It was utterly foolish for any individual to assume less of what she was absolutely capable of, or that the suzerain could possibly be subdued in the face of bloodshed. Lady Athena alone was a valuable ally, and a formidable opponent.
The sheer image of her cold, calculating stormy gray eyes had him visibly shivering.

“Well, we have a few more hours ahead of us,” Percy stated, completely dismissing the former topics. “I don’t suppose you can teach me how to handle a dagger? I might as well extend my capability beyond swordplay while waiting for our arrival,” the son of Poseidon asked, swinging the blade from side to side as he twisted his wrist.

The son of Hades naturally laughed, tsk-tsking at the novice action. It was quite an innocent and childish action, but it was nonetheless a refreshing sight; to see the older male incapable, for now, on one league which the son of Hades highly excelled in.

“All right. I just need to shed my tunic off. I have no more clean ones to spare after today, and I would rather present myself decently later,” Nico answered, reaching down onto his pockets as he plucked a black cotton hairband, clenching onto it with his teeth as he bunched up his hair from behind.

It did the job somehow, though not as neatly as he had hoped as shorter locks slipped through, framing the sides of his face persistently. Casually turning his back onto the older male, Nico deftly unbuttoned his doublet vest, shedding it completely before doing the same for the tunic which clung to his frame.

A startled gasp escaped the son of Poseidon’s lips, earning the younger male’s attention immediately as he glanced back at his companion whose sea-green eyes were completely transfixed onto his back.

“Why do you have those, Nico…?”

Or more specifically, at what was adorning it.

The symbol of Hades was engraved onto his black, gleaming wickedly against his skin as the black ink seemed to protrude against the illumination of the sun. Dark wings were extended along the left and the right side, as if the son of Hades actually possessed wings of his own, withdrawn and folded against his back. At the small of his back was a figure which took Percy a few seconds to discern – as it initially appeared more as a rune symbol – of a small serpent. Comparative to the former two, it lacked of detail, as if it was carved onto the skin more as a symbol, rather than a realistic mark.

“Aah, this…” the son of Hades murmured, trailing off as his pale right hand gingerly caressed his opposite side absent-mindedly, as if the young man was caressing the tattoos instead. “I believe that
Before the son of Poseidon could utter his protest, Niccolò di Angelo sauntered towards the main deck, folding his apparel carefully before placing them atop one of the crates. With a barely audible hum, the son of Hades faced the older male, gesturing him forward with a come-hither.

“Come. You have much to learn, son on Poseidon.”

Ílios – the House of Apollo, pioneer of the Second Renaissance and the leading district in terms of advancements in the medicinal field. Ílios has a population of a few hundred thousand civilians with an economic progress and status subpar to most, ranked at seventh. Though, comparative to how it had been during the Skoteina Chronia, its current status was immensely better.

The streets bustled with countless civilians, the booming yet melodious variations of music compositions playing rather harmoniously, as if the musicians silently communicated to match the playing tunes and were simply playing a single yet wondrous music. Public acts of street performers – exotic and traditional dances, acrobatics, street theatre, reciting of prose and poetry, caricature, etc. – were occurring simultaneously in all sorts of directions. The wafting scent of innumerable delicacies, local cuisines, and of more exotic kinds, was absolutely divine and utterly pleasing to one’s senses. Everywhere, as far as the eyes could see, it was as if the everyday lives of the civilians were as joyous and wild; as if they were partaking in a daily-occurring festival. To the son of Poseidón’s eyes, it was a wondrous and pleasing sight, fit for a blossoming district.

Niccolò di Angelo mused of why he had simply discarded in the winds his option to refuse, as he found himself in a district he was displeased of once more. Not of the people, by the Moirai, no. The civilians of the district radiated of kindness and hospitality, each individual a “bundle of joy” so to speak. No, he absolutely adored the civilians of the district. If only their suzerain was much, or at the very least, equally tolerable.

His pale right hand twitched periodically atop of his dagger at the sheer reminder of the suzerain, indicating his agitation as those russet-brown eyes scanned the crowd with evident disinterest.

“I did not expect for such a place to be so lively,” Percy commented from within their carriage, the curtains against the window only parted slightly to accommodate the third heir so he could bask in the foreign sight. “I can’t believe anything could surpass Thálassa.”
The son of Hades chuckled, leaning his head against his arm as his eyes focused more at the sight outside their carriage. Nico had opted to sit opposite the son of Poseidon with his legs casually crossed. He was long familiar with the sight, and he had to admit that he missed the lively district to a certain extent since his last departure. Admittedly, it had been such a long time.

“This is not the peak of their liveliness. Ílios is well-known for their festivities. Take for example, the day of the founding of the district. In such occasion, the civilians adorn costumes and celebrate in broad daylight on the streets for fourteen days,” Nico remarked, a small smile curling his lips.

“Well, we have ample of time to settle our business in this district. Perhaps, would you care to indulge me in participating on one of their festivities?” Percy inquired, his tone clearly hopeful.

As if Niccolò di Angelo could ever hope to resist those pleading sea-green eyes when they scrunched up, appearing more as doe baby seal eyes. There was a raw excitement in them that the son of Hades had not seen in such a long period of time, and it was rather a refreshing sight to behold.

“I would follow you as per your request, as long as your father permits it,” the son of Hades answered simply, before redirecting his attention outside.

“Thank you,” Percy breathed, a broad smile curling his lips. “So, since you are more aware of this district than I am, kindly enlighten me then of what I should know?”

“There are quite a lot that you should know,” Nico commented, leaning back against the plush, velvet seats as he pondered over the question. “Let me see...”

“Skipping through the geographical details and such, Ílios thrives in the medicinal field. Should there be an ailment or a disease, the healers in Ílios are guaranteed to procure a treatment for it. Additionally, healthcare in this district is the best throughout the entirety of Pangaea. The other districts vie for their best healers, regardless of the cost, due to that. You cannot travel to a foreign district without finding a healer who was originally from Ílios. Or rather, there is at least one Íliosian healer within each House.”

“Ílios is also the pioneer of Second Renaissance. Since the end of the Skoteina Chronia, Lord Apollo highly believed that reintroducing and rediscovering the former… pleasant ages might essentially aid in the civilians recuperation, and imbue a distinct identity to the people. Art, literature, music… People started adapting, not only one, but multiple cultures; on a global scale. The civilians are very open to the concept of diversity, and you rarely encounter any quarrels regarding the cultures which the civilians adapted respectively.”
“Another fact is that in Ílios, marriage between the same sexes is legal. They condone ill-treatment towards opposition against that matter, as well as societal hierarchy. Lord Apollo desired for his people to possess an open-mind within the society, and these… acceptances are rather crucial in order to for the society and the economy to progress with stability,” the son of Hades added.

“Their cuisines are diverse, mostly attributed to their multi-cultural expanse. If Thálassa is primarily acknowledged for its seafood cuisines, Ílios has no distinguished one of its own. In terms of beverages though, it is widely acknowledged for its “Medovukha”, which is a sweet drink with low alcoholic content, made with fermented honey and varying spices.”

“And you have ingested that before…?” the son of Poseidon inquired cautiously.

“Once,” Nico answered as he lifted his right index finger, withholding nothing to the older male. “It would be impossible to depart from this country without having a taste of it. Not because consuming it is a tempting idea, but that it is offered everywhere you go. Civilians could get quite insulted if you refuse to indulge in their drinks.”

“I do not like the idea of getting myself intoxicated in a foreign district.” Percy murmured, scowling at the sheer thought.

“You could always opt on simply taking shots if your alcohol tolerance is low,” the son of Hades offered, an amused smile playing along his lips, which promptly earned a scoff from the older male.

“All right. To sum all that you have said, I have a lot to learn of this district,” the son of Poseidon concluded, pointedly ignoring the younger male whose eyes vaguely gleamed with displeasure at the heavily summarized points. “You have conducted business with Lord Apollo. How is he like? What should I know about him?”

Niccolò di Angelo frowned at the inquiry, the smile on his lips disappearing in an instant as he contemplated of the answers. The young man was absent-mindedly twisting the skull ring on his finger once more, a sigh escaping his lips ever so often as the silence lasted for almost a full minute.

“Lord Apollo is… a complex individual – for the lack of a better term – who has slight eccentricities. Regardless, you should not underestimate his prowess as the suzerain of this district. There is a reason, after all, why an entire district was bestowed upon his hands,” Nico warned, his expression absolutely serious. “He has a sharp business sense on projecting outcomes. Deceiving him would be absolutely useless and foolish.”
“Not that I would commit it,” Percy mumbled, to which the son of Hades offered a curt nod in agreement.

“You have a strong sense of equality, and you highly respect the values which you have been taught of. Your honesty is one of your strongest quality. I am merely stating the fact that many had been foolish – challenging suzerains, and ultimately suffering such grave fates,” Nico remarked, settling his hands atop of his lap as he uncrossed his legs.

“I am telling you this: Do as your father asked, and nothing more. If Lord Apollo were to offer you any further condition beyond the terms your father established, no matter how convenient you may regard it, do not assent to any. As far as I am permitted to be within your presence during such discussions, I would do my best to remind you of this.”

“The moment his eyes would train on you, he would start to assess you. Your worth as an heir to your father’s district, your prowess as a soldier; your worth as a mere individual. You must impress him, yet you cannot lie of your attributes. The only advice I can offer if for you to conduct yourself in the best manner which you deem possible,” the son of Hades concluded, his eyes gazing immensely onto sea-green eyes.

“Don’t screw up. Got it,” Percy mumbled, swallowing visibly as the son of Hades sighed once more at his remark.

“Last but not the least, under any circumstances, if that man were to step into your space far too close to your liking, pushing at his face is an option,” was the blunt advice.

The third heir blinked at the comment, uncomprehending of the statement. Sea-green eyes gazed pointedly at the frame of Hades’ son for an indefinite amount of time, wordlessly requesting for an explanation, to which the son of Hades offered none.

“I would try not to offend Lord Apollo to that point. But why would you offer that advice? He does not have the reputation of a violent suzerain, right?” Percy said cautiously.

Niccolò di Angelo did something uncharacteristic even of himself, darkly snickering at the statement as he tilted his head back, mock amusement and displeasure creeping its way instantly onto the russet-brown eyes as the young man processed the older male’s statement. In a way, Percy should have regarded the gesture as rather offensive, yet there was something unfathomable in those eyes which indicated that contesting whatever word Nico would say would eventually result to him
vehemently apologizing for his unintended mistake.

“Lord Apollo has quite a reputation for a suzerain. Not all of them are positive,” Niccolò di Angelo breathed, gazing out disinterestedly at the jubilant throng of people on the streets. For a second, the son of Poseidon desired to bolt out of the carriage doors just so that he would not bask in that negative aura the younger male was radiating.

“You’ll know what I mean when we arrive. Granted that you can tolerate the man, let your father hope that this visit would not last in a mere day.”

The Palace of Yákinthos – the residence of Lord Apollo – was located at the heart of the district, a three-storied stone structure that gleamed like pure gold under the illumination of the afternoon sun, with marble domes and various five-storied towers. The palace was surrounded by a large garden where craspedia, daffodils, gladiolus, sunflowers, and tulips – all of the same vibrant color of yellow – bloomed delicately. It was absolutely blinding to the sight, to the point that Percy shielded his eyes mere seconds upon taking in the grandeur of the palace.

The crowd had thinned out as their carriage approached the vicinity of Lord Apollo’s domain; not necessarily that it was forbidden to be near the premise, but rather as a sign of respect. Multiple guards were stationed across the property, adorning crisp and plain vests of the shades white and gold.

“The Palace of Yákinthos is named after one of Lord Apollo’s former male lover,” Niccolò di Angelo explained as the carriage entered the palace grounds. “According to records, Hyacinthus was a young winsome noble from Ílios, courted by the lords Apollo and Favonius – then a civilian of Anemoi. Hyacinthus favored Lord Apollo, and this drove Lord Favonius mad with jealousy, resulting to him murdering the young noble. Of course, Lord Hermes condemned the action of the lord, relinquishing his citizenship within the district and banishing him. It is believed that Lord Favonius fled to Agápi, gaining the protection of Lady Aphrodite in exchange for his eternal servitude. Nonetheless, the palace, upon finishing its construction, was eventually named after Hyacinthus in honor of the young noble.”

“That is…” Percy trailed off, unsure of how he was supposed to complete his statement.

But the son of Hades offered a curt nod, absolutely understanding the older male’s struggle.

“I am telling you this because your curiosity could be quite lethal,” Nico commented, the corners of his lips twitching in suppressed amusement. “In the presence of Lord Apollo, you should not mention his former lovers – male and female.”
“I don’t understand how they could feel little remorse with their countless affairs,” Percy breathed in a hushed voice, his features seeming conflicted. “I don’t understand how my father could— with my mother—“

“It makes you fearful, doesn’t it?” Nico questioned, a sad smile gradually settling onto his lips. “Of embracing reality and adulthood. It has you fearful of establishing a family, thinking that you could possibly commit sins outside of your espousal.”

“Are you fearful?” Percy asked.

“No,” was the firm response, laced with finality. “I do not believe I could ever hold a love so strongly once more.”

The response startled the son of Poseidon, his pupils dilating in surprise as they gazed at the nonchalant form of Niccolò di Angelo. The question rested at the tip of his tongue, seeming to scald the surface with the intensity of how the third heir desired to vocalize it. Yet, a part of him was certain that no answer would be offered in return to satiate his inquiry.

*Who was it, Nico? Was it filial love, the one for Bianca? Or did you mean it in a romantic sense?*

A daughter of the suzerain – a young beautiful woman of the name Kayla Knowles – welcomed the young heirs at the Palace of Yáinthos with a pleasant smile curling her crimson-red painted lips. The maiden seemed utterly surprised at the presence of the son of Hades, but did not question nonetheless. Upon clearing the marble steps which led to the main door, the son of Hades humbly knelt on one knee, cautiously grasping the maiden’s extended hand and gently brushing his lips at the back of it as a form of greeting. Percy immediately followed the example, executing the same actions as his companion had before arising to full height once more.

“Greetings, Lord Perseus and Lord Niccolò.” The son of Poseidon tried not to wince at how he had been addressed by his given name. “I apologize that my father could not personally welcome you into our humble abode, as he is currently with company. However, I have been instructed to accompany you to his study. If you would please follow me.”

The maiden gestured at the interior of the palace for a few seconds before heading forth inside. The young heirs promptly followed, sparing no backward glance as the main door closed.
The interior was very rich, the values attached to the furniture undoubtedly extortionate. The theme was limited to varying shades of yellow and brown, and pure gold and white. Marble statues of various women and men were aligned accordingly against the walls, illuminated by the lights from the suspended crystal chandeliers on the ceiling. The vibrancy was rather blinding for the son of Poseidon, who was unaccustomed to a bright setting, but Niccolò di Angelo merely flinched upon entering the palace.

“The palace is still too bright. I see your father is still stubborn of his color schemes,” Nico commented from beside Percy as they trailed after the young maiden.

“We tell him that. Per usual, he would dismiss our comments, saying that if we could handle the intensity of the sunlight, surely we could manage with this,” Kayla answered with a sigh, grasping lightly at her robes so that the hem would not brush against the plush carpet. “Anyway, it is good to see you once again, Lord Niccolò. You have not visited our district since the signing of the treaty.”

“I was needed to handle military matters,” was the curt response.

“Of course,” the young maiden agreed half-heartedly, inconspicuously sparing a glance at the young heir before focusing on the son of Poseidon as they rounded a corner. “This is your first visit to Ílios, is it not, Lord Perseus?”

Said heir could not repress his wince a second time, though he decided to tolerate the fact that he was being addressed by his actual name, regardless of despising it. Percy plastered a professional smile on his lips, firmly keeping his hands by his side as they proceeded forward.

“That is correct,” the older male agreed. “My father and I, along with my older siblings, used to attend the Solstices. Given a few years ago, only my father and the first heir attended these meetings due to… pressing circumstances. The year that I had stopped attending was unfortunately the year which the Solstices were executed here in your district.”

“I see.” Fortunately, the woman did not press on extracting information as to what “pressing circumstances” he was pertaining to. “If I may ask, how long do you plan to stay in Ílios?”

“Ah, it depends. Nico— I mean, Lord Niccolò mentioned that Ílios is a district well-known for its festivities. If possible, we wish to stay for a while and partake in one,” the son of Poseidon offered, his tone sounding hopeful.
“Of course!” the young maiden agreed immediately, her voice possessing an enthusiastic lilt. “One of our heirs is celebrating his birthday in a few weeks’ time. The people of Ílios are quite enthusiastic in organizing a festival in honor of such wonderful occasion. While your presence would surely be requested at the evening ball, I am certain that father would permit for you and Lord Niccolò to explore the nearby town in the morning.”

“Evening ball? Would that mean the presence of foreign visitors?” the son of Poseidon cautiously inquired.

The young maiden slowly nodded without offering a glance to the older male.

“A few close acquaintances. My brother wishes to keep the celebration as private as possible. Having suzerains in the same area is quite… intimidating and tense. Hardly the setting for a celebration, you see,” she answered, pausing once as she grappled with words. “As for whom would be invited, I believe that would be something you should ask of Lord Apollo or the celebrant himself.”

The three rounded a few more corners, passing through countless servants as they made their way within the palace. After a few minutes of light chatter and sauntering, they halted in front of a double-brass doors at the end of the corridor, with the insignia of the district – the size of a shield – engraved at the center. The voices – two, at least – within the room were hushed, merely murmurs, due to the thickness of the door.

The young maiden paused for a second before raising her right hand, delivering three sharp raps to the door; the sound resounding along the corridor. The conversation inside the room ceased immediately, followed by a few seconds of silence.

“Father, I have brought our guests from Thálassa, as per your request,” Kayla remarked in a loud voice.

“Thank you, my dear. Send them in, will you? And ask Michael to come here,” was the muffled response of the suzerain.

Wordlessly, the young maiden stepped aside, gesturing for the young heirs to step into the room as she offered a curtsy to bid them farewell with the faint rustling of her robes as the sole indication of her departure. The son of Hades cautiously clasped the knobs on the doors, tugging them down before pushing through, wincing as the bright light from within the room momentarily blinded them.
The familiar citrusy scent assaulted the son of Hades a second thereafter; a mixed scent of lemon, lime and mandarin encompassing the vast space. Russet-brown eyes had to blink incessantly for a few seconds, gradually adapting to the blinding light of the interior.

A sudden weight crashed against his front – or rather, encompassed his frame in a firm hug. His breath hitched for a second, his mind becoming utterly blank at the unexpected gesture. His instinct was ordering him to force himself out of the grip; pry himself from the stranger’s inappropriate embrace. Yet, he was too stunned to react.

“Mi valiente soldado,” the stranger breathed close to his ear, just as the young man was about to regain his composure, and struggle.

And he knew that voice, would always be familiar with the voice of his sole companion for the past two years – the voice of a confidant and a loyal friend. As his vision cleared, glossy black hair that was worn in a single braid and an Imperial Gold pauldron gradually focused in his sight. Only when his hands gingerly grasped onto a velvet purple cloak did the son of Hades permit for his eyes to close once more, embracing the figure before him tightly in return.

“Reyna,” he breathed as recognition dawned upon him, his voice muffled as his lips pressed against her armor. “It has been a while.”

Perseus Tzákson silently observed from the side, his expression contorting to an emotion even he could not fathom as he watched intently the intimate exchange between the son of Hades and the unknown woman. An exotic, prepossessing woman, for that matter. The woman was marginally taller than the son of Hades – perhaps a mere half an inch, or so – adorned in a legionnaire armor that was crafted in Imperial Gold, and a velvet purple cloak which appeared to have been woven through with filaments of Imperial Gold as it glinted against the light that streamed past the open windows. An Imperial Gold sword that was approximately three-feet in length was attached to her side, hidden securely inside an obsidian-black scabbard.

The son of Poseidon had to wonder how it was plausible that the woman could move with such grace – or move at all – under such heavy weight. Perseus Tzákson had to wonder equally when the woman would pry her hands off of his companion.

“And now, I am quite offended. I thought I would get the first greeting. That is not fun at all,” a honeyed voice commented with a tone that was heavily laced with amusement.
Sea-green eyes redirected their attention to the other occupant of the room, an older male that the son of Poseidon would have to admit was winsome and almost ethereal. The man was seated in an expensive armchair, adorning a robe of gold and a golden crown forged to a laurel wreath. His features were astoundingly too proportioned and immaculate, framed by long, wavy blond locks pulled back in a loose bun. His sky blue eyes were absolutely radiant and he possessed a smile that was absolutely blinding. To Percy, the older male was like the embodiment of a god underneath all the gold that adorned his muscled and toned physique.

As if sensing his gaze, the older male shifted his attention to him, with that amused smile on his lips still plastered all across his features.

“I assume you are the one sent by Lord Poseidon to my district?” the man inquired, his head tilting slightly to the side as he asked.

Only then did it register to the son of Poseidon that this was Lord Apollo, the suzerain of the district of Ílios. It was rather a foolish thinking to assume that it was someone else for he was in the study of the said man after all.

Regaining his composure, the third heir bowed respectfully.

“Yes. I am Perseus Tzákson, son of Lord Poseidon and third heir to the district of Thálassa,” Percy formally introduced himself. “I apologize if we have possibly intruded upon you and your company.”

“Not at all. Either way, she preferred the company of Lord Hades’ child than mine,” the suzerain murmured, his tone indicating that he might possibly be pouting. Not that Percy could conjure such image in his mind.

“That is because Niccolò di Angelo is family to me, my lord. I mean no disrespect by saying that his company at this moment is very much refreshing to your Majesty’s incessant flirting,” the woman remarked as she gradually pulled back from her embrace with the son of Hades.

Said young man still seemed rather stunned, though a small and natural smile – regardless that it was miniscule – was curling his lips. There was question in those russet-brown eyes, directed at the woman, and the only response that the young man received was a pointed look. As if the connection with their eyes alone explained everything that there was to answer in that unspoken question, the son of Hades nodded.
“I do have a reputation with the ladies,” was the suzerain’s cheeky response, before he redirected his attention to the son of Hades.

“Ah, Niccolò di Angelo.” The young man tensed immediately upon being addressed. “It has been a while since I last saw your beautiful face.”

“Lord Apollo,” Nico greeted rather stiffly. “It is my utmost pleasure to be back in Ílios once more, and my utmost displeasure to be the receiving end of your flirtations as well.”

The suzerain heaved an exaggerated sigh, though the smile on his lips broadened at the remark.

“Feisty as always, I see,” Apollo commented, earning a defiant glare from the younger male. “Though I am pleased that Lord Poseidon sent you and his other son instead of that first son of his. Triton, was it?” the suzerain inquired, looking pointedly at Percy.

The third heir offered a curt nod.

“Oh, well. I have to change your accommodations then. Since I initially thought it was Triton who was coming, I thought that it was rather befitting to room him in the pig pen.” The son of Poseidon had to wonder if the suzerain was actually serious. “I suppose the rooms parallel to Lady Reyna would do splendidly?”

Percy cautiously glanced at said woman, surprise gracing his features a second later as he found said woman assessing him with such a calculative gaze and a familiarity; as if she had known him despite that this was their first encounter.

“Ah, could it possibly be your first encounter?” was the suzerain’s rhetorical question as he carefully eyed the woman and the son of Poseidon respectively. “I suppose I should offer the introductions then, for both of your sakes.”

“That would not be necessary, my lord,” Reyna answered before the suzerain could begin.

With such confidence and refinement in her movements, the woman approached the son of Poseidon in long and even strides, stopping a mere few feet from the third heir. With an impassive expression on her elegant features, she extended her right hand in a gesture of a handshake.
“Let me say to you: I am not like those pampered heiress and ladies that you have encountered,” the woman stated in a low voice so that only the two of them could hear, her piercing jet-black eyes challenging. “Let me keep this simple for now. I know who you are, son of Poseidon. I know your affiliation with Niccolò di Angelo. If you ever come so close to harming him, harming this young man who is like a dear little brother to me, I will skin you alive. Do you understand?”

The son of Poseidon visibly swallowed at the threat, surprised that he had found it in himself to offer a nod as a sign of confirmation. His eyes must have been dilated with fear for, in his peripheral vision, the son of Hades was gazing at him with evident concern in his eyes.

“My name is Reyna, second daughter of Lady Bellona,” the woman introduced herself with a bit more volume in her voice, yet with the same air of intimidating authority. “Temporarily filling in the position of Niccolò di Angelo as the Lieutenant Colonel of Skotádi.”

“Perseus Tzákson,” Percy introduced himself as he clasped her hand in a handshake, suppressing the overwhelming urge to yelp as she enclosed his hand in a death grip. “Son of Lord Poseidon and third heir to Thálassa. Captain of the district’s military.”

Only then did it register to him that this person was Niccolò di Angelo’s companion for the past two years; his mentor with the art of wielding a dagger and his loyal friend. This person was also somehow related to Frank. Most importantly, this person had the capacity to kill him if he were to commit to any wrong decision, especially if it involved a certain son of Hades.

“The Charybdis,” Reyna acknowledged with a curt nod, releasing his grip on his hand as she stepped back to where the son of Hades was standing. “Well, I look forward to sparring with you one day.”

It was not an offer, but an order. Percy was slowly beginning to process how a friendship formed between Niccolò di Angelo and the maiden. The level of intimidation either possessed was simply overwhelming.

“You children are no fun,” the suzerain remarked, and Percy was certain that Reyna was irked at being addressed as such. “If I am correct, which I know I am, you want to discuss business, get it done, and leave. Isn’t that right, Perseus?”

“Incorrect. He will be staying in Ílios until the upcoming festivity,” Nico interjected before Percy could respond.
“Ah, yes. Thank you for answering, Perseus,” the suzerain grunted, sky blue eyes narrowing for a split second at the nonchalant son of Hades. “You know, if only you are as equally feisty in bed—“

In that instant, Percy comprehended what the son of Hades was pertaining to when he had uttered blunt remarks regarding the suzerain. Nico’s challenge as to how far he could possibly tolerate the suzerain suddenly made crystalline sense; and not in a positive way, for that matter. His hands along the side gradually closed into tight fists, making his knuckles protrude evidently.

“We plan to stay until then, if that is all right with you, Lord Apollo,” the son of Poseidon interjected in a low voice, barely concealing his utmost desire to lash against the suzerain for his inappropriate advances at Nico. “However, my priorities lie with discussing business with you and ensuring the welfare of your district. That is what my father has sent me here for. In the meantime, would it be possible for us to request that we may be given rest? It has been quite a long journey for the both of us.”

The suzerain assessed him critically, though there was no trace of emotion in those sky blue eyes that could aid the son of Poseidon in fathoming what the older male was thinking at that moment. The room was utterly silent for seconds, none of the occupants daring to break the silence. Comprehension was slowly making its way into those eyes. As to what that comprehension might possibly mean, the son of Poseidon was uncertain. Though, there was one absolute thought in his mind at that moment: he did not want to last a second longer in that room.

And before his very eyes, Apollo smirked.

Sharp raps on the door resonated throughout the room before a male of jet-black hair and chocolate brown eyes entered the room, pausing a mere second later upon registering the awkward silence the occupants settled in. Percy vaguely heard a sigh from the male, before the latter spoke up in a resigned voice.

“You called for me, father?”

“Ah, yes. Just for some minor discussions, Michael. But for now, would you mind showing our new guests and Lady Reyna to their chambers? Just come back to the study afterwards,” Apollo requested, his eyes still transfixed onto sea-green eyes.

“Of course, father,” the male nodded, quickly sparing a glance at the occupants, a surprised expression crossing his features before he broke into a natural smile at the sight of the son of Hades.
“di Angelo. It has been a while.”

“Michael,” was the curt greeting.

“Well then. If you would follow me,” Michael inclined his head, gesturing pointedly at the open door.

Reyna and Nico cautiously walked towards the son of Apollo, though the son of Hades paused upon reaching his companion who was still gazing directly into the suzerain’s eyes.

“Percy?” he breathed in a hushed voice as he placed a firm hand against the older male’s left shoulder. “Are you not going to rest?”

Prying his gaze off of the suzerain, the son of Poseidon spared the younger male a glance, only to receive a questioning gaze in return.

“No, I’ll come with you,” Percy offered a reassuring smile before turning to face the suzerain once more.

“If you would excuse us, Lord Apollo.”

“Please make yourself comfortable. I shall see you once you have had your rest, son of Poseidon,” was the response.

“Of course,” Percy agreed stiffly as he walked out of the door with the son of Hades by his side.

And none of them saw the broadening smirk and that hint of mischief in the suzerain’s eyes as he observed the son of Poseidon wrapping a possessive hand against Niccolò di Angelo’s side.

Chapter End Notes

Definition(s):
Pauldron: either of two metal plates worn with armor to protect the shoulders
Translation(s):
Aimatochysía: Bloodshed
Diplasiázo: Double
Paliá Rómi: Old Rome
Paliá Elláda: Old Greece
Palace of Yákinthos: Palace of Hyacinthus
Mi valiente soldado: My brave soldier

The full names of most of the characters are provided at the link below. That page is subjected to change as the story progresses.
Link: HERE
Thank you for reading this chapter! Until the next chapter!
“You were my beautiful mistake and I don’t regret anything. I would do it all again in a heartbeat.”

- Michael Faudet

“I apologize for my father. I apologize in advance as well, as his demeanor would not change anytime soon despite your stay in Ílios.”

“You don’t have to apologize for him, Michael,” the son of Hades said in a monotonous voice. “You are not accountable for his actions.”

Said man slumped forward, his upright posture curving significantly as they continued to walk further away from the suzerain’s study. With what he was capable of seeing from the back of the man, Percy could see that the son of Apollo looked shattered; the fatigue making him appear older than what was his actual age.

“But his children can make our district’s reputation a whole lot better by rectifying his mistakes as much as we are capable of,” the son of Apollo grumbled, chocolate brown eyes narrowing to slits for a split second before the man regained his composure once more. “I hope he had not been inappropriate during your encounter, but that seems like an unlikely situation.”

“Lord Apollo is a maláka,” Percy growled in a hushed voice, startling Nico and Reyna as they heard the son of Poseidon heaved out a cuss.

Michael did not seem offended; rather entertained as he half-heartedly indulged in a laughter that reverberated throughout the corridor. Fortunately, the small group had already walked a considerable distance from the suzerain’s study for the comment to be audible to Lord Apollo. The son of Poseidon had to smile at the gesture as it, for a while, eased the fatigue etched clearly across the man’s features.

“Well, we are of Greek origins,” the man commented, voice laced with amusement. “You are a new
face here, aren’t you? My name is Michael Laurence Yew, second heir of the district of Ílios. Captain of the military division.”

“Perseus Tzákson, third heir to the district of Thálassa. Captain,” the son of Poseidon introduced himself in return, pausing mid-step as Michael halted in his tracks to face his direction.

“The Charybdis,” the man breathed, a thrilled smile curling his lips and emphasizing his musteline features. “We have heard a lot of you. You seem to be rather acquainted with Niccolò di Angelo.”

The son of Apollo pointedly gestured at Percy’s hand that rested firmly yet subconsciously against the side of the son of Hades. As if he were scorched, Percy retracted his hand immediately, a visible flush creeping up his cheeks as he spluttered excuses and apologies. The daughter of Bellona silently observed the exchange, noting the lack of amusement from Nico despite the subtle curl of his lips.

“We’re childhood friends,” Nico murmured, his features scrunching up in a frown. “Don’t make unnecessary assumptions.”

“I’m not,” Michael defended himself, raising his hands up in the process. “I merely stated that you two are rather acquainted. It is quite rare to see someone – anyone – touching you without getting their fingers dislocated; as rare it is for you to dub anyone as a friend. Did you train with your swords together?”

“Michael.” The tone of the young man was firm, and hinting finality; that the matter was absolutely not up for discussions.

“Always so uptight, di Angelo,” the man commented with a sigh before shrugging in defeat. “All right. I shall make haste in sending you to your quarters for now. I am needed back in the study.”

“Thank you,” was the unified response from the three individuals as they ascended the grand staircase.

It was not an easy feat to distinguish the sons and daughters of the suzerain from the countless servants that roamed the premise of the palace, Percy figured. They were all distinctly unique; a person of their own. If there was a sole similarity with the suzerain’s offspring, perhaps that would be the fatigue that seemed to be etched permanently onto their features, accentuated by the light over their heads. It was astonishing how many they were – Michael easily dismissed the question with a noncommittal, “Easily above fifteen” – and the countless lovers that the suzerain had in order to
conceive such a number of offspring. It was equally astonishing how the existing children seemed nonchalant by then of any addition to their expanding family.

Nonchalant, but not completely pleased.

The son of Hades and the daughter of Bellona seemed completely unaffected of the situation as well, their features easily impassive as they courteously greeted the heirs – young and old – with practiced smiles as they passed by. Not that the son of Poseidon could not accomplish executing the same gesture, but he was certain that his smiles had been unconvincing, if those pointed glances that he received did not imply so clearly.

Equally, the critical looks that the daughter of Bellona was directing to his direction were absolutely unnerving.

“We can only spare one room at the moment for now for our visitors from Thálassa,” Michael said as soon as the servant he was discussing with departed from the group. “We had diplomats and nobles who visited the district recently, and the servants are still in the process of cleaning the rooms. Another room can be cleared out in a few hours, but until then, would you mind sharing one room?”

“I don’t mind staying at the servants’ quarters in the meantime,” Nico offered.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Nico,” Reyna and Percy commented at the same time.

The two briefly shared a look before the son of Poseidon spoke once more.

“It would be fine for us. Since it would be inappropriate for one of us to temporarily share a room with Lady Reyna, it should be fine for us to share a room.”

With the manner that the son of Poseidon was pointedly gazing at him, Niccolò di Angelo was certain that the matter was not up for debate. The daughter of Bellona was reluctant to agree – if the deep scowl on her features could indicate otherwise – but she did not seem intent on debating as her lips pressed firmly onto a thin line.

“All right…” Michael hesitantly murmured as his eyes shifted back and forth between the two males. “The available room has a door that connects it to the next room. I suppose that would be a convenient setting then, as soon as that room has been cleaned up.”
“It is. Thank you, Michael,” Nico said, bowing his head to express his gratitude.

“No problem, Nico. All of you should get some rest. One of the servants will inform you when the room has been cleared,” the son of Apollo stated before looking at Reyna. “And they should also call you to join us for dinner. In the meantime, I hope you will rest well.”

“Take it easy, Michael,” Nico called out as the son of Apollo turned to walk away.

The man halted in his tracks, his shoulder slumping as he turned to face the son of Hades once more. The son of Apollo was smiling, though it held more of disbelief than amusement. He looked grateful though, and the smile on his lips made him appear more of his age.

“Someday, di Angelo. With my father, that’s not an option at the present.”

Michael sauntered off, waving without ever glancing back as he departed from the small group. Russet-brown eyes attentively followed the son of Apollo as he disappeared around the corner, and even then, Nico could not turn back to face his companions as he pursed his lips. He had encountered Michael since his last visitation to Ílios, and he was well aware how the situation of their increasing family – and his father’s “actions” – had been taking a toll on all of them. It was not an easy feat to constantly aid in managing a district; more so in keeping tabs on family. As much as the first heir was faring well on his own, Michael and his siblings still had to step up in place of the suzerain.

Lord Apollo is arrogant, self-centered and cocky. That was an undisputable fact alone. However, the son of Hades and the suzerain’s offspring were intelligent to not underestimate his prowess and legibility to the position of being a suzerain of a district. Unfortunately, that persona of his rarely present itself.

With his lips pressed to a firm line, Nico turned to face his companions once more, only to find them having a hushed discussion. Or rather, Reyna was discussing a matter to Percy, and from Nico’s perspective – which was Perseus Tzákson’s paling features – it was not necessarily pleasant.

“What are you two discussing?” Nico casually inquired, his head tilting to the side as his eyes narrowed at the sight.

“We can have our discussions after you have had your rest, Nico,” Reyna increased the volume of
her voice, redirecting her attention to him upon realizing that he was looking towards their direction. “I need to rest as well. Dealing with Lord Apollo is very exhausting. I’m sure you understand that.”

And Nico did, only too well. Yet, his inquisitive nature was persisting him to insist on pressing the daughter of Bellona for answers.

Percy did not seem interested in their exchange as he cautiously dragged himself to the room parallel to that of Reyna’s. As silent as possible – which, in the case of an empty hallway, any sound would softly reverberate – the son of Poseidon twisted the knob and entered the room wordlessly.

“… Later then,” Nico murmured, dropping the subject for now as he sauntered towards the open door.

Stepping into the room, russet-brown eyes remained transfixed on the form of the daughter of Bellona, who was watching him just as intently, until he had fully shut the door and locked it with a resounding click. Percy heaved a loud sigh from beside the younger male, startling the latter as he was unaware of the presence. The son of Poseidon seemed apologetic, yet his relief became more pronounced as seconds passed by. With a slight spring to his step, Percy plopped his entire body atop of the king-sized canopy poster bed at the middle of the room, his hand greedily caressing the velvet sheets. It was still rather too bright for either of their taste, and there was a mutual unspoken agreement as Nico wordlessly drew the curtains across the windows, blocking as much light as was possible until the room was only dimly lit.

“You can take the bed. I’ll just sleep… on the loveseat,” Nico murmured, flinching at his remaining option.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Nico,” Percy huffed upon raising his head, his hair thoroughly dishevelled. “We have a bed. A king-sized bed with thick drapes that can completely block the annoying sunlight, or any light at all.”

“That’s a first: Seeing you despise the sun.”

“Not the point, di Angelo,” was the immediate response.

Percy slowly pushed himself to sit at the edge of the bed, unlacing his combat boots and placing them on the plush carpet at the foot of the bed.
“You are not sleeping on *that* when we have a spacious bed in the room,” the son of Poseidon stated firmly, unceremoniously removing his doublet vest and his ocean-blue tunic, and discarding them atop an armchair before placing his sword against the wall on his side of the bed.

“It is *highly* inappropriate for us to share a bed,” Nico insisted, though his eyes had long casted to the side once the older male began stripping his upper apparel. “Besides, I came here as your guardian so —”

“Stop right there,” Percy interjected with a frown, standing up as he unfastened the golden ties that held the drapes, rearranging the material so that it blocked as much sunlight as was possible. “First of all, I am asking you to rest on the bed with me. That is *highly* appropriate, unless we are of two opposing genders. As far as I know, we are both males, right?” The son of Hades begrudgingly offered a nod. “Second, you are my companion; not a servant. Please don’t demean yourself like that. I never want that for you.”

Nico was about to contest that – to deny of the son of Poseidon’s claim that he was demeaning himself through his action – but there was a truth to Percy’s statement that Nico could not lie about. In reality, to some extent, he did consider himself a mere servant, degrading himself from his title as the second heir to the district of Skotádi just to serve another foreign heir. It had been demeaning, and even Thanatos had been displeased of his actions which led to his situation, yet it presented itself as an inevitable – whether any of them liked it or not. Percy was amongst the people who classified as the latter.

Begrudgingly, the son of Hades trudged towards the edge of the bed and slowly unlaced his boots and placed his blades on the wall near his side of the bed before removing his upper apparel – though rather self-conscious of the action. With more force than he had intended to, the younger man yanked harshly at the blanket, tugging it across his frame as he settled down on the far end of the soft bed.

Percy merely sighed at the gesture, walking to the other side of the bed, and settling underneath the blanket before forcibly tugging the startled younger male to the middle of the bed.

“Percy! What do you think you are doing?!” Nico hissed as the older male prevented him from returning to his position once more by having a firm grip on his shoulders.

“Preventing you from potentially embarrassing yourself by falling out of bed. Seriously, Nico. I’m not doing anything that would cause your *good* friend Reyna to come barging in and flaying me alive,” the son of Poseidon snorted.

Nico paused his struggles at the remark before partially turning his body to face the third heir.
“That was what you two were discussing back there?” Nico inquired, arching one of his brows in disbelief.

“More or less, yes, that is the summary,” Percy shrugged nonchalantly, seeming less petrified than when he had dealt with the daughter of Bellona. Or perhaps, he grasped assurance in the fact that the door to the room was locked. “When you said “friend”, I did not expect someone with such an intimidating presence.”

“She is like us, more so than you can imagine,” Nico murmured, facing the other direction once more and leaving their discussion at that.

But Percy was adamant, his stubborn nature was an infuriating yet adoring aspect of him – at least, in Niccolò di Angelo’s perspective. Wordlessly, Percy lifted his right hand and traced the tattoos that adorned the younger male’s back, earning a yelp from the latter at the sudden cool touch against his bare skin.

“These tattoos. They are beautiful,” Percy murmured, brushing his palm against the soft skin.

The son of Hades had his lips pressed onto a firm line, his eyes hardening along the edges as he curled in on himself as much as possible without being too conspicuous. Beautiful, Percy had said. If only the son of Poseidon knew the circumstances by which he attained them.

It did not matter at the present – his past. In that moment, as he tuned out the warm caresses against his back and the sound of Percy’s low voice, he could pretend that he was back in his district, with the darkness cradling him as he succumbed to – hopefully – a dreamless sleep.

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There it was again – that searing pain of a fresh burn, along with a gut-wrenching stench, that pushed all the ends of his nerves haywire. He was well-aware that he had slipped into a dream once more – a nightmare, to be much accurate – but the memory was simply too vivid that it passed for reality. The pain intensified, plunging him to countless waves and waves of unbearable agony, and it centered solely on that mark which branded the skin on his chest that was atop his heart.

The silhouette of an old man materialized before his sight; his vision registering solely the silhouette and a monochromatic empty plane. The silhouette flickered, the image becoming distorted occasionally as it always did, before an orotund voice breathed near his ears.
“Is it power you seek, my child?”

It was always the same question, breathed in that same manner that, to Niccolò di Angelo, it was simply all too familiar. He knew where all of this was headed, and he should be accustomed to it by then, but he was not. For some reason, he could not. And the man ceaselessly played the same game, often succeeding in cracking him to his breaking point.

“Generations have forgotten what power used to be – formless. It is amusing to see the present generation scorn at all of it – sorcery, the power of names – so it is only a mystery that you, a child of this generation, has to resort to me to gain your heart’s desire. Not on your own; no. The ancestral roots of the Asteria clan has always received my favors.”

Throughout the encounters, the son of Hades had known to keep his lips firmly sealed, regardless of what the man – an imitation of Lord Chaos, perhaps, in his mind – would utter. Yet, his silence did not cease the brief flashes of memories that haunted him constantly throughout the years.

“Do you really want to do this, Lord Niccolò?” The novice young sorceress – witch – of a clan his father welcomed into their district questioned, her moss green eyes showing evident concern.

“I am, Lou,” the son of Hades confirmed, cautiously slicing a small wound across his palm and allowing his blood to seep through before raising it atop the middle of an eerie incantation circle.

“A part of you believed then that it was such a ridiculous thing,” the man chuckled, his tone laced with sheer humor as the memory briefly dissolved.
The mark on his chest pulsated in an excruciating manner once more, and his lips parted in a soundless scream as the sheer agony from that day resurfaced once more.

“Lou, what have you done?!” The young witch’s mother exclaimed, eyes dilated with pure horror as she helplessly watched as the young son of Hades writhed on the ground, the mark of Lord Chaos slowly burning itself across his skin as he incoherently screamed for the pain – for everything – to stop.

“Your father truly is such a cautious man, and as much as it displeased him of giving you to another district like a common servant, he had no choice. He played his cards astoundingly well; concealing the truth behind the mark. The Moirai were not against you as well, how fortunate, for Poseidon thought of you as if you were his own son. But you know the entire truth, don’t you, child?” the man continued as the scenery dispersed, paving way for one which haunted him throughout the years.

Piles of corpses littered a barren land where crimson blood was splattered and pooled in nauseating puddles. Countless bodies were mutilated; slit in places which exposed far too much than what the son of Hades was capable of stomaching. The lifeless expressions on the corpses – morphing from male to female, from children to elderly – plagued his mind and were pushing him to the brink of insanity.

The blood that splattered against his frame and pooled at his feet further aggravated his state of mind. The corpses did not have to resemble anyone whom he was acquainted with for the effect – the mental damage – to completely settle in him. The sheer sight of all those lifeless eyes transfixed onto his rigid frame was already gnawing at his sanity.

“In fulfilling that which you so desire, I become a part of you. I will always be a part of you, Niccolò di Angelo; in the darkest recesses of your mind where you are plagued with the blood shed upon your hands.”
Nico lurched forward with a loud gasp, dragging the silken sheets with him and simultaneously snapping the older male beside him back into consciousness. He could feel a thick sheen of sweat encompassing his entire body, yet it seemed to matter little at the moment. With a shaky breath, he bent his trembling knees before resting his head against his hands.

The image of his sister – a mangled and bloodied corpse – despite that Bianca di Angelo might differ in features after seven years, would not cease to continuously damage his mentality. Regardless if her heart was still beating, the fact that she was practically dead to their knowledge was as far as they were concerned. And that was admittedly a fear of his that he would not allow himself to dwell upon – the idea that there would simply come a day when Bianca di Angelo would be found and be brought back to her home district, veiled in a linen shroud, like Theseus had been all those years ago. It had been excruciating to endure that – Theseus was almost an older brother to him as Thanatos is – and he was unsure if he could endure it in the same manner should it be his biological sister in that position.


The sheets around them shuffled as the older male shifted closer to the son of Hades, cautiously placing a hand against the damp and unnaturally cold skin of one of his shoulders. The young man did not flinch, nor did he imply any changes in his reactions as he remained hunched forward, taking in ragged breaths through his chapped, quivering lips.

“Are you feeling ill? Do you need water? Do you need more blankets?” the son of Poseidon continued uneasily as he received no response, dragging the sheets up and carefully wrapping them around the younger male’s half-naked frame. “… Do you need me to call for Reyna?”

“No.” The answer was almost instantaneous as the son of Hades firmly grasped the hand that was against his shoulder, the grip only indicating that he was not about to release it anytime soon.

Percy was not entirely too sure what the younger male intended to achieve from that, but in the split second that the son of Poseidon managed to get a glimpse of a lackluster eye, his lips pressed into a tight line before he offered a nod.

“… Tyson has always been extremely fond of hiding within any corner of the alcazar,” Percy murmured.

Cautiously shifting closer to the son of Hades, he gingerly wrapped his other arm around the younger male to pull him closer. Calloused fingers gently pushed back silken and disheveled locks as Percy slowly wiped the sheen of sweat across Nico’s forehead while gradually easing the latter to rest his head on his shoulder.

“But he is specifically fond of hiding in two places,” Percy continued, watching Nico intently as the man’s breathing remained labored, though he was slowly regaining his composure. The son of Hades still hid his expression underneath one of his hands.

“I asked him once about it. I said, “Tyson, is there a reason why you like to hide on those two places so much?” It was so endearing how he answered; the look of innocence on his face was absolutely adorable. He said…” Percy paused, weaving his hands through Nico’s locks, brushing them back soothingly before resuming once more. “’Because you always go there as well, big brother. So I feel safe going there.’”

“It was our maple tree in the garden… and your bed chambers,” Percy continued, never taking his eyes off of Nico, the worry on his expression evident as the latter’s breathing was still uneven. “It’s really amusing that he felt the same way that I did whenever I go there: safe.”

“You are a bad liar. You are making this up,” Nico stated dully, easing back against the son of Poseidon, trying to dismiss the sound of his blood pounding against his ears. “Why tell me this specifically?”

“I know I am a bad liar. Which is why I don’t lie. You can ask Tyson when we get back if you want,” Percy offered, a small smile curling around the edges of his lips as he brushed his hand once more against the younger male’s forehead. “Living with Triton has instilled a certain amount of fear in the little tyke. Whenever it gets unbearable for me or him – for us – we would go to either place just to get away for a while. It makes me feel safe, and that in turn makes Tyson feel safe as well.”

“You are a bad liar with privacy issues then,” Nico stated dully, easing back against the son of Poseidon, trying to dismiss the sound of his blood pounding against his ears. “Why tell me this specifically?”
“I am not lying,” was the exasperated response. “And because right now, you needed to feel safe, and that is the only thing I could think about if I am placed in your position.”

“I did not say you were,” Nico breathed, dismissing the latter statement. “I was just stating two facts.”

Gradually, the son of Hades lowered his hand, exposing his lackluster russet-brown eyes that were absolutely exhausted. Percy had his lips pressed firmly onto a thin line, opting to be silent for a little while longer as he delicately brushed the few remaining damp locks which plastered against the younger male’s features. His calloused hand brushed repetitively against the cold skin of Nico’s forehead before cautiously trailing to his left cheek, caressing the skin in a soothing gesture.

“I’m tired,” the son of Hades whispered as he slowly closed his eyes once more, leaning back against Percy’s support out of exhaustion. “I’m tired, Percy.”

The son of Poseidon was certain that it pertained beyond the physical aspect of the word; that Niccolò di Angelo was physically, spiritually, and psychologically fatigued. The dark circles which rested beneath his eyes and the paleness of his complexion implicated enough. The meager amount of food he consumes on a regular basis, sluggishly raised to his barely parted lips, made his exhaustion as every bit as evident in Percy’s eyes. Had he been resting adequately since their departure from Thálassa? If the son of Hades had been plagued constantly with these unnerving dreams, the probability was highly unlikely.

“I’m tired too, Nico,” Percy murmured, resting his face against the disheveled locks. “I’m tired too. But we have to keep on living; have to keep on fighting. Not for us – never for us.”

“I’m tired, Percy. I’m tired,” Nico repeated in that hushed voice, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he visibly swallowed. “I just want to rest.”

“Soon. Soon,” Percy said, voice firm with conviction. “But not now. I need you to keep on fighting with me, Nico. If you stop, I will do the same in a heartbeat. So please… Just hold on a little longer.”

Silence filled the room once more, and in that silence, the faint scuffling of heels against the polished marble floor outside the room was audible as servants bustled about. There were muffled conversations, but the walls were too thick for either of them to discern snippets of any conversation. Eventually, Nico’s breathing evened out and the grip he had on the son of Poseidon’s hand slowly
faltered. Percy simply kept his grip firm, watching the son of Hades attentively as he continued to soothe the younger male.

“I dreamt of her,” Nico started once more with his eyes still closed, his voice a mere whisper. “I dreamt of dead people. But she… She was always much of a prominent figure to me, even in my state of unconsciousness. I dreamt of her; dreamt of her… dead.”

Percy did not need to know who she was. There was only one person in Niccolò di Angelo’s existence that he regarded with such anonymity.

“I’m afraid to close my eyes; to see everything again and again until it’s ingrained to my mind—” Nico trailed off, biting his lower lip as he found himself rambling.

There was a brief pause before he spoke once more, and his words stung more than it should to Percy.

“I want it to stop. I would give anything to unsee it all.”

No, Percy thought to himself, subconsciously tightening his grip around the younger male. Nico should not have to give anymore; the son of Hades had already sacrificed too much. Out of the three of them – of him, Nico and Jason – it was Nico who had lost most, and Percy could only imagine the magnitude of the pain that the son of Hades constantly endured. Percy was barely enduring on his own at the present, and it was solely because of his family that he was clinging onto life.

Niccolò di Angelo was undeniably a strong individual, but even Percy was certain that he had been constantly pushing at his limits.

How much he could take.

How much he was willing to endure.

“It will stop, Nico. I promise, we’ll make it stop,” Percy murmured, flinching when the son of Hades painfully tightened his grip on his hand.
“Don’t make an impossible promise, Perseus Tzákson. You know I hate people who make impossible promises.”

“Then I will just have to make it happen,” Percy growled. “I hate to see you like this, Nico. You deserve better than this.”

“I hate seeing myself like this too,” the son of Hades murmured, slowly lifting himself up to sit upright, disregarding the statement which the third heir uttered thereafter.

“I’ll just go… and bathe. Thank you for helping me out.”

“Are you sure?” Percy asked hesitantly. Regardless, his grip on the younger male gradually loosened.

The son of Hades offered a curt nod as he slowly dragged his legs to the side of the bed. Pausing, he wordlessly disrobed the sheets from his upper body and placed them to the side.

“Positive. You should rest some more. I apologize for having woken you up,” Nico answered as he released his grip on Percy’s hand, sluggishly rising to his full height.

“You don’t need to apologize,” Percy stated firmly, gazing directly into russet-brown irises. “I want to be there to help you, Nico. It is my choice, and it will continue to be my choice. I don’t intend to make a half-hearted promise.”

The son of Hades simply offered a fragile smile in return before his lackluster eyes casted to the side. Offering no further response, the young man sauntered towards the bathroom, his shoulders hunched just the slightest bit forward. He paused at the doorframe, his bare feet lingering on the carpet as he hesitated.

“Percy?” Nico was certain that the older male focused his attention immediately on him upon being called; he did not wait for a confirmation as he continued. “There has never been a full week where the thought of simply ending my life did not appeal as the best escape in my mind.”

His right hand gripped at the doorframe firmly, his nails carving miniscule crescent indentations on the wooden frame like deadly talons. Leaving the conversation at that, the son of Hades quietly closed the door with a deafening click.
Niccolò di Angelo was uncertain of what he was doing anymore. At the umpteenth time that the daughter of Bellona managed to get her dagger to graze the exquisite material of his canary yellow tunic, he was certain that his mind was too distant and too preoccupied for such a dangerous endeavor. Reyna must have noticed it much earlier than she would let on as she simply remained silent, critically assessing his figure as his eyes shifted towards the wide windows of the suzerain’s study. Sea-green eyes gazed directly onto his russet-brown eyes for a mere few seconds before casting towards the side once more.

Regardless of what he had offered to Percy – to stay by his side as much as he was capable of during his business conducts – the son of Poseidon adamantly refused it afterwards, suggesting instead that he wisely basked for a few hours in the presence of the daughter of Bellona. Niccolò di Angelo is, by all means, not an imbecile. What he had uttered to Percy a mere two hours ago obviously perturbed the son of Poseidon. Perhaps, disappointed him even.

Redirecting his attention to his companion, he wordlessly sauntered towards where she was seated in the garden – under the cool shade of a tree. As much as it displeased him to be unaware of what was happening within the suzerain’s study, the small fact that he had at least the vision of the older male would suffice.

Perhaps it was a mistake to share something so… horrible to the third heir. But with Percy, he was certain that he could entrust the third heir with such delicate details. Percy had never judged him before, but Nico should have considered that that was in the past. They had changed; Percy had changed, and Nico was simply lacking knowledge to the extent of it. He said he wanted to help, but Nico knew better.

There was no helping him with these manifestations in his mind that simply plagued his existence every single day. The sole reason why he had shared such a heavy truth to Percy was purely because if Percy was capable of helping him, it would be by relinquishing those vile thoughts in his mind. Percy was capable of ensuring that his mind would not slip to such dark recesses. That was the only help that Percy could offer.

Percy could not kill the rest of his demons. It was a fight which Nico had to deal on his own.

“You are disturbed.” It was a statement, not an inquiry. Without having to offer a glance, the son of Hades was certain that piercing black eyes were gazing at his hunched form. “What are you thinking, mi valiente soldado?”
The young man pursed his lips at the inquiry, distantly plucking the grass leaves before him as he thought of what he should say.

“\textquote I dreamt of her,\textquote” Nico murmured, scrunching up the plucked grass leaves in his hands before discarding them to the side. “Why can’t I rid of \textit{her} in my mind, Reyna? \textit{She} did not care enough of me to stay. Why am I still bothering myself with \textit{her}?\textquote”

“You already know the answer to that, Nico,” Reyna answered, her voice softening just the slightest bit; enough to express her fondness for the younger male. “\textit{No matter what she} has done to you, all the good memories that you have of \textit{her} overweighs that. You love \textit{her}, Nico. Unconditionally.”

“I wish I didn’t,” the son of Hades laughed humorlessly, his lips crinkling at the edges in an offer of a fragile smile. “\textquote Then perhaps, I would not be as damaged as I appeared before Percy.\textquote”

“What do you mean by that?” Reyna inquired, her eyes narrowing dangerously into slits as the older male’s name was mentioned.

It was no question that the daughter of Bellona expressed a certain amount of dislike towards the son of Poseidon. As much as she respected of the past friendship that Nico and the son of Poseidon used to share, the sheer fact that the male alone caused much grief to Nico for such a long period of time – regardless that it was unintentional – fueled her anger towards him. No, perhaps her anger was more directed to his lack of defiance. That, and the fact that the suzerains had the audacity to manipulate their children and force them to be betrothed for the sake of their districts. Their children were mortals, not bargaining chips. For them to be utilized as the latter sickened Reyna to the core.

Reyna hated Percy, but she \textit{despised} the second son of Zeus for the same reason.

“I shared with him my thoughts,” Nico answered without sparing her a glance. “Of how the idea of simply killing myself never fails to cross my mind.”

“And how did he react to it?”

The son of Hades shrugged.

“I am guessing that he is displeased of me. We have not talked of it since I mentioned it. His silence worries me,” the man admitted before hanging his head low.
“I think you are mistaken of his displeasure,” Reyna stated, placing a comforting hand against one of his shoulders. “I have seen how he cared for you when Lord Apollo was, for the lack of a better term, harassing you back in his studies. If your friendship was as strong as you once described it to me, then his displeasure was most likely to himself.”

“He would not be displeased of you. He would be displeased of himself for not being a better support for you,” Reyna continued, leaning back against the bark of the tree. “It is not unnatural. We often feel that when we see the people we most care about despairing, or when we try to find excuses for the bad things that occur in our lives. Thoughts like, “Why could I not have been better for this person?” or “Will I ever be enough to make this person happy?” eventually plague our minds. We often care too much of other people to actually process what is actually the reality. Right now, he is probably just as distant as you are. If not, more.”

“I was like that when Hylla left,” Reyna added, her lips pressed into a firm line. “You move in circles and try to find the reason through it all, and eventually you come to blaming yourself. It is unfair, but it is what makes us who we are: mortals.”

“But when you think of these events in life, you have to grasp that they occurred for a reason. If it was not for the brewing war, my family would not have moved to your district, and I would not have met you,” the daughter of Bellona offered with a small smile. “If it was not for Percy, you would not have wielded a blade. And no, there is no wrong for the cause which you fight for. You are much independent than anyone I could come to imagine. You are capable of defending yourself and I am at peace when I am away for I know you would be safe. When you stop clinging onto what you still have in your life… that is when you will crumble.”

“’If you stop, I will do the same in a heartbeat.’ Percy told me that,” Nico said, slowly facing his companion as he spoke once more, gazing directly into her eyes as if he would find all the answers that he needed simply by staring into them.

Reyna nodded at that, though there was an unfathomable expression in her eyes which the son of Hades silently questioned.

“You are one of his pillars, Nico. His father, his stepmother, his brothers… None of them matter to him as much as you do. Probably.” She added the last word cautiously. “He only met his father when his mother had died, and he probably loathed his father for a long period of time. He would never establish a deep bond with his stepmother because he probably perceives that as replacing his mother in his heart. And his brothers… the youngest child does not know of his struggles, his once main pillar is deceased, and the oldest one wants him dead. But you…”
“He is important to you just as you are important to him, if we both disregard any romantic emotions,” Reyna stated, her lips twitching just the slightest bit when she managed to get the son of Hades to blush faintly. “You are one of his pillars, just as he is one of yours. Never forget that.”

“So then why would he not talk to me? Why would he be out there on his own?” the son of Hades questioned, his features scrunching up in displeasure as he raised his eyes once more towards the direction of the suzerain’s study.

Their eyes met for a second before sea-green eyes diverted once more.

“You really should. He…” Nico paused for a few seconds, his expression hesitant as his lips parted once more and he continued in a whisper. “There is something you should know.”

The maiden shifted her frame, fully facing the young man so as to offer him her absolute attention. She gave him a pointed glance, but he easily missed it as his eyes roamed about the area critically, ensuring that no one was there to eavesdrop to their conversation before he resumed.

“Frank fled to Thálassa.”

The reaction was almost instantaneous as Reyna’s body completely went rigid before her hands firmly grasped his shoulders, digging onto the skin like deadly talons. Her piercing black eyes were dilated with shock, of an untamed hopefulness, yet there was skepticism and disbelief in them that Nico had clearly seen. Her lips parted once, but she closed them once more as she took a cursory glance at their surroundings, as he had done so earlier.

“Frank is alive?” Reyna asked in a voice barely above a whisper.

Nico could understand where Reyna’s reactions stemmed from. As a son of Ares and a daughter of Bellona, Frank and Reyna were blood-related; cousins. As much as their personalities contrasted,
they shared a much identical upbringing – Palaiá Rómi descendants – compared to the other offspring of Lord Ares, as both Frank and Reyna were disciplined by the traditions which their mothers had been raised. Reyna could not establish the same mutual perspective with the rest of Lord Ares’ offspring – all driven with the thirst to slaughter and the thrill of the war. Violence. Their blood thirsted for the violence and bloodshed. Frank was an exception; the sole person whom she regarded as an extension of her family. So when he was eventually pronounced dead, by his own father nonetheless, Reyna had been one of the few that were utterly devastated.

Now, for someone, even if it was Nico, to inform her that a member of her family was alive after a whole two years of absolutely no concrete information or any forms of lead, it was rational that she would find the information unbelievable.

“He is under the protection of Lord Poseidon. He is amongst the soldiers. Keeping him within the grounds of the suzerain’s property – at the barracks – was the only way to ensure his and the district’s safety,” Nico supplied in the same hushed voice. “He barely stepped off of the property. Only the suzerain and Percy know of his identity, and they intend to keep it as that.”

“Nico, this is serious. He was pronounced dead. If Lord Ares finds out that he is in Thálassa, he could have the excuse to start the war,” Reyna warned him, her fingers tightening against his shoulders.

And Niccolò di Angelo was well-aware of that; he had the same discussion with the son of Poseidon merely weeks ago. The price of that information was too high in magnitude; it could easily pose as a reason for the house of Ares – and the houses of Zeus and Aphrodite by their alliance – to declare war upon the house of Poseidon.

War was inevitable, but it was unwise that their side – his and Percy’s – would be the ones to instigate it.

“We know,” Nico voiced out his thoughts, his arms crossing over his chest as he pondered. “I barely settled at Thálassa before we departed for Ílios. Being at sea leaves me quite blind with the events that are happening all across Pangaea. Has there been any movements on the side of Lord Zeus for the past two weeks?”

“No. But Nico, I think Thanatos was right,” Reyna answered, leaning closer to the young man as she spoke. “The attacks on the districts; they could be diversions for something colossal.”

“”Diversions”? How does the death of thousands of lives classify easily as “diversions”?” Nico growled low, baring his teeth slightly as his hands clenched into tight fists.
“We do not know as of yet. Thanatos requested for the assistance of Lucas’ hounds regarding this matter. We have not heard of any new information yet, but if there is something stirring, they are the most capable of extracting that kind of information,” Reyna assured. “They were dispatched to Pólemos.”

“That is suicide!” Nico exclaimed.

“Lucas knows, Nico. We can only take what we can get,” Reyna gritted her teeth, her features completely expressing her displeasure.

The daughter of Bellona paused for a second, slowly releasing her grip on the son of Hades with an apologetic expression as he flexed them thereafter. Gradually, she settled back against the bark of the tree, still casting a pointed look at the son of Hades.

“We cannot do anything further in that matter. Now, back to our previous topic: Frank. How has he been?”

“Frank is well. Better, if I must say so,” Nico murmured. “He prefers his life now despite that his movements are restricted. But, he firmly believes that being at Thálassa would eliminate the chances of him having to fight against Skotádi. I would hate to ruin his misconception, especially given the problem at Thálassa in the first place.”

“Triton,” Reyna stated with a nod. “Does Hazel know about Frank?”

“No,” Nico admitted, continuing his statements immediately before Reyna could comment any further. “And no, you cannot tell her about it.”

“Niccolò di Angelo—“

“Reyna, I am not stupid nor am I conceited. I approved highly of Hazel and Frank, and that had not changed despite my unprecedented and unpleasant encounter with Frank,” Nico explained, his tone hinting finality. “But even my approval would not allow me to grant my sister an immediate happiness.”
“Hazel has spent two years looking all throughout Pangaea for Frank. If the word reaches her of Frank’s whereabouts, she would cease her relentless searches immediately, and that would easily attract suspicion. Every action is costly at this point,” Nico continued. “I need an anonymous person, to her at least, to deliver simply the fact that Frank is alive. I already requested Lucas’ aid in this.”

“Nico.” There was that warning tone which implied rather clearly to Niccolò di Angelo that he was going to be chastised. “You know that Lucas does not do anything for free.”

“Reyna, I can manage this. Please trust me.”

And Reyna absolutely trusted him, more than what she had him know. As much as he was one of Percy’s pillar, Niccolò di Angelo was equally one of hers. They were each other’s confidant, and in the son of Hades did she found a sibling, regardless that they were not blood-related. She had seen him through his worst, as equally as he had seen her through her worst. His breaking points always shattered her from within, yet the impassive expression on her features would not let on. Because as much as he would not come to admit it, she had been his main pillar for the past two years. If she crumbled before his presence, so would he.

Equally, if he crumbled, so would she.

Reyna would be absolutely damned if that were to happen to Nico.

Looking at the son of Hades, she followed his line of sight and her piercing black eyes rested once more at the form of the son of Poseidon. Reyna would admit that Niccolò di Angelo had an amazing sense of taste with his romantic choice. The son of Poseidon was every bit as captivating and winsome as the young man depicted, perhaps more so upon aging to a full-fledged adult. There was a boundary to his kindness, and beyond his irksome antics, Reyna was certain that Perseus Tzákson qualified best as a suzerain in comparison to the first heir.

She was intrigued in him; there was absolutely no romantic attraction in her curiosity of him. The man had a guarded expression – a miniscule one – plastered across his expression always in the presence of the son of Hades. Reyna was not blind; rather the opposite.

With an exaggeration to her movements, the daughter of Bellona unsheathed her dagger; the golden blade glinting against the sunlight as she pointed it at the direction of the son of Poseidon. Percy redirected his attention to her, watching her movements with sheer curiosity as his head partially tilted to the side.
“I do trust you,” Reyna murmured. “But my trust on you does not extend to him.”

Stabbing the dagger to the ground, she raised her right hand once more while glaring pointedly at the son of Poseidon, curling her index finger in a come-hither motion before looking pointedly at the ground.

The sound of Niccolò di Angelo’s laughter was absolutely refreshing and all the more satisfying as the son of Poseidon paled in an instant before offering a curt nod.

Perseus Tzákson was uncertain of what he was doing anymore. At the umpteenth time he had jumped in the presence of the suzerain as he attentively observed the daughter of Bellona’s dagger grazing Nico’s tunic, he was certain that his mind was far too distant and preoccupied, and that he was making an utter fool of himself. He was absolutely being disrespectful at that point, but dismissing their discussions without a valid excuse was highly inappropriate.

“As you can see, our agricultural sector has been most steadily progressing,” Apollo stated, watching the heir attentively from his position behind his desk. “The council envisions a future for our district whereby we can relinquish our dependence from the districts of Gi and Krasí. Since our district has quite a number of hectares of fertile lands along our southern borders, we plan to fully utilize them solely for agricultural purposes. But agriculture is not of our main concern.”

“Medicinal advances is what our district is well-acknowledged for,” the suzerain continued, folding his hands underneath his chin. “To develop medicines – cures for ailments – we are dependent on the funds offered by the districts. But, as you know, expenses are not declining, and in our continuous pursuit, we have to touch our funds for the other sectors if our allocated funds in the medicinal sector become inadequate. Where I am heading in this is that I simply propose that Thálassa might find it absolutely beneficial to offer funds for our continued studies. The generosity would be most appreciated.”

The son of Poseidon narrowed his eyes at the statement, his sea-green eyes darting towards the direction of the suzerain who simply offered an innocent smile.

“I am well aware that Ílios constantly receives funds from Skotádi since the treaty that was signed years ago. Sofía has been aiding the district in the process of research, in terms of both human resources and financially, and Fotiá had been supplying the materials and machineries that were necessary for those medical advances,” Percy stated, squaring his jaws as he regarded the suzerain critically. “Three districts, I believe, is already too much of help and generosity, Lord Apollo.”
Lord Apollo raised his hands defensively, or as much as he was capable of doing without raising his elbows off of the table. The man had a smirk plastered across his lips, and there was mischief in those sky blue eyes as he gazed at the son of Poseidon with pride.

“Ah, and I thought I would get to trick you with your current state. Well done. Lord Poseidon truly raised you well,” Apollo commented, honestly impressed with the younger male.

The son of Poseidon briefly lowered his head in shame when the suzerain noted of his state, and he knew that he had truly disrespected the man. He was about to offer his apologies, but Lord Apollo only dismissed it with a flick of one of his hands.

“I understand your current state – worrying about your young lover. Ah, you remind me of how I had been with my first male lover, Hyacinthus,” Apollo sighed dreamily as he recalled his deceased lover. “He was truly a magnificent man; beautiful. That is a problem with us mortals, you see. We associate words such as “beauty” to women or what we perceive as feminine things. Beauty, by definition, is the quality present in a thing or a person that induces immense pleasure or deep satisfaction to the mind which comes in different manifestations. Mortals often forget that, once they started to make specific classifications.”

“Hyacinthus was beautiful. The most beautiful mortal I had ever laid my eyes on. No one could compare, and once you see a beauty most captivating, you subconsciously try to find something of equal magnitude to compare it with,” the suzerain murmured thoughtfully after much rambling. “That is what I did; what I still do. That is why I have a lot of sons and daughters. No matter how desperately you seek, the dissatisfaction of not coming close to that captivating beauty once more pushes you to an endless pursuit.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I have loved the mothers of my children. But Hyacinthus fills my head. I cannot see or hear anyone else,” Apollo concluded, a naturally fond smile settling onto his lips at what he had admitted. “I am sure you understand my sentiments. There is no one in this world that holds your attention as much as Niccolò di Angelo, is it not? You can neither see nor hear anyone else when in his presence.”

The son of Poseidon shifted in discomfort, uncertain of how he was supposed to conduct himself. Nico had warned of him not to mention any of the suzerain’s lovers, but if Lord Apollo himself was the one instigating the discussion, would it be considered impolite if he tried to divert the topic?

“Nico… is not my lover,” Percy stated cautiously, hesitant to state it as it seemed like a dull response after all that the suzerain had said.
The fond smile that graced the suzerain’s features gradually dropped and Lord Apollo arched one of his brows mockingly, folding his hands once more underneath his chin as he regarded the other male with skepticism. If the son of Poseidon was uneasy under such scrutiny, he did not let on as his features remained as composed as he could well manage.

“Oh? Then it should not be a problem then if I court the son of Hades? It would be delightful. He is quite a beautiful mortal, if I dare say so,” the suzerain stated casually, though there was a wicked smirk curling his lips.

“Don’t you dare touch him,” was the almost instantaneous response as Percy lowly growled.

“Your actions beg to differ with what you say, Percy,” the suzerain stated with a laugh, addressing the man according to the latter’s preference.

“He is my friend. I swore to myself that I would not allow anything or anyone to push him down any further. Don’t specify what my actions are. I just want to protect him,” Percy answered with gritted teeth, his fists clenching into fists.

“You say that, but you should know this, child. I am best at determining when a person lies. Not even Lord Hades could lie in my presence without me calling out on him. And you, my child, just stated a lie,” Apollo claimed nonchalantly, continuing before the older male could respond. “Perhaps this meeting should be adjourned. Your mind is in a different place. Regardless, I commend you for your knowledge at least. You are much easier to deal with than your older brother; no offense. He makes too many demands whereas you offer compromises. I can see why Lord Poseidon favors you.”

Percy lowered his head once more in a low bow, his emotions unfathomable even to himself. A part of him was absolutely ashamed that the suzerain had to state how distant he was, yet a part of him was pleased that he was being commended as himself; as his own person. The son of Poseidon gingerly fiddled with the sleeves of his tunic, sea-green eyes shifting once more to the two individuals by the garden.

“May I ask something, Lord Apollo?”

“By all means,” the older man answered, intrigued.
“Before the alliance between our districts was established, you could have easily made one with Skotádi. Lord Hades would not have a reason to refuse that offer. Why did you choose to establish – to offer – one with Thálassa instead?” Percy questioned as he faced the man.

A knowing smile tugged at the corners of Lord Apollo’s lips as he tilted his head to the side, with his chin firmly resting atop his folded hands. Percy was slowly starting to grasp the truth behind Nico’s earlier words; that there was a reason why Lord Apollo was highly qualified and bestowed upon with the position as a suzerain of a district.

“Do you know who Lord Zeus fears most, Percy? Lord Hades,” Apollo stated matter-of-factly. “Lord Hades aided most in the revolutions; has killed most of Lord Kronos’ men than many soldiers combined. Is it ironical that Lord Zeus perceives him as a threat? Not at all.”

“For someone with a reputation in the war as Lord Zeus, the so-called savior of Pangaea, the power he attained was maddening. It consumed him, forced him every single day to that same power-hungry state as his deceased father. With the gradual declination of the economy in Ouranós, it only aggravates the suzerain to commit drastic actions. The reason for wars are not solely from hatred or revenge. Most often, wars are instigated by a person’s desperation. When you have been comfortable at the top and everything gradually starts to crumble before you, that is where the desperation comes. Lord Zeus is desperate to keep himself in power. Lord Hades has what Lord Zeus needs, and Lord Zeus is willing to do anything to lay a claim on it. That is what this impending war will be all about.”

“Why did I choose to side with Lord Poseidon, you ask? For power balance,” Apollo answered nonchalantly, as if his explanation was as clear as day. “Ouranós has an alliance with two districts, and one of them is Pólemos. Pólemos – their wildcard – has a strong military force, and the number of its soldiers is simply overwhelming. Skotádi has four alliances, and two of which were simply by family attachment and are basically not vital in terms of man power for the war. They have the two main agricultural districts, and then the districts of Anemoi and Sofía – the wildcards of Skotádi. Lady Athena would not be foolish to side with Lord Zeus, and we can all determine that the reason why she did not side with Thálassa was majorly due to the fact that she does not see eye-to-eye with your father.”

At that, Lord Apollo heaved out an amused chuckle, his sky blue eyes twinkling in sheer humor, before he resumed.

“Anemoi sided with Lord Hades on this for two reasons: the power of Skotádi and to avoid confrontation with Sofía. You should know the reason for the latter, right?” At this, Percy nodded. “But Thálassa, your district has three alliances. Ours, then Artemis’ by extension. And then, you have Fotiá – which is actually your wildcard. Disregarding the agricultural districts, the three main powers should be potentially equal. The decision I made stabilized the three main powers. It is not a matter of preference or benefits; it is a matter of determining what would define the best outcome. In this case, siding with your district was a… pre-emptive measure.”
“Pre-emptive measure?”

The man offered another smile as he leaned back against his seat, his fingers tracing the intricate patterns on his apparel while smoothing out miniscule wrinkles on the material.

“Just know this, Perseus Tzákson: It was a difficult choice to have sided with your district. Ílios is surrounded on all sides by districts in an alliance with Skotádi. But I trust Lord Thanatos, just as much as I had trusted Lord Hades, and I am perfectly all right that I am surrounded by the districts they have established alliances with. I see potentials of a righteous suzerain in him, just as I see the same in you and Niccolò di Angelo. Regardless of how this war should end, know that I am on Thanatos’, yours and the young di Angelo’s side,” Apollo concluded with a knowing glimmer in his sky blue eyes.

Before the son of Poseidon could respond to that, a loud knock resounded throughout the room and a male of tastefully shaggy blond hair and vibrant sky blue eyes entered, pausing by the doorframe as he cautiously assessed the current occupants of the room. The younger male, Percy assessed, seemed close to Nico’s age, possessing an athletic built that was emphasized by the short-sleeved pristine white tunic which he adorned. If it was not for the uncanny similarity of the younger male’s features to the suzerain, Percy might have mistaken him for one of the healers.

With a few seconds glance outside, the son of Poseidon slowly redirected his attention to Lord Apollo, hoping that his pale features would not be as prominent as he assumed it to be.

“Perhaps you are right, my lord. We can resume our discussions at a later date. Lady Reyna… requests for my presence,” the son of Poseidon stated, casting his eyes to the plush carpet.

The older male laughed at the statement, humor evident in his sky blue eyes as he regarded the son of Poseidon intently.

“With that maiden, I believe “request” is an understatement,” Apollo answered, the smile on his lips broadening as the young lord flushed at his statement. “Go on then. Please tell the young maiden and the young son of Hades that dinner would commence in a short while.”

“di Angelo is here?” the newcomer inquired, his voice laced with surprise and his eyes dilated with an undisguised enthusiasm at the information. “How come we were not informed of his visitation?”
“Because I was not informed as well that he is visiting with Lord Poseidon’s third heir,” the suzerain stated with a subtle roll of his eyes before he gestured at the young lads before his presence.

“Perseus, this is my third son and heir to the district of Ílios, William Gallagher Solace. William, this is Perseus Tzákson, third son and heir of Lord Poseidon."

“A pleasure to meet you. Please call me Will,” the son of Apollo politely greeted, a natural smile curling his lips as he extended one of his hands to the son of Poseidon whom gratefully took it in a firm grip.

“Percy. And likewise,” Percy murmured, briefly shaking the hand before promptly dropping his.

“So, what brings you to my study, Will?” the suzerain inquired, looking pointedly at his son as the young heir redirected his attention to him once more.

“Lee and Austin needs your analysis on the current research before we progress to the next phase,” the son of Apollo stated, running his hands through his blond locks to brush as much as possible off of his features. “So far, the conditions are stable and they are just waiting for your approval to proceed.”

“That is my cue to leave,” Percy stated cautiously before addressing the suzerain. “Until later then, Lord Apollo.” He then turned to the younger male. “Will.”

“Until later then, Percy.”

Disinterested with listening to a highly sophisticated and complex discussion, the son of Poseidon briskly headed towards the door, twisting the knob and pulling it open before he made a step out of the room. Before he could fully close the door, he hesitated with one of his hands still firmly grasping onto the knob and his back to the remaining occupants of the room. The suzerain and his son seemed to notice likewise as they remained silent, and Percy was certain that they were staring at him expectantly, waiting for him to either state what he had on his mind or to leave the room completely.

“I meant what I said earlier, Lord Apollo. I cannot guarantee that I would not be hostile the moment you touch Nico. Thanatos and their ally districts would be the last of your concerns.”

With that said, the son of Poseidon completely closed the door, leaving the son of Apollo with an
expression of disbelief and shock, which immediately morphed to displeasure and disappointment within seconds as he regarded the all too knowing smile of the suzerain and his father.

“Really, father? Please do not involve di Angelo in your deviances,” Will stated exasperatedly, his hands subconsciously resting against his hips as he gave his father a reproaching look.

“At ease, child. As charming and stunning as the young di Angelo is, I know my limitations.” The incredulous expression on Will’s face stated otherwise. “However, that does not mean that I would not mess even the slightest bit with the son of Poseidon. I can assure you, Nico might actually find my intentions pleasing in the end.”

Perseus Tzákson could not lie to him; no individual had managed that in his presence. No man or woman is completely noble and selfless, and the son of Poseidon was clearly not an exception. Regardless of the number of excuses that he would utter, Apollo would always know of the truth behind his intentions.

Ah, young love. I wish you could see this, Hyacinthus. You would be entertained most of this.

“I know I will eventually regret asking this but, what do you have in mind?” the son of Apollo questioned, his shoulders hunching forward in defeat.

“William, my child, I need your help.”

Chapter End Notes

Character(s):
(Will Solace) William Gallagher Solace
======== Gallagher: Eager Helper (Celtic origin)

Translation(s):
Maláka: The term is actually associated to a person who spends most of his/her time masturbating. There are varying interpretations to it. It is used as an affectionate reference amongst friends, but to strangers, it is definitely an extreme insult. (In Percy’s case, it most definitely is not an affectionate reference so…)

The full names of most of the characters are provided at the link below. That page is subjected to change as the story progresses.
Link: HERE
Thank you for reading this chapter! Until the next chapter!
“That's how you know you love someone, I guess, when you can't experience anything without wishing the other person were there to see it, too.”

— “The Descendants” by Kaui Hart Hemmings

First impression never dies, but they certainly can be altered given an unspecified amount of time.

That was what was processing through the son of Poseidon’s head as he – with a neutral expression plastered across his features – reminisced for the umpteenth time the retreating backs of the son of Hades and a certain son of Apollo. In a not so inconspicuous gesture, William Solace would flash a knowing smile at his direction for the past three weeks, with the sole intention of agitating him. Needless to say, the younger male was achieving his intent well as Percy had to click his tongue to repress vocalizing or acting out any displeasing urges.

By all means, William Solace is an absolutely decent and well-educated individual with an equally proper upbringing. The younger male radiated naturally of kindness, was approachable, and presented no hostility with the cheery disposition he possessed. That was his impression of the younger male for the first few days. Until he noticed a pattern to his actions.

Most of the son of Poseidon’s itinerary consisted of associating with the suzerain and his council, conducting business, and seeing to it that all which his father had stated were addressed. It was a tiring cycle: breakfast, Apollo, lunch, Apollo, dinner, Apollo, and sleep. During the past three weeks, he had adapted fairly well on the environment which the district offered. It was livelier and he had indulged in a few eccentricities which he persuaded Nico to do so as well; they toured the nearest cities and Percy was educated in the varying cultures that existed. Needless to say, he vaguely feels at ease, as if he were at his home district.

It was with his insistence that Nico was not by his side during his confrontations with the suzerain, partly out of his need to learn to handle these matters independently. But in the rare occasion that a day in his schedule did not consist of an “Apollo time”, William Solace would always snatch Niccolò di Angelo before Percy could request for the latter’s company.

Initially, he had permitted it with nonchalance, sincerely pleased that the son of Hades had people
who could provide him company; preoccupy his mind and entertain him in a positive manner. But that was until he had noticed the knowing smiles that he now interpreted as mockery at this point. It was a week into that arrangement that he started to notice how the son of Apollo only requested Nico’s presence before Percy could request for his company. And William Solace was desperate for Nico’s presence, muttering one excuse after another, enough for the son of Hades to reluctantly cave in and for Percy to keep mum to himself.

Needless to say, Percy was agitated. But most importantly, he was irritated with himself because Niccolò di Angelo was always looking pointedly at him as if he were requesting his assistance, and Percy would not even utter as much as a single protest to the son of Apollo. Reyna’s constant disapproving gaze did not make him feel any better.

Oh, the daughter of Bellona had always been disapproving of him since their first meeting three weeks ago, but her distaste in him was becoming more pronounced with each encounter with William Solace. It was questionable though; she equally had the opportunity to tell the son of Apollo to back off, but she was always looking at Percy with one of her brows arched in a challenging manner. As if she was expecting him to do something that only he could possibly accomplish.

It was not as if he and Nico were becoming increasingly distant once more. When the son of Hades had moved to the room adjacent his, it was with Percy’s insistence that Nico come to him should he had those… haunting nightmares – he was unsure how to classify it – once more. The son of Hades had been obviously reluctant, and Percy had to express his disappointment when Nico did the exact opposite of what Percy insisted to him. It was convenient that there was a door connecting their rooms and that Percy was ever inquisitive. That had been an almost sleepless night as he soothed Nico once more, ignoring the younger male when the latter insisted that he was fine and that Percy should return to his bed chambers then.

“Sorry… Forgive me...” Percy heard him utter those words once, like a mantra, and they both knew well that it was not directed to a specific person. In the nights that he was plagued with those horrid dreams, those repetitive apologies were directed to every single life that Nico had claimed or had been incapable of protecting. They were the deaths that stripped parts of Niccolò di Angelo; one of the few countless reasons that had broken him. The deaths had broken Percy as well, but not to the extent that Nico was experiencing.

Nico was not pulling away from him, which Percy perceived as a positive thing. But with the son of Apollo intervening whenever he wanted the son of Hades all for himself, most of their interactions were restricted to Percy disturbing Nico before either turned in for the night. It was mostly casual talk of “How has your day been?” which would gradually evolve to Nico giving a Will-related response. Percy could not express his irritation when Nico would talk of what he had done with Will – Will this, Will that – but he could redirect his irritation to another person. Or persons, to be exact.

Percy was sure Lord Apollo had something to do with this. He was absolutely sure of it.
The sharp prick of pain against his left thigh snapped him back to reality once more. The seamstress gave him a chastising look before she resumed her work, tailoring the apparel which he now adorned. It was an exquisite attire; a coat completely pristine white with fine gold linings and intricate embroidery of laurel which weaved like creeping vines from the hem. It consisted of simply three pieces, with the inner apparel having a plunging v-shaped neckline that exposed his collarbones, and emphasizing his well-defined physique. The attire gleamed under the illumination of the light, giving off an ethereal glow to the person – in this case, him – who adorned it. As hesitant as he had been when the suzerain insisted that he wear a royal attire of the district for the upcoming celebration, Percy was far from questioning how expensive the entire ensemble was. It was a gift, Lord Apollo had stated, and Percy would simply leave it as that.

From the side of the room, Nico and Reyna were leaning against the wall, with the son of Hades observing him intently. The maiden did not seem as interested, choosing to look at the flowing robes which she now adorned with slight distaste.

“What are these celebrations like?” Percy found himself asking, just to fill in the silence within the room. “What am I supposed to expect?”

Surprisingly, Reyna chose to answer.

“They are unnecessarily extravagant, and people would be loud; louder than usual. Expect to see nobles – men and women – clothed either in flamboyant or outrageous attires, trying to outdo one another in hopes of getting their children or themselves betrothed.” At this, even the seamstress nodded in agreement. “Maidens, and lords with unmarried daughters would be expecting you to ask them, or their daughters respectively, to offer a dance. Despite calling it a celebration, it mostly is a ploy to get business done.”

“By customs, only the men could request to dance with another person. Thus, as soon as you step into the room, they would lock in on you as if you were some fresh meat just to garner for your attention, sire,” the seamstress softly added, causing the son of Poseidon to visibly swallow.

“Right. Is there any way to avoid that? I just want to experience the celebration part,” Percy mumbled, more so to himself. “I know how nobles take things to extremities when you refuse their suggestion of dancing with their daughters.”

“Get a partner for the night,” Reyna stated in a monotonous voice. “Even nobles respect pairs who mutually agreed to be partners. Either that or do as I do by learning to project an intimidating and dangerous presence.”
“Well, the latter is not going to happen any time soon,” Percy stated with utmost certainty, wincing at the probability that he was doomed to spend the entire night on that day, baited from one maiden to another.

“If I may suggest, my lord,” the seamstress spoke up, her voice soft. “Why not go with Lord di Angelo?”

The suggestion completely caught the respective occupants of the room off-guard. It was evident in their reactions as a flabbergasted son of Hades had his russet-brown eyes dilated partially out of disbelief and discomfort. Percy was not reacting any better, the color rising to his cheeks and he, a sputtering mess.

The seamstress must have interpreted her suggestion as unwise as she immediately bowed in an apologetic manner, a bright flush dusting her freckled cheeks.

“Ah, that is if Lord di Angelo does not already have a partner, I mean. It is merely a suggestion. I did not meant to assume or imply your preferences. I apologize for my impudence, my lords,” the woman breathed shakily, retracting her trembling hands from the third heir's apparel.

“It’s all right,” Percy hastily answered, offering the distressed seamstress an assuring smile. “We were just surprised by the suggestion.”

Percy had to remind himself that this was the district of Ílios, a district which vehemently condones societal hierarchy and irrational perceptions towards the concept of homosexuality. Of course, it was valid for the woman to offer such an innocent suggestion.

Percy hesitantly glanced towards the direction of the son of Hades, only to find the younger male fiddling with his father’s ring on his finger. His teeth clenched against his lower lip, and his features were contorted with discomfort. Percy was unsure which had instigated that: the suggestion or the mere prospect of having the son of Poseidon as his companion.

“Do you… Do you have a partner already, Nico?” Percy decided to ask, just so that the discomforting silence would not settle in. “Or perhaps do you have a partner in mind?”

Said son of Hades slowly looked up, russet brown irises transfixed on sea-green eyes. The young man stopped fiddling with his jewelry for a mere few seconds, lips parting hesitantly, before they
slipped shut once more.

“I... No. No, to either,” the son of Hades cautiously answered, slightly shrugging. “I am not really one to participate in that part of the festivities and the sheer thought that someone might potentially want a dance with me was just highly unlikely. Needless to say, I never entertained the thought of being bothered.”

“I do want a full experience,” Percy stated, allowing a smile to slowly curl his lips. “But I want to naturally enjoy the night, and that may include the dancing. Just not with an additional hidden intention behind it. I want to enjoy it as much as I can, and to be honest, I want to enjoy it with you since... well...”

“Since?” Nico pressed, arching a brow.

“Well... Since Will always occupied your schedule when I do manage some free time.” Percy answered hastily. “May I have your company for the whole day of tomorrow?”

“That is inclusive of the evening ball?”

“Will you be completely mine for one day?” Percy clarified, barely repressing the urge to slap a hand against his mouth as he belatedly realized what he had just uttered.

The hitching of Nico’s breath was audible to his ears, and even the seamstress by his feet seemed to settle more and more in discomfort with each passing second. The daughter of Bellona was oddly silent, trying to observe as inconspicuous as possible the exchange that was occurring between the two heirs. There was confliction and trepidation in Niccolò di Angelo’s features, as if he were weighing on grasping on the offer or declining it.

“If you would have the cloddish me as your partner, nothing would make me happier,” Percy added after a few seconds, honesty dripping from the tone of his voice.

The son of Hades mumbled inaudibly – at least to the son of Poseidon – with his head hung low. A small smile was slowly forming on the young man’s lips, curling in what Percy could only deduce as amusement. Before Percy could question what he was mumbling to himself, Nico raised his head and gazed directly at the son of Poseidon.
“If you could promise that you would not step on my feet,” the son of Hades conditioned, shifting his footing so that he was depending more on his left feet to stabilize himself.

“Consider that done,” Percy readily agreed, a wide smile stretching his lips to the point that it almost ached.

It was not something he could repress; the happiness that immediately bubbled within him when it came to being with the son of Hades. Despite their contradicting personalities, there was no presence in the entirety of Pangaea that could compare to what was solely Niccolò di Angelo’s. Sure, they had been isolated on a ship for almost a full two weeks, but those days had been uneventful. On the dry land and in a foreign district, they could indulge in a mini exploration; just the two of them, as it had always been.

Being with Niccolò di Angelo had always offered Percy thrilling experiences, not because of the countless yet harmless messes Percy would drag them to, but because they indulge each other equally with a silent mutual understanding of their limitations. Nico indulged Percy with his mischiefs, and Percy, in return, offered his absolute attention to the younger male when the latter would be caught in his thoughts. The son of Hades was highly intelligent; his knowledge boundless even at a tender age. Nico could share his knowledge and countless stories of different districts and their cultures, and Percy would never tire of hearing them because there would always be that enthusiastic and giddy glimmer in those brown eyes that would reflect the slightest of the innocent child that Nico once was.

“Anyway, is your attire prepared already?” the son of Poseidon inquired after a moment.

The son of Hades casually gestured to the seamstress who simply offered a smile in response.

“Indeed!” the seamstress answered enthusiastically, slowly rising to her full height as she critically assessed the son of Poseidon’s ensemble. “If the young lord permits it, you may see it while he adorns it.”

“No, he may not,” Nico stated firmly, interjecting before Percy could enthusiastically agree. “I will only wear it once more at the celebration tomorrow.”

“That’s not fair,” Percy complained, subconsciously jutting out his lower lip. “You have seen mine.”

The son of Hades offered a shrug.
“And it suits you well,” Nico pointed out nonchalantly. “But I am not putting on mine until tomorrow. It’s too much of a hassle, and it would cause the attire to get all wrinkled.”

Percy wanted to argue, but he knew that it would be futile once the son of Hades had his mind set on something. Aside from that, arguing with the younger male with the daughter of Bellona in the same premise as them was just suicidal, Percy concluded.

His bottom lip was still subconsciously jutting out, giving him that image of a kicked baby seal which the rest of the occupants collectively adored. Though Nico and Reyna did so with impassive expressions; the seamstress cooed unabashedly at the sulking son of Poseidon.

“Stop that, Percy. You are not getting your way,” Nico stated with an exasperated sigh, crossing his arms against his chest.

“I’m not doing anything. I am honestly sulking,” Percy stated with a grunt, similarly crossing his arms as he redirected his pitiful baby seal image completely at the son of Hades.

The seamstress huffed, slapping the crossed arms in a chastising manner as the gesture wrinkled certain parts of the attire, before smoothing the wrinkles once more. Percy observed that the woman was entertained at their exchange to some certain extents, if the fond smile that curved her chapped lips was anything to go by.

A series of knocks resounded from the door but the two young heirs paid no heed to it as they glared defiantly at each other. Neither of the two paid the slightest attention as the door parted open, revealing a young man of shaggy blond hair and vibrant sky blue eyes. Said man eyed the two speculatively, an amused smile curling his lips as his presence was neglected.

“I hope I am not interrupting anything.”

Percy winced at the sound of the familiar voice, his expression contorting with displeasure which did not go unnoticed to the son of Hades. The latter’s expression became indifferent in a second as he reluctantly acknowledged the newcomer.

“The attire suits you well, Percy,” the newcomer stated, a natural smile gracing his lips.
“Thank you, Will,” Percy murmured in a low voice, suppressing the bitterness in his tone as much as possible. “What brings you to my room?”

Before the son of Apollo could respond, the son of Hades was already slowly making his way towards the door, knowing that the situation would end in the same manner as it had been for the past three weeks: Will asking for his presence, and Percy merely dismissing them to do as they – actually, Will – pleased. A firm hand grasped his wrist in an iron grip, and Nico halted midstep to glance at the son of Poseidon out of curiosity. Sea-green eyes were not glancing at his direction at all as the son of Poseidon awaited to hear Will’s response.

“I heard that Nico was here, and I was wondering if I could have his company for a while,” the son of Apollo stated.

There it was again, Percy thought with a frown. The request of the son of Hades’ company, followed by complex excuses which Percy would be unable to process. He glanced at the son of Hades who was staring back at him with an expectant look. What Nico was expecting of him, Percy knew not of. But as his silence stretched on for almost a full minute, a look of resignation settled onto those russet-brown eyes once more before Nico tugged at his hand which Percy was still clutching on.

No, he would not allow this. Not once again. They only had a few days remaining in this district; a few more days remaining of their temporary freedom. Once they get back to Thálassa, Nico would be bombarded with his duties just as much as Percy would. He had been foolish, permitting Will to take the son of Hades at every single chance.

“I apologize,” Percy hastily stated before the son of Hades could completely pry himself from his grasp. Percy took a deep breath once more, swallowing audibly before starting all over. “I apologize because I actually wanted to request for Nico to accompany me to the town today. That is if he would like to?”

Percy added the last statement hesitantly while his eyes remained transfixed on the son of Hades. Slowly, though perhaps only visible to him, Nico might have genuinely offered a small smile to him for a second.

“My lord, you are my priority after all,” Niccolò di Angelo smoothly responded, looking pointedly at the son of Poseidon’s hand. Slowly, Percy released his grip on him. “I am sure that whatever you request of me can be handled on another date, Lord William. Right now, I believe that Lord Perseus requests for me.”

“Since you are very much intent on these matters being crucial, I would not mind filing in for
Niccolò di Angelo’s place of discussing these researches with you. I am, so to say, here on Lord Thanatos’ request after all,” Reyna remarked, her piercing black eyes fixed on the son of Apollo.

“That would not be necessary,” Will answered, fixing a smile on his lips though he seemed uneasy at that moment; most likely from the daughter of Bellona’s scrutiny. “I hope you have a wonderful day then.”

The son of Apollo critically assessed the two male heirs closely for a few seconds, as if he were trying to discern something. When he did not find whatever it was he was searching for, Will lowered his head in a slight bow before exiting the room, closing the door behind him.

Percy did not dare to glance at the son of Hades, his sea-green eyes darting around the room evasively while the seamstress finished her duties. There was no doubt that his companions in the room were currently scrutinizing him, and knowing that was unnerving. The fact that Niccolò di Angelo was but a few feet had him feeling uneasy.

If Nico would speak at that moment, Percy was certain that his line of thoughts were along, “What in my father’s name was that?” In truth, Percy did not know it himself.

“I will leave you to dress then. If you would excuse me,” Nico murmured before sauntering towards the door that connected their rooms. Reyna headed towards the bedroom door on the other hand, a knowing look in her eyes as she gazed pointedly at the son of Poseidon.

Once the doors closed, Percy loudly exhaled a breath he did not know he was holding in the first place. His shoulders visibly slumped, and his lips were pursed as he hesitantly glanced at the connecting door of their rooms. Nico did not seem displeased at the idea of being in his company, but the son of Hades had never been an open book.

Nico had been formal. That was never a positive thing. The only instances the son of Hades would converse in a formal manner would either be if he was being evasive, presenting himself like a proper heir should, or he was thoroughly displeased. His formality earlier probably was not intended for the second one, so Nico was either being evasive or thoroughly displeased. At who? Percy could not be certain.

“That about does it,” the seamstress declared, snapping him out of his musings. “Just be careful removing it so it does not get all wrinkled.”
“Thank you, madam,” Percy said, bowing low.

The woman simply patted his back in return before excusing herself from the room. Percy heaved a sigh, running a hand through his disheveled hair before he slowly stripped off the extravagant clothing. Well, he had already requested for Nico to accompany him so there really was no use mulling.

Niccolò di Angelo was the embodiment of the perfect heir, and most of the heirs and suzerains acknowledged that fact. Even Thanatos, his half-brother and the current suzerain of Skotádi, would willingly relinquish his position and the entire district under the capable hands of the younger male. He sympathized with the people, and despite his unease of socializing naturally, he was more than capable of stating what needed to be addressed at the right time.

He could never pass for a commoner, Percy concluded to himself as he observed the younger male closely. Disregarding the weapons that were situated by his sides, there was an aura that surrounded the son of Hades which simply would not allow him to be distinguished as nothing less of a noble or a natural born leader. Regardless of the discriminations the young man faced for being an illegitimate child, there was no denying that he is indisputably a son of Lord Hades.

“Percy,” Nico called out to him, beckoning him close as they weaved through the people. “If you are feeling unwell, we can go back. You’re spacing out. It would be bad if you end up getting lost amongst the crowd.”

“Sorry. I was just… lost in thought,” Percy excused himself, reaching forward before clasping a hand against the younger male’s left wrist. “This is the first time we managed to get out of the palace on our own, and I’m already messing up. I’m really sorry.”

“Stop apologizing,” the son of Hades grunted, trying to retract his arm from the third heir’s grip but to no avail. “What is on your mind? You seemed lost in thought for a moment there.”

“Just… random thoughts,” Percy offered lamely, glancing away when the son of Hades offered a deadpan look. “Are you sure I’m not imposing on you? I was not sure if you wanted to go to town with me, or if I had forced this upon you.”

“You are not imposing on me,” Nico stated, shrugging slightly. “That aside, I prefer this compared to what Will has been subjecting me to for the past three weeks. I am a son of Hades, not the son of
Athena, and it is Thanatos’ duty to learn of all their researches. Not I.”

“I know what you mean,” Percy murmured, remembering the past three weeks that he had been bombarded by the suzerain and the council. “Let’s not discuss those while we are out here. I want us to enjoy our visit while it lasts.”

“While it lasts,” the son of Hades agreed with a nod.

Some locals who recognized the son of Hades kindly greeted the young man, to which Nico politely returned with his own greeting. At first, Percy had been surprised, but considering that Nico did reside once in the district a few years back, it was not questionable that his identity was recognized by the locals. Many had approached them, some bearing gifts – Percy had a taste of Medovukha, and he had to admit that it had a certain appeal, but he did not see himself becoming an avid drinker.

Amongst the sea of jubilant people and a kaleidoscope of colors from the multiple banners and streamers which adorned the town, they watched countless of street performances and participated in some – people requested that the son of Poseidon sing despite Nico’s vehement refusal and warning; they regretted their decision immediately. The embarrassment was well worth it as Percy got to see the son of Hades laugh without any restraint, clearly enjoying himself.

Niccolò di Angelo was nothing short of a prodigy, and Percy was not overstating the fact. The son of Hades possessed an eidetic memory, and Percy was more than satisfied as he observed the people become enamored with the young heir who had easily learned how to play their district instrument, a santouri, in a matter of an hour mostly from observations alone.

By the time they had emerged to a less crowded area of the town, Percy was then carrying a heavy wicker basket with an assortment of packed market goods, endearing trinkets, bouquets of varying yellow flowers, and a whole lot more which he could not collectively classify. There were a few yellow stuffed animals that were peeking at the top – gifts from a few locals for the youngest son of Lord Poseidon. Nico had received a few of his own – gifts for his half-sister and for the current suzerain of Skotádi. The son of Hades had insisted that he and Percy switched – Nico was solely carrying a painted framed portrait of the two of them; a gift from a street painter which Percy eagerly accepted, and declared was to be hung on his bed chambers at Thálassa – but the third heir refused with the valid reasoning that the younger male was much capable of ensuring the safety of the portrait within his grasp.

“Can we go to that jewelry shop? I don’t have a gift for Lady Amphitrite yet,” Percy questioned as he pointed to a quaint store, trying to flex his shoulders inconspicuously. Unfortunately, the son of Hades still noticed his exhaustion but did not state otherwise.
The energy of the people was absolutely contagious, to the point that the broad grin that curled Percy’s lips did not recede despite his exhaustion. The son of Hades expressed his enthusiasm in a much contained manner with a hint of a smile lingering on his lips.

“All right. Is there any specific jewelry that you are looking for?” the son of Hades inquired, matching the son of Poseidon’s pace as they walked side by side.

“Something white. It’s her preferred color, after all,” Percy shrugged, increasing his pace as he felt the strain in his arms. “Do you have any suggestions in mind?”

“Well…”

As soon as they entered the store, the son of Poseidon grunted in appreciation of the dark maple furnishings that were aesthetically pleasing and refreshing to his eyes after the past three weeks. Hastily placing the basket near the glass door, he straightened his posture before groaning softly as he was temporarily relieved of the heavy burden. The son of Hades slowly followed suit, leaning the portrait against the wall so that it was least likely to be damaged.

The owner, an elderly man with sun-kissed hair swept back and warm brown eyes, simply smiled amiably from underneath a beige flat cap and bowed towards their direction, silently offering them privacy. The two heirs respectively offered smiles and bowed respectfully before going about with their current task.

“If you wish to consider the customs of Ílios, then you should know that each jewelry signify individual meanings respectively.” Percy nodded at that, gesturing for the younger male to continue as he circled the store, scanning each piece of jewelry. “It is not by color, but more so where you place the jewelry.”

“Typically, there are four common jewelries purchased on a regular basis: bracelets, earrings, necklaces and rings. Bracelets and earrings are most appropriate as gifts whereas necklaces and rings are specifically purchased for courtship. Bracelets signify ‘eternal companionship’ and is popular amongst the younger generation due to the variations by which they exist,” the son of Hades explained, trailing behind the older male. “Meanwhile, earrings mean ‘I will always listen to you’ or ‘You are in my mind always’.”

Nico gingerly picked up a silver branch cherry blossom earrings with diamond and white pearls, and flashed it to the son of Poseidon. The older male scrutinized the jewelry for a good ten seconds before sheepishly shaking his head. The younger male simply nodded in understanding before placing the accessory back.
“Necklaces originally meant ‘I own you’ but was changed to ‘You are mine’ to make it less… brutish. Random fact, gifting chokers of any dark shades is absolutely prohibited in Ílios. I am not entirely sure of the reason, but I heard from before that it was due to the close association to having a rope – a noose – around one’s neck, and thus are associated to death. Rings, as is acknowledged across the entire Pangaea, is to signify that one is united in wedlock with another, taking into account that the ring is placed upon the right ring finger,” Nico explained, lifting his right hand and pointing at his ring finger for emphasis. “If it is placed on the other fingers, it could signify otherwise and is depending on the person who gifted to you the ring.”

Percy nodded as the son of Hades explained further, stating variations of the four common jewelries and the different meanings behind them. His attention was divided between Nico and the accessories, with him gingerly picking up one piece after another. With what the younger male was explaining to him, his choices were limited to the first two types of jewelries.

The son of Poseidon halted midstep, stopping before a wide table with brooches placed in individual glass casings. The design on the brooches and the casings themselves were much ornate compared to the other jewelry; much ornate than the rings themselves. A topaz zircon and crystal rhinestone brooch of what vaguely resembled as an octopus caught his attention. Upon closer inspection, it was an actual resemblance of the animal, but the manner by which it was designed made it appear as if it were a rosebud instead, with elongated vines. With deft fingers, he slowly lifted the casing before picking the exquisite accessory up.

Turning to the son of Hades, he wordlessly pinned it to the younger male’s coat, oblivious that his gesture silenced the younger male almost instantaneously. Once he had it pinned, Percy pulled back with a satisfied grin, admiring the brooch which Nico now adorned.

“It suits you. Do brooches have a specific meaning too?” Percy questioned with a smile; a smile that dropped mere seconds after when Nico’s aghast expression dawned upon him.

From his peripheral vision, the elderly man who had remained silent since their arrival had a broad knowing smile on his lips. That smile, coupled with the expression on Nico’s features, signified only one thing: he did something that he should not have done, and was likely foolish.

The son of Hades gradually regained his composure, and his first reaction was to hastily unfasten the brooch and to place it back where it originally had been. Nico closed the casing cautiously, his hand lingering atop of it, before he withdrew back.

“You could not have known,” Nico mumbled repeatedly, mostly to himself. Glancing to the old man, the son of Hades apologetically shook his head, and it seemed that whatever miscommunication
existed from his actions was gone; though the elder seemed disappointed.

“Nico, what do brooches mean?” Percy questioned once more in a lowered voice.

The son of Hades almost hesitated before he offered an answer. The surprise in his features was already gone, replaced with a neutral expression.

“Brooches are pinned to the chest area; close to the heart,” Nico slowly explained, moving past the brooches to gaze once more at the other jewelries. “Brooches are not commonly purchased, but they harbor a deep meaning just as much. To the giver, brooches mean ‘You are always in my heart’. Receiving it would mean that the feelings are mutual, and it holds an unspoken response of ‘My heart is yours’. Upon accepting a brooch, one must be gifted in return. That is the custom here in Ílios.”

“It’s a confession of love?” Percy asked, eyes widening.

Nico shook his head.

“It’s a proposal. A marriage proposal,” the son of Hades answered, continuing hastily before the son of Poseidon could respond. “Rings unite two individuals permanently. It is just that… the act of gifting brooches is considered highly as well. It stemmed from one of the cultures that the district adopted, and they considered it as a custom ever since Ílios was established.”

“Oh. So that’s why…” Percy trailed off, glancing at the elder male for just a second before looking away.

“You could not have known. Don’t worry of it,” Nico easily dismissed the topic; a certain tone in his voice clearly stated that he did not want to talk of it any further, probably to spare either of them from further embarrassment.

The son of Hades randomly picked up a set of three pristine white bangles with ocean-blue linings, wordlessly holding them up for Percy to assess. Sea-green eyes met with russet-brown eyes, and there was a clear message in the latter which Percy could not refuse. *Don’t apologize. Don’t talk.* Nico wanted to dismiss the earlier events as if they never occurred.

Suppressing a sigh, Percy shook his head at the accessory, moving on to one set after another as the
son of Hades resumed talking once more. They had settled once more in a comfortable environment, but it was evident that neither of them forgot what had happened.

And when Nico exited from the shop, followed a minute or two after by the son of Poseidon who was struggling with their gifts and purchases in tow, what had happened then was wordlessly and forcibly dismissed.

William Solace was a vermin in Niccolò di Angelo’s life, and nothing could convince the latter otherwise.

The two of them had been contrasting individuals from the start, like how the light contrasted with the darkness. That was how blatant their difference from each other was. William Solace was an overly optimistic individual that was able to freely indulge in a passion he always desired to pursue. William Solace never shed blood on his hands; he was not a killer unlike Niccolò di Angelo.

Niccolò di Angelo, on the other hand, never possessed a passion; not that he could pursue it either way. His entire life was devoted to ensuring the best for his people in his home district. His entire life was never for himself, but for the welfare of others. There was solely one thing he ever did covet in his life, and that was one thing that he knew he could never come to have. After all, that one thing had been the reason why he disappeared from the son of Poseidon’s life for more than two years. Additionally, Niccolò di Angelo, compared to William Solace, was a killer. He had shed blood with his hands for a countless number of times; the metallic viscous liquid was almost a second skin to him.

The only similarity that they possessed was that they were both observant in nature, and that similarity was not so positive in Nico’s perspective. The past three weeks had been hell in the presence of the son of Apollo, solely because the blond male pried incessantly of his relations with the son of Poseidon. We’re friends, Nico simply stated then, and whether his “we’re” meant “we are” or “we were”, the son of Hades did not elaborate further. The more he uttered the response, the more he questioned if he was trying to convince himself into believing it. No matter how Nico uttered the same response over and over again, the son of Apollo would not believe and would simply press once more the next instance that they were in each other’s company.

Percy may like you more than what you think, Nico, Will repeatedly insisted, and it was Nico’s turn to scoff at his statement. That was never a possibility. Only one person had admitted to cherishing him with those feelings, but that was another person never meant to be his. Same-sex relations were considered forbidden in some districts – courtesy of thick-headed suzerains, Nico thought bitterly – and the districts that accept it still faced opposition from people whose firm on the belief that men were solely for women. It did not make the son of Hades feel any better of himself, considering that his attractions had only been to men.
A glossy red apple was wordlessly placed atop of his lap, startling him from his thoughts. Glancing sideways, Nico noticed Percy looking at him with those curious sea-green eyes, most likely wondering what he was brooding on. *That’s unhealthy*, Percy was no doubt chastising him in his mind, as he always did when the son of Hades was caught up with his thoughts.

“How have you liked your stay so far?” Nico casually inquired as he dismissed his former thoughts, redirecting his eyes to the view of the whole town.

They were at the outskirts, with an overview of the capital. The sun was already setting, painting the sky a dyed pomegranate pink that was slowly becoming a chalky mauve. The breeze was cooler at the outskirts, dropping to a temperature that was quite chilling to the bone. Neither minded though, simply basking in the sight of the ever-changing canvas that was of the sky as the sun sets, paving way for stygian darkness.

“I want to come here again without having any business-related matters in tow,” the son of Poseidon admitted, rummaging through the basket and taking out an apple for himself. “But… I enjoyed this day. I really did. Thank you for coming with me.”

“It was my pleasure. Perhaps in the future, you could return here again, but for leisure,” Nico offered, slowly bringing the fruit to his lips before taking a small bite.

“Sure. *We’ll* return here again,” Percy concluded, correcting the son of Hades’ statement partially before taking a bite from his own apple.

They settled once more comfortably in silence, watching as the sun sets and as the town was gradually filled with an array of bedazzling, colorful lights. The stars were slowly peeking in from the sky, glittering like silver sequins in the night. Ílios was truly like a paradise where they could be bothered to be carefree individuals without the burdens of their positions in the society. At that moment, at the outskirts and by each other’s side, they were simply Niccolò di Angelo and Perseus Tzákson; no positions attached to their names.

“I don’t want to go back yet,” Percy breathed from beside him, twisting the bitten fruit in his hands. “Not to the castle, I mean. Reyna did demand you to be there by dinner.”

The son of Hades chuckled at that, knowing that the mere presence of the daughter of Bellona intimidated the son of Poseidon.
“I don’t feel like going back home yet,” Percy clarified, “I mean, I know it could not be helped. Triton would be coming back there eventually. Give and take three months; just as I have been given. But after a few days, we have no actual reason to stay here anymore and we will be back to our duties again.”

“I just don’t want us to go back yet. It’s been a long while since I have been away from my family; from my responsibilities,” Percy said, slightly leaning against the younger male.

“Sooner or later, we would have to go back to your district, Percy. I’m sure that Tyson misses you dearly by now,” Nico pointed out, taking another bite of his fruit and chewing on it slowly.

“I know that,” Percy huffed. “I know that. I’m torn between staying here and just going home. As much as I love this district, that feeling does not extend to Lord Apollo.” And his third son, Percy added mentally, with a bitter note.

The son of Hades chuckled in agreement.

“Well, there is still the future. You – we – could visit once Lord Apollo is on one of his “business” trips,” Nico stated, nudging the older male on the shoulder before gesturing at the scenery before them. “But now, enjoy this.”

“You’re being hopeful,” Percy noted, looking at the younger male. “That a future still exists despite the current events.”

The son of Hades shook his head.

“I am being overweening and self-assuring that I am capable of making the necessary kills if it ensures that there is a future,” Nico admitted without looking at his companion. “I have to be that way if it means that the good people of Ílios – of Skotádi and Thálassa – could secure a good future. I am not fighting for my future; I am fighting for theirs.”

“You are not necessarily alone,” Percy remarked, carefully placing the fruit in his hands atop the pile on the basket. “I am by your side in this. I just wish that Jason…”
“Please,” Nico interjected in a dark tone before he could continue his statement. His eyes hardened along the edges, and Percy could see the immediate coldness that surfaced in them. “Don’t. I don’t want to ruin this day, Percy.”

With that alone, Percy slowly closed his mouth, lips pressing into a firm line. It was not a question that Niccolò di Angelo viciously strayed from any conversations regarding the second son of Zeus, and for good reasons.

With a sigh, the son of Poseidon cautiously grasped the younger male’s shoulders, forcing the latter to face his direction before he rummaged once more inside the basket. Nico watched the third heir warily and with curiosity, wondering what the older male was up to.

“You’re right. Forget that last statement,” Percy murmured, enclosing something on his right fist before turning towards the son of Hades. Without giving the young man a chance to move away, Percy hastily fastened the object in his hand onto the fabric of Nico’s tunic that was above his left breast.

“But I meant what I said: I am on your side in this,” Percy stated firmly. “And I want you to have that to keep that thought in mind.”

Niccolò di Angelo did not have to spare a glance down to check what the object was. The familiar glint of it showed only far too well, and it was with a curious expression that he regarded the son of Poseidon.

“But this…”

“It really suits you well. You can disregard the customs here and treat that as a gift from me to you. And technically, you are not giving me one in return, so the meaning of it should not matter. You have to wear that tomorrow during the ball, or I will sulk the entire time,” the son of Poseidon responded with a cheeky grin before lying down, resting his head nonchalantly against the younger male’s lap.

“What are you doing?” Nico questioned, looking down at his lap with his eyes wide in surprise.

“Resting on my human pillow,” was the innocent response. “We can stay like this for a little longer, right? We would be late for dinner either way, and Reyna would have my head. I want this to be the last thing that I see before she passes judgment onto me. I want this – just us – to last.”
When Percy flashed a contagious smile at him, Nico could not repress one of his own. With a playful shove, he shifted the older male to lie sideways to face the town instead before dropping his hands to his sides, clutching on several grass leaves.

“I’ll tell her we got carried away in the crowd,” the son of Hades murmured, redirecting his attention to the scenery. “I won’t allow you to die on me tonight.”

*Or any other night,* Nico thought to himself, sparing a glance at the topaz zircon and crystal rhinestone brooch that rested atop of his heart. He ignored the subtle fluttering of his heart, dismissing all thoughts as he basked in that moment of solely him and the son of Poseidon as Percy freely laughed at his statement, leaning his head back against his warmth.

And if they were to be chastised later, Nico could care less. For in this moment, he was simply content.

Chapter End Notes

The full names of most of the characters are provided at the link below. That page is subjected to change as the story progresses.
Link: [HERE](#)
Thank you for reading this chapter! Until the next chapter!
Chapter Notes

So I just received a new review from the previous chapter. The embarrassing thing that I did after reading it was cry because I've been feeling unmotivated the past few weeks every time I update with the mentality of "Well, keep looking at the hits. As long as it increases, your story is being read." Seeing that review gave me so much happiness that I just cried for some reason I could not explain. Point of sharing this? I guess I just want you guys to know that my happiness for the past few times has been seeing the hits increase and the rare kudos and subscriptions increase. To see a review as I did for the previous chapter, that brought me the greatest joy for the past chapters that I posted. :)

Sharing aside, this part is an IMPORTANT UPDATE NOTE. I will NOT be able to update for the next three weeks due to exam preparations and the exams itself. And once I started updating again, the update time of each chapters will start to be two weeks' apart so that I could keep the consistency of posting a chapter. I apologize for this, but this semester is said to be the most critical of the current school year. I hope you guys could understand. Anyway, please enjoy this chapter! :)

UPDATE: I decided to update Chapter X this coming weekend. Afterwards, that would be three weeks of inactivity. I decided on this because Chapter X is the last chapter for the district of Lord Apollo. We will be moving to the district of Lord Hermes for a few short chapters for the next ones. So, yes, chapter X will be posted this weekend. Resume of updates afterwards is on the month of July.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Much unhappiness has come into the world because of bewilderment and things left unsaid."
— Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Waking up in the dark to a shadow looming above his head, Percy did the most natural response: grapple in self-defense.

The intruder seemed equally startled; enough for the son of Poseidon to grasp an extended hand and pinning the figure to his bed, his right arm pressing against the jugular notch while his weight completely immobilized the intruder. A choked gasp escaped from below Percy, and the latter struggled to completely regain his consciousness, blinking rapidly to adjust his eyes to adapt to the darkness. His body was still heaving, a light sheen of sweat adorning his exposed torso as adrenaline coursed through his veins. As sea-green eyes slowly adjusted to the surroundings, the figure below the son of Poseidon gradually raised his head, enough for Percy’s arm to slide down from the intruder’s jugular notch.
“Good morning to you too, Perseus Tzákson,” the figure breathed, squirming from underneath his tightening grasp. “I wonder if you tend to get aggressive with the servants for waking you up at daylight, and pinning them to your bed as well.”

“Nico?” Percy breathed, leaning down to take a closer look at the figure below him.

Dark dishevelled locks and amused russet-brown eyes greeted his sight, and the son of Poseidon could not help but groan as he immediately released his grip on the son of Hades.

“By the gods, di Angelo! I could have killed you!” Percy exclaimed, leaning back so as to allow the younger male to sit up.

Nico cautiously raised himself, sitting upright on the bed while flexing his wrists which had been within the son of Poseidon’s grasp only moments ago. Fortunately, upon close observation, there was no discoloration on his skin that would indicate of any formation of bruise.

Nico gazed at his companion with an incredulous look, his posture oozing of confidence as he casually crossed his legs.

“You couldn’t have. After pinning me, it would take two seconds or less for me to remove myself from your grasp and slit your throat. If you had any intention to kill me, it would have taken you three seconds – give and take. I could have killed you with a mere difference of milliseconds,” the son of Hades uttered, and there was a dark gleam in his eyes that only made his words much certain.

The realization that Niccolò di Angelo was every bit capable of taking his life caused a shiver to travel down Percy’s spine. The Nico before him had been under the tutelage of Lord Thanatos and Lord Hades since the day the former suzerain publicly acknowledged the young man as his son. The Nico before him was just as capable of killing as any soldier, and much more. Bloodbringer: the title that was bestowed upon the son of Hades, for he delivered death without mercy. Percy had not seen the son of Hades in the face of a bloodshed, but he had heard of stories about how the young di Angelo was a beast – mechanical and unfeeling. No matter how withdrawn Nico was, Percy simply could not imagine the son of Hades with such lack of… humanity.

“But seriously, I didn’t hurt you, did I?” Percy asked with a frown, leaning close to check at the younger male, especially his wrists.
“I’m fine. My pride was just slightly wounded. To be pinned so easily like that…” Nico trailed off, shaking his head in disappointment of himself. “At least your father and I could be assured that you are capable of defending yourself.”

Percy huffed at the statement, crossing his arms across his bare torso.

“I have always been capable,” the son of Poseidon answered firmly, almost as if challenging the younger male to rebuke his statement. “Why did you wake me up?”

The son of Hades stared at him with a disbelieving expression, and for a second, Percy saw the young man’s right hand twitch above his sheathed dagger.

“Festival. At the town. Today,” the son of Hades stated, both amused and irked at the same time as realization dawned on the third heir’s features. “You had been so insistent yesterday on leaving early in the morning so as not to have any encounters with the arriving guests, yet here you are.”

Apparently, ‘here you are’ translated to being half-dazed and clad in nothing but silk pants. The son of Poseidon tried not to flush at the statement while internally chastising himself for temporarily forgetting the itinerary for the day. It was not intentional by all means, but with Reyna’s piercing glares the night before when they had arrived hours after dinner had him prioritizing his life before the supposed plan. Sure, Nico had offered an excuse for their absence at the table, but that did not elevate the daughter of Bellona’s displeasure in him. Percy could not find it in himself to dislike the maiden; she cared for the son of Hades to an enormous extent though she expressed it as inconspicuous as was possible.

The previous day had been nothing short of marvelous, and Percy would give everything for it to happen once more; to see the genuineness of Nico’s happiness and that spark of life on his eyes. He had more or less forgotten half of what the son of Hades shared with him, Nico surely knew that as well, but he was sure that Nico was pleased that he was attentive to him. And Nico’s pleasure was his and vice versa; had always been since they were seven years younger.

Glancing at the younger male, Percy noted that Nico was already bathed, and casually dressed in a long-sleeved obsidian black tunic and equally dark pants. His polished combat boots faintly glinted under the soft light that managed to seep past the drapes of the poster bed. The blatant difference in their states had the son of Poseidon almost covering his eyes in shame. He had been the one to insist, yet he had been the one that needed to be awaken instead.

“I’m sorry. I was too busy thinking about how to avoid being skewered by Reyna last night that it slipped my mind,” Percy murmured in a low voice as he stood up, walking towards a mahogany
wardrobe. Without much glance at the apparel, the son of Poseidon simply chose a slightly lighter – in terms of color – set of clothing.

“Reyna would not skewer you,” Nico commented nonchalantly, though a smile was playing along his lips at the idea.

“No, Reyna would not skewer me,” the son of Poseidon said in a sarcastic tone though a smile was on his lips.

Percy could only shake his head in disbelief of the amount of faith the son of Hades possessed for the daughter of Bellona.

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By the time they managed to escape from the palace guards’ prying eyes – Leshem “Lee” Ibsen Flecha, the first heir, had repetitively insisted that they venture the district with the protection of the guards, but Percy always neglected it – the sun had already peeked from the horizon, bathing the district with its radiance and warmth. People were already gathered at the streets, and the merriment and lively music escalated as minutes passed by. The people were clothed in varying costumes from different cultures and different ages. Some adorned masks and cloaks as if to add a mystifying ambience to the contagious energy in the air, and the costumes ranged from flamboyant to utterly ridiculous. It was exotic, and with the increasing energy in the air, the son of Poseidon could not help but grin as he guided his companion through the crowd.

A huge crowd gathered at the plaza, merrily dancing and circling the grand fountain while singing hymns to their ancestral gods. Most of them were already heavily drenched, but the dirt on their feet and the coldness against their skin did not seem to bother them as they freely indulged in that high provided by the lively energy. Percy had to admit – he was tempted to participate, but it was with the low growl on his stomach that he withheld himself. The two heirs had yet to eat; Percy had been adamant on leaving the palace as soon as was possible.

“Here, mister!” A child with mocha brown skin, curly cinnamon brown hair and eyes tugged at the fabric of his tunic, extending a dark brown loaf of bread at his direction.

“Is that for me?” Percy inquired with a tilt of his head, kneeling on one knee as he carefully grasped the bread. “What bread is it?”

The young girl nodded enthusiastically, a wide smile across her lips. There was a curious glint in her
eyes at the latter question, and she found herself voicing out her thoughts seconds later.

“Are you not a local, mister?” the young girl asked innocently.

The son of Poseidon shook his head, tugging his companion down to kneel beside him, to which Nico obliged with a repressed grunt.

“We’re both passing by,” Percy offered with a bright smile. It was not completely a lie, but it was not completely true either. “My friend and I wanted to experience one of the celebrations here. I heard they were amazing!”

The child still seemed confused to a certain extent, but she nodded at his explanation. Taking another loaf from the quaint basket that she carried, she pressed it gently against the son of Hades’ hands.

“These are pumpernickel bread. They are really flavorful! My mother baked them,” the young girl declared in a proud voice.

“They must be delicious then,” Percy commented, a fond expression crossing his features. There was also a pained look in his eyes that did not go unnoticed to the son of Hades. “My name is Percy, and this is Nico. May I know your name?”

“Greta,” the child answered readily, bouncing on her feet.

“Thank you for the bread, Greta. We truly appreciate it,” Percy said, shifting his gaze to the son of Hades for a split second before redirecting his attention to the little girl.

“You’re welcome, Mister Percy! Please enjoy the festival too, Mister Nico!” the child exclaimed before scurrying off to the other children gathered at the plaza, distributing goods or simply just chasing one another.

“It’s natural,” Nico stated from beside him as they slowly stood upright. “You would be surprised how they manage to keep things as civilized as possible.”

“This is a good district,” Percy concluded with a smile, raising the staple food slightly to gesture for
the younger man to eat. “These are good people. I’m surprised by their level of enthusiasm, but not how civilized they manage to keep things.”

“It is a good district,” the son of Hades agreed, taking a bite of the food before beckoning the older male to resume moving.

The two heirs walked further into the crowd, munching on the admittedly flavorful – Percy could not discern if he appreciated the taste or not – staple food as they explored the vicinity further. There were well-balanced buffets on every other streets to which the locals freely dined – Percy giddily indulged in the meat cuisines though while the son of Hades observed him in humor; pan-friend minced cutlets, kotlety, and skewered, marinated and grilled meat, shashlyk. Percy noticed that there was a fire cauldron at each site, to which Nico explained of the customs of the locals, which was to offer food for the deities before their own – Percy followed the custom despite Nico stating that it was unnecessary in his place. The nobles practiced it as well, Nico elaborated, but it was common that the servants do so on their behalf before serving meal to the noble family.

Some of the locals noticed their presence – mostly Nico though – and had brought offerings to the two heirs. While Percy had been all too accepting, the son of Hades limited to just taking fruits with the excuse of not wanting to spoil his appetite for the evening. The people seemed genuinely happy that two heirs had graced them with their presence; Percy could not understand their awestruck and worshipping expressions. Nico explained to him of how the heirs of the district and the suzerain himself were treated rightfully superior than the people, and Percy stubbornly pointed out that he was just like them with a position attached to his name. And Percy conversed casually, as the son of Hades remained by his side, to the people as if he were a part of their unspoken family.

They slipped hours thereafter, blending once more into the crowd with the sun glaring down on their backs as it reached its zenith. It was overwhelming, Percy thought to himself as he assessed the number of people who had gathered on the streets. Streamers and confetti littered the grounds, and many still fluttered from above. The merriment was absolutely contagious that the son of Poseidon found himself dragging the younger male towards the crowd.

“Teach me how to dance,” Percy requested, his voice slightly louder so that he would be heard amidst the noise. Various instruments were being played at the same time while the people rejoiced, singing in the loudest of voices.

“I would not know how to do so as well,” the son of Hades answered, leaning close so that he would not have to resort to shouting.

“Then we’ll learn together,” Percy stated firmly, grasping the younger man’s hand in his before pulling him to a crowd gathered in a circle.
They never let go of each other’s hand thereafter, always naturally entwined as if to constantly remind themselves of the presence of the other. They laughed, they sang, and they danced with that contagious merriment coursing through their very veins. If either tripped, the other would simply laugh at the sight and kid for a bit, but amidst the crowd, it was as if they were back to a glorious time from a memory gone by.

Within the cover that the dark alleys provided, identical sky blue eyes observed the young heirs intently, from the natural smiles that adorned their disheveled expressions, to the slight intimacy that was present in the contact of their hands.

“Is this what you wanted, father?”

Knowing sky blue eyes glinted with satisfaction at the sight, lingering only for a few seconds before said man redirected his attention to his son.

“Sometimes, you have to push the stubborn mind continuously – even if it induces ill urges – to give the heart what it truly desires,” the man murmured with a playful smile. “Their fates will always be intertwined – in the past, the present, and what is yet to come.”

“Do you believe that this – whatever lies between them – will eternally last?” the son questioned.

The man shook his head, causing a few stray golden locks to cascade against his eyes.

“Know this, William. We, mortals, are unpredictable creatures with the belief that our fates have been dictated at the moment a soul is breathed onto us. If there is anything that is capable of defying the fates or what has already been set in stone, it is what exists between the son of Poseidon and the son of Hades. That bond; it is unbreakable.”

If any had questioned of the two heirs’ relationship – and many did – they would dismiss the inquiry with a sheepish laugh or a flicker of a hand, but never offered a definitive answer.

Because neither of the two could discern what was actually transpiring, but in the contact of their entwined hands, there was an unspoken yet cherished promise.
To all and singular to whom these words shall come
do the royal family of the district of Ïlios extend warmest greetings.

In the name of His Majesty the suzerain

Lord Apollo,

1st Suzerain of Ïlios.

In the name of His Highness

Lord Leshem Ibsen Flecha,

The first son; heir to the district of Ïlios. Colonel of the Ïliosian Army.

With this present letter,
we request the honor of celebrating,
in thy kind and noble presence
and that of your household,
the 19th birthday of His Highness

Lord William Gallagher Solace,

The third son; heir to the district of Ïlios.

The festivity is to be held on the

6th day of the third month
at the Grand Hall of the Palace of Yâkinthos.

Your presence will be a great honor.

May the blessings of the Moirai be bestowed upon thee.
The invitation was handwritten on a parchment paper in an exquisitely cursive writing, stamp sealed with the symbol of the district on the crimson red clay, and was widely distributed to the third heir’s noble acquaintances and those of family ties. He had read it countless of times, to the point that the invitation had creased along the sides.

Servants scurried all over the palace, each with varied tasks to ensure that the celebration would be of utmost perfection. The Grand Hall was impeccably spotless, the marble floor gleaming from having been freshly waxed and polished. With the excessive amount of gold, yellow, white and silver in the furnishings and decorations, the grand chandelier was only adequately lit so that the sight was rather glowing than blinding. Bouquets of flowers were placed atop wide circular tables with pristine white old-fashioned table skirted cloths; each bouquet comprising of freesia, daffodils, chrysanthemum, white hydrangeas and baby’s breath flowers. Flower garlands of white roses were suspended from the ceiling, and some had been strategically left dangling on pillars. The venue was nothing short of elegant, without being too aesthetically excessive or lacking.

The sun was already setting, and by then, one noble family after another arrived in varying carriages and situated themselves inside the palace, adorned in lavish clothing of frivolous ribbons and lacy frills. He had to inwardly scorn at the sight. Gatherings such as this served solely one purpose for nobles and their families.

“For someone who is at a celebration, you don’t seem too pleased?”

He turned to the direction of the voice, and a natural smile immediately settled on his lips as he acknowledged the approaching son of Apollo.

“Michael,” he breathed, extending his right hand to offer a handshake.

“Jake,” Michael greeted in return, clasping the hand in a firm grip and shaking it once before releasing his hold. “It’s refreshing to see you not covered in grease for once.”

The man, Jake, heartily laughed at the comment as he casually brushed his tawny brown hair back, disheveling it in the process.

“I feel clean for once,” Jake agreed just as he gestured at his ensemble. “Despite my status as an heir of Fotiá, only now do I feel like I actually belong to that group.”
“Well, we heirs have to stick together. I know Lord Hephaestus tend to keep all of his children on their feet, but you need not be a stranger,” the son of Apollo teased, his shoulders relaxing as he regarded the other man. “You and Will are so alike that it’s frustrating how the both of you are not betrothed yet.”

The son of Hephaestus shrugged at the statement, a fond smile curling his lips at the aforementioned name.

“Will is betrothed to his passion to be involved in the medical field, and I in innovation. I don’t believe that either of us could be committed to each other when we are much inclined on such endeavors,” he responded.

A servant passed by, carrying a tray of wine glasses, to which the son of Hephaestus claimed two, casually offering one to the son of Apollo. Michael grasped the delicate glass, pinching the stem between his right index finger and thumb, before he twisted it slightly in his hand.

“Wonderful. I have two emotionally constipated pairs in my presence then,” the son of Apollo stated in a monotonous voice, suppressing a sigh as he gratefully sipped on his red wine.

“Oh?” Jake breathed, arching a brow out of curiosity. “Care to share names?”

The son of Apollo flashed a Cheshire smile against the rim of his glass, his chocolate brown eyes gleaming with sheer amusement at the change of topic. Not that it was not unwelcomed; it was much interesting, admittedly.

“Perseus Tzákson, son of Lord Poseidon, and Niccolò di Angelo, son of Lord Hades,” Michael supplied, lowering the glass from his lips before beckoning the man to him until they were leaning side-by-side against a wall near the golden grand staircase.

“I know Percy,” Jake stated with a contemplative look, crossing his free arm over his chest as he fiddled with his wine glass. “But I have never encountered a son of Lord Hades before.”

“They are not in alliance with our districts. It is only natural that they would not take a risk by sending their heirs, despite how capable they are in decimating our numbers on their own. Especially Niccolò di Angelo.”
“The Bloodbringer,” Jake murmured, nodding in agreement.

The second son of Hades was merciless, according to the countless tales that had been told across the districts. No defiant and foolish man ever lived to see daylight in the presence of the young heir. The young man indisputably exuded of intimidating power, attributed to a strict tutelage in wielding a sword which could only be provided by an equally intimidating man: Lord Hades.

The son of Hephaestus, as well as each and every one of his half-siblings, was educated of the events that transpired in the rebellion decades ago, and the casualties on the opposing sides. Thus, he knew just what Lord Hades, the left-hand man of Lord Zeus who single-handedly decimated the opposition forces under the command of Lord Kronos, was capable of.

“What is he like?” Jake inquired after a few moments of silence. “What does he look like?”

“Easily the most intelligent person I have ever encountered, and that means a lot, considering that I am acquainted with the children of Lady Athena.” Michael mused, a small smile curling his lips. “Though di Angelo has an eidetic memory, the man really perseveres and is eager to learn.”

“Contrary to popular belief, he is not heartless,” the son of Apollo added, looking pointedly at his companion. “There is no one with a greater sense of loyalty and unconditional love to the people of his district and his cherished ones than that young man.”

“However, he is truly a prodigy at wielding weapons. I observed a sparring session of his once; he strikes to kill. His movements are precise, and the way he maneuvers himself makes his action seem effortless. I would go as far as to say that not even my father would be foolish enough to challenge him to a duel,” Michael continued, lifting the wine glass to his lips once more. “As per his features, I have never been the best at describing elaborately; I would not do justice on him. However, it would be of your best interest if you refrain from expressing too much curiosity on him.”

“And why is that?” the son of Hephaestus inquired, arching a brow out of curiosity.

Michael smiled knowingly as his lips pressed against the rim of his glass. He disliked the idea of meddling with what was not his business, but that did not necessarily mean that he would be oblivious when others did so. If his father – and his younger brother, by extension – believed that they were being discreet with their meddling, they were absolutely wrong. Discreet; they were not. Cunning; begrudgingly so.
“I told you: emotionally constipated pair. You should get going, Jake. The herald will announce your name in a while,” Michael simply uttered, excusing himself before the man could question further as he made his way towards his family.

No, Michael mentally shook his head. Not his entire family, for the rascals are scattered across the Grand Hall, preoccupied with their respective business; their duties as gracious hosts and hostesses. Politely greeting the gathered guests as he sauntered past them, the son of Apollo cautiously grasped the shoulder of one of his sisters.

“Everything all right, Kayla?” the son of Apollo asked his sister.

The maiden frowned slightly at the inquiry, her eyes shifting disdainfully across the vicinity for a few seconds before resting once more on her older brother’s concerned chocolate brown eyes. It was evident that the young lady was displeased of the gathering – her displeasure much directed to the invited guests – but her perfectly painted lips remained sealed out of respect for the celebrant.

She was every bit beautiful, adorning a simple yet elegant white flowing dress with embroidered snowflake patterns along the waistline and sides to accentuate her curves, but there was a weariness in her expression that not even her makeup could conceal.

“I hate gatherings such as this, Michael. You are well aware of that, and that is a mutual understanding between us siblings,” Kayla responded softly, in a hushed voice. “But that is not why I am displeased at the moment.”

The son of Apollo arched his brow, silently gesturing for his sibling to continue with her train of thought. The maiden seemed to be at complete unease, a frown permanently etched onto her beautiful features as her eyes shifted uneasily.

“She’s here. That witch is here,” Kayla whispered just as the sound of a heralding trumpet resounded throughout the room.

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A middle-aged man of short stature, adorned in burgundy and gold surcoat tunic tabard, was situated at the top of the grand staircase. He was standing at the far left side, his head held high with pride and dignity as his piercing black eyes addressed each guest sternly, demanding utmost silence. When the guests quieted down, the man slowly took a deep breath in… a deep breath out… before
announcing in an orotund voice:

“Entering with pride and honor, the founding suzerain of our beloved district, Ílios – the House of Apollo: His Majesty Lord Apollo.”

All the guests looked up as the said man emerged from the dark hallway before standing at the top of the staircase, addressing the gathered guests with a charming smile curling his lips. The suzerain adorned a sand-colored renaissance royal court doublet made of a heavy brocade fabric and sporting a row of antiqued buttons. His golden laurel wreath crown was nestled atop his wavy blond locks that were delicately swept back, a few stray stands framing his features perfectly.

The man recognized the looks that were directed at his direction; he had lived, and possessed experience worth of decades to discern what those looks were. Dismissing them with nonchalance, he slowly descended the grand staircase, sauntering towards his throne and seating himself appropriately and with the finesse of a true noble.

“The Birthday Celebrant: His Highness, Lord Leshem Ibsen Flecha – The first Son of the 1st suzerain of Ílios; First heir to the succession and the future 2nd suzerain of Ílios.”

The man was almost an exact carbon copy of his father if not for the manner which he styled his hair that was swept neatly to the side. His sky blue eyes glimmered with kindness, yet there was a hardness in them that reflected authority. A professional smile was plastered across his lips as he descended the stairs slowly, never taking his eyes off of the guests, as if measuring their worth with his eyes alone.

“The Birthday Celebrent: His Highness, Lord William Gallagher Solace – The third Son of the 1st suzerain of Ílios; Third heir to the succession.”

The celebrant slowly emerged from the hallway, that carefree smile as always was present on his lips. His attire was simple, yet exquisite as it was composed of a pristine white tunic underneath a reversible gold and brick doublet made with two contrasting jacquard fabrics of the shades gold, sage and burgundy. His carob-brown pants clung nicely to the shape of his legs and a pair of brown leather boots covered up to his shin.

“By the grace of our patron deity, Sol, the presence of our comrades under the Sýmfono Symmachías are amongst us. Entering with pride and honor, accompanying Lord William Gallagher Solace: His Highness, Lord Jacob Rasmus Mason – The second son of the 1st suzerain of Fotiá, House of Hephaestus; Second heir to the succession.”
Said man emerged shortly after, casually offering his hand to the third son of Apollo. With an amused smile, Will grasped onto the offered hand, permitting himself to be aided as they descended the flight of stairs.

“His Highness, Lord Perseus Tzákson – The third son of the 1st suzerain of Thálassa, House of Poseidon; Third heir to the succession.”

Most nobles arched their brows at the introduction; most of them were rather informed of the tragic demise of Thálassa’s second heir, Lord Theseus. Rightfully, the man should have been addressed as the second heir, but at the tone of the herald, there was no mistake in his declaration. The son of Poseidon did not seem perturbed as he slowly emerged from the dark hallway, surety and confidence exuding from his presence with every step that he took.

Michael could not help but quiver the slightest bit as he took in the appearance of the son of Poseidon.

Utterly gorgeous.

Devastatingly attractive.

The women were absolutely captivated, awestruck and delighted with the sight that was being presented to them. From the side of the room, Michael had to hide his amused smirk as he lifted his half-empty wine glass to his lips. The son of Poseidon had yet to venture to foreign districts since a few years back and his presence before the nobles of Ílios was unfamiliar, thus the unlikely possibility that the gathered nobles would have recognized the third heir of Lord Poseidon. From the side of the room, he critically observed the varied reactions of the guests and found himself laughing internally at the accuracy of his predicted response.

At the mere mention of the name and the title of Perseus, the noblemen and women immediately perked with curiosity and intrigue. And in Michael’s mind, the likelihood of their objectives being tangential to one another was undeniably high – be introduced to the young heir, and place claim on him if he was unwedded, which was Percy’s case. When Perseus Tzákson emerged from the hallway, adorned in a full pristine white ensemble that embodied of his being above all of the nobles, they locked onto him as if he were a priceless prey. Not that it was inevitable – Percy was a young and devastatingly winsome adult with features that practically beckoned for attention and demanded to be worshipped. True – Michael had to softly chuckle – Percy was a prey amidst the sea of power-crazed nobles. But, in the presence of the son of Hades, those mere nobles were but dirt on the soles of the young heir’s feet.
When the son of Poseidon did not descend the stairs and approached the herald instead, there were hushed whispers amongst guests. Whatever it was that the son of Poseidon uttered, the herald seemed quite at unease, but reluctantly nodded just before the third heir silently stood to the side.

“… Accompanying Lord Perseus Tzákson – His Highness, Lord Niccolò di Angelo – The second son of the 1st suzerain of Skotádi, House of Hades; Second heir to the succession. Ambassador of Skotádi.”

The whispers hushed at that, followed by a deafening silence.

A son of Hades was in their district?

The announced name was undoubtedly the second son, the child that was raised in bloodshed, for the whole district was aware of the name of the first and sole legitimate son of Lord Hades – Lord Thanatos – who had succeeded over the district a few years back. They had an established treaty with Skotádi, but neither side pressed further towards an alliance.

Their expressions varied from incredulity, panic and unease. What was an heir of Hades doing in their district? Why was the high position of being an ambassador of a major district bestowed upon a young man?

A few seconds of uncomfortable silence passed by before a young man emerged from the hallway, and the silence prolonged further as the guests unabashedly ogled and beheld on the presence of the son of Hades.

By the gods, it was as if a deity humbled them with his presence.

From beside the celebrant, the son of Hephaestus could not help but agree with Michael’s former words as he respectfully admired and marveled at the young man atop of the grand staircase. Indeed, neither Michael nor anyone could do justice in depicting the features of the son of Hades. More so now, perhaps, as the young man presented his attire so gorgeously, yet with the pride and dignity of a prim and proper heir.

Niccolò di Angelo was dressed in an immaculate and pristine white silver binding medieval jacket, and a white vest with black rhinestone buttons. The jacket had exquisite silver linings with golden
embroideries of laurels at the notch lapels. Atop his jacket was a one-shoulder cream gold brocade cape that fluttered with each step that he crossed to stand beside the son of Poseidon. Those russet brown eyes were the most exotic that the son of Hephaestus had laid his eyes upon; eyes that were emphasized by his glistening raven locks. His pale complexion was accentuated by his ensemble, making him appear so surreal.

No, Jake corrected himself mentally. Both sons of Poseidon and Hades appeared surreal under the soft light from the grand chandelier. Their ensembles complemented each other, as if they were specifically sewn for the two heirs and them alone.

In his peripheral vision, the son of Hephaestus noticed the third son of Apollo beaming triumphantly and with a sense of overwhelming pride while gazing at the respective heirs on top.

And when Percy slipped his hand to Nico’s left hand, grasping it as if it were the most delicate thing in the world, Jake understood clearly what Michael had meant mere moments ago. There was a fondness in those sea-green eyes that was difficult to discern, but not impossible. In the years that he had been acquainted with Perseus Tzákson, he had never seen those eyes so full of life or with that breathtaking fondness in them. Yet, contrasting to the older male, russet-brown eyes were filled with an unspoken uncertainty as the son of Hades permitted himself to be escorted down the flight of stairs. Jake did not miss the brooch that was partially covered by the cape, and he was aware of what it signified in this district: A proposal.

Searching across the room, his eyes met chocolate brown eyes, and they seemed to mutually convey the same message.

Emotionally constipated, indeed.

“May the deities of Palaiá Rómi and Paliá Elláda bestow countless of blessings upon you.”

William Gallagher Solace was kneeling before his father as the man conducted the ceremony. A silver aspersorium with blessed water was on the young man’s hands, presented before the suzerain. The nobles all had their heads lowered, wordlessly offering their respects to the deities as their suzerain called upon their blessings.

“Blessed be thee by the goddess Hygieia,
Daughter of the god Vejovis and the goddess Epione,
Benevolent goddess of health.
Bestow your protection and power unto thy child.

“Blessed be thee by the goddess Minerva,
Daughter of the god Jupiter and the goddess Metis,
Benevolent goddess of wisdom.
Bestow your protection and power unto thy child;
Enlighten the irresolute mind for the time that is to come.

“Blessed be thee by the goddess Laetitia,
Benevolent goddess of joy, gaiety and celebration.
Bestow your protection and power unto thy child;
May the future behold boundless happiness and secure the purity of thy soul.

“Blessed be thee by the goddess Abundantia,
Benevolent goddess of abundance and prosperity.
Bestow your protection and power unto thy child.”

Lord Apollo dipped the silver aspergillum onto the stoup, tapping it once on the rim before sprinkling the blessed water around his son. The water did not touch any part of his body, but rather surrounded the area where he knelt. The nobles slowly raised their wine glasses, lifting it for a solid ten seconds as they uttered a murmured prayer, before taking a calculated sip.

“Bless thee sweet child of yours, William Gallagher Solace.
May the blessings of the Moirai befall upon thee.
Bestow your protection and power unto thy child, William Gallagher Solace.”

The suzerain handed the aspergillum to his first son whom wordlessly clasped onto the material. Kneeling before the young man, Lord Apollo dipped three of his fingers lightly onto the water, carefully raising it before brushing his fingertips against the younger man’s forehead, the fabric close to his heart, and his left and right shoulders respectively. Once that was accomplished, he arose once more.
“May the blessings and protection of Sol befall upon thy child. Evlogiménos na eíste.”

“Evlogiménos na eíste,” chorused all the people present.

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The ceremony ended, and the party started once more with a much livelier energy as the suzerain and his children entertained the invited nobles like proper hosts and hostesses. Trays of wine glasses emerged one after another, as were prepared local cuisines, evenly distributed and placed across countless circular tables on extortionate porcelain wares. Noblemen and noblewomen occupied the dance floor, their movements practiced and graceful as they swayed in tune to the upbeat classical music.

A slightly greater number of nobles remained seated with their family, customarily greeting other noble families and exchanging discussions regarding politics, business, tittle-tattles and more. The suzerain and his children catered to that particular crowd more, seating and begrudgingly immersing to such troublesome discussions with professional smiles plastered convincingly across their features.

The celebrant himself was not excused from his duties, maneuvering from one table to another, often lingering longer than what was intended for idle chat, and in the worst cases, implications of proposals. Will was becoming more irked with each not-so subtle implications, but the fact that he was managing to cover his frustrations with his cheery disposition was rather commendable.

The three heirs – namely the sons of Poseidon, Hades and Hephaestus – were currently seated close to the balcony, avoiding the guests as much as was possible, with the presence of sons of Apollo to temporarily entertain them.

For some reason that the son of Hades could not discern, the daughter of Bellona was in the company of the daughters of Lord Apollo, associating solely with them while simultaneously distancing herself from the leering eyes of most noblemen. As if sensing a gaze on her profile, piercing black eyes scanned through the vicinity before meeting directly with his eyes. Reyna, for some reason, assured him with a nod, which he simply claimed in silence.

“How are you liking the celebration thus far?” Michael inquired, looking pointedly at the son of Poseidon.
Percy frowned at the inquiry before cautiously inclining his head to a group of children that were merrily dancing to the upbeat tune, though clumsily so. There was a clear separation between the two dancing crowds with the basis of their respective age groups.

“Well, aside from the ones having… heated discussions at the balcony…” Nico and Jake almost choked at the statement. They could discern said discussions as well, and it was rather for the best to tune out said heated discussions, especially when they became much too intimate to deserve attention. “Only the children seem to be truly enjoying themselves.”

“You get used to such things after coming to attend many,” Will commented with an understanding expression as he stood behind the seated son of Hephaestus, his hands resting atop broad shoulders. “But, yes. Not all of the gathered nobles are acquainted with me. To be frank, the only reason why they were invited was so as to not cause them to believe that there is disparity in treatment.”

“I cannot imagine how you could truly come to enjoy your birthday celebration if you are still being tied to… obligations,” Percy stated, slowly lifting a slice of Beef Stroganoff to his lips, relishing the sour yet flavorful taste that assaulted his taste buds.

“Nonetheless, happy birthday, Solace,” Nico murmured, raising his eyes to meet vibrant sky-blue irises. “Likewise with what Percy stated, I do hope that you do enjoy your birthday celebration thoroughly.”

“Today is for formalities. We always go on afternoon picnics the day after the actual celebration; just us siblings. You three are more than welcome to join,” Michael stated with a mischievous smirk. “Though I do not need to state that to Jake, do I?”

The son of Hephaestus simply rolled his eyes in response which earned him a low chuckle from the second son of Apollo. Politely excusing himself, Michael catered to the rest of the guests, flashing polite smiles and greetings from one table to another.

“I will see you two at the dance floor,” the celebrant commented in a playful tone, looking pointedly at the sons of Poseidon and Hades respectively. “But for now, I see a certain son of Aphrodite that I need to greet.”

“Say hello to Mitchell for me,” Jake requested with a smile, patting one of Will’s hands against his shoulders, dismissing the celebrant.
With a broad grin, the third son of Apollo politely excused himself, walking away from the small group as he followed suit to his older brother.

“Poor saps. They cannot even get a rest on their supposed special day,” the son of Hephaestus commented, shaking his head, before he redirected his attention to the son of Poseidon. “Well, it has been a while, Percy. What brings you two here to Ílios?”

Jake gestured to the two heirs.

“The gathering,” the son of Poseidon answered automatically, laughing a second thereafter when his companion arched a brow in disbelief at his response. “I kid. Father asked me to conduct business and handle matters here at Ílios. Our stay was just extended slightly because I wanted to experience how a celebration here is like. We are already leaving in a few days. How about you?”

“Partly the celebration, and partly your brother’s presence at our district,” Jake honestly responded, poking once at the food on his plate before placing his utensils at the side. “As soon as I received an invitation to Will’s birthday celebration, I bailed out on my family and left them to handle the demon. Leo requested that I bring leftovers for compensation of my ‘betrayal’, as he so puts it.”

The two heirs laughed at that, though the son of Hades remained silent throughout the exchange. Percy noticed the younger man’s discomfort, for he immediately fixed a polite smile on his lips as he pointedly glanced back and forth between his companions, hoping the son of Hephaestus would understand what he was trying to get across. Fortunately, Jake did, as he extended a hand towards the son of Hades shortly after clearing his throat.

“Where are my manners?” Jake softly chastised himself just as Nico cautiously eyed the extended hand. “My name is Jacob Rasmus Mason, second son of Lord Hephaestus, Lieutenant Colonel of the Fotían Army. But please, call me Jake.”

“Niccolò di Angelo. Second son of Lord Hades, Lieutenant Colonel of the Skotádian Army and First Lieutenant to the 1st division of the army of Thálassa,” Nico murmured, firmly grasping the hand and shaking it once before releasing it. “… ‘Nico’ would suffice.”

Instead of receiving shock from the latter part of the introduction about the young man being involved with another district’s army, the son of Hephaestus seemed genuinely intrigued instead, his hands folding underneath his chin as he inclined his head instinctively and out of curiosity.
“A fellow Lieutenant Colonel. It’s always a pleasure to meet one under much peaceful circumstances. Though I believed it was mentioned as well that you are the ambassador of your district,” Jake murmured, a sincere smile on his lips as he regarded the son of Hades with respect. “Is this your first visitation on this district?”

The young man slowly shook his head, gingerly placing his utensils at the side as well before sitting upright.

“I officiated the signing of treaty between Skotádi and Ílios. That is why I was appointed as the ambassador. But I only personally conduct business with our ally districts since then, and leave business matters with foreign districts to anyone who Lord Thanatos chooses to appoint. I have visited before, though did not indulge myself in participating at the celebrations,” Nico answered in a modulated voice. “Ílios was the first district that I visited that was not in alliance with us. It had been… a good experience.”

“That is quite a feat,” Jake commented, impressed with the fact that something significant was assigned to the hands of a young man. “Well, I formally extend an invitation for you and Percy to visit Fotiá, if that is the case. I have heard from Michael that not only are you eager to learn, but you have an eidetic memory as well. We could use fresh input, and if I could teach you how to forge your own weapon by any chance, that would already be an accomplishment on my part, seeing as even Percy does not – by the life of him – show interest in it.”

“Not a genius,” Percy huffed playfully, not the least bit offended at the comment.

“I would keep that in mind,” Nico said, a natural smile stretching his lips as he accepted the invitation. “It would be a good experience. Thank you for the invitation.”

“No problem,” Jake returned the smile with a grin of his own. “Though, forgive my curiosity, but you don’t seem pleased that people would acknowledge you as the rightful ambassador of your district.”

“Names and positions in society… they simply possess powers,” the son of Hades stated firmly, his lips curling downwards in displeasure as he recalled of how he was introduced earlier. “In this world, people would desperately vie for your attention, in that sick hope that they could be associated to you. That is how nobles climbed up in society. And I would rather not be involved in that mess.”

“I do not know what Lord Apollo was thinking for declaring my position to his district so bluntly, but I can only hope that these nobles would choose not to believe of it,” Nico stated truthfully.
“We can always request for Michael or Lee to ‘talk’ to their father, if you wish,” Jake offered, his grin broadening. “If there is anyone who can tame Lord Apollo to some certain extent, it would be those two.”

They settled back into a comfortable silence, with Percy and Jake lightly conversing of each other’s daily lives. Occasionally, the son of Hades would add his input or two, but the young man opted most on listening as the older males exchanged various stories.

Jacob Rasmus Mason. The man was clearly knowledgeable though he had an unusual tendency of being quite jittery as he occasionally fiddled with his silver fork. Nico supposed that it was due to the fact that as a son of Lord Hephaestus, he was constantly exposed to forging and building machineries and complex materials that it was difficult to remain put on a position for far too long. The son of Hephaestus was undeniably a modest man who was rather accommodating with each topic that he would decidedly permit himself to engage on.

Niccolò di Angelo was not foolish; the man was withholding himself from delving onto personal questions, and he appreciated the consideration. Though he conversed so naturally, each and every word he would utter was thoroughly calculated, most likely with the intention of avoiding any matter that might provoke the son of Hades.

“You and Percy are childhood friends?” Jake inquired at some point, his interest evident with the way his eyes gleamed underneath the grand chandelier. “What was Percy like? Was he rambunctious?”

Percy stood up just seconds ago, approaching the main table so as to take another glass of wine for the younger male, temporarily leaving the sons of Hades and Hephaestus at the table. Niccolò di Angelo had to chuckle at the assumption; a chuckle that eventually evolved into soft laughter as the son of Poseidon managed to hear the last two statements, and was currently sulking and mumbling of how he was being unjustly targeted. Though at the son of Hephaestus inquiry, dozens of fond memories surfaced onto Nico’s mind, subconsciously causing a fond expression to cross his russet-brown eyes.

“He was,” Nico admitted after a while, still lost in thought. “He would always get us both into trouble, and I would have to explain and get ourselves out of trouble at the same time.”

“Always a handful, Percy. Really,” Jake teased, laughing when the son of Poseidon stabbed his sautéed beef with vehemence in return.
Percy could not come to be displeased of the playful comments, despite that the son of Hephaestus was clearly targeting him. He could not come to express displeasure; not when Niccolò di Angelo seemed to be thoroughly enjoying himself with their exchange of personal stories and rather absurd discussions. Simply seeing Nico flash a smile quenched his desires to bicker with the son of Hephaestus.

Niccolò di Angelo looked absolutely hideous in bright colors. That was an established fact between the two heirs that they mutually agreed upon after... certain circumstances. Certain circumstances being Percy getting viciously whacked on the head upon howling in laughter at the sight of Nico wearing a golden yellow tunic. He could not help it; Nico was not a person with a cheery disposition, so the color naturally clashed with his personality. But the color white...

He had a brief glimpse of Nico’s ensemble when they were at the dark hallway. But when the son of Hades fully stepped forward, exposing himself completely, Percy could only be... captivated. Nico had grown into a fine, young man; the kind of individual Percy believed that his biological mother would undoubtedly be proud of. The son of Hades carried the attire with such dignity and pride that reflected his proper upbringing. It fitted him like a glove, and it accentuated him so gorgeously that Percy could not take his eyes away; not that he had any desire to do so.

Angel.

Tyson had called the son of Hades an angel once. And when Niccolò di Angelo stepped forth and was illuminated by the soft lights overhead, Percy could come to believe that an actual angel had descended upon the room to specially grace them with his presence.

And the sight of that brooch on his chest, his brooch…

“You have to get out of here. Get some food or dance – I don’t care – but spare yourselves.”

Michael approached the three heirs once more, a forced smile plastered across his features and his posture seemed tense. His chocolate brown eyes were silently seething; to whom it was directed, neither of them could be certain.

“Everything all right, Michael?” Jake inquired, gesturing for the son of Apollo to take a sit.

But the son of Apollo did not budge from his position, simply looking pointedly at the sons of Poseidon and Hades as he repeated his statement once more.
“Jake, that witch is here. I don’t know how she got in; I’m positive that she was not invited. I don’t know how she got in – maybe she forced Mitchell to bring her along – but these two better get out of here,” Michael stated, keeping his voice low so as not to attract any attention, though he repeatedly made emphasis.

Percy and Nico still seemed confused, though Jake seemed to understand the situation immediately as his features paled slightly. But whatever he was going to say was effectively cut off as manicured fingers glided smoothly against the doublet of the son of Apollo, before firmly digging onto the fabric.

“Lord Michael,” a honeyed voice, definitely of a female, breathed slowly. “I didn’t know you are acquainted with the sons of Poseidon and Hades.”

A tall and glamorous woman with glossy dark hair in ringlets and a perfect makeup emerged from behind the son of Apollo, her warm brown eyes slowly looking over the occupants of the table. She adorned a scarlet ruffles beaded ball gown with a plunging neckline, exposing a decent amount of her cleavage to the naked eye. Was this appropriate? Percy had to question as he averted his eyes out of modesty in place of the young lady’s lack thereof.

“The son of Hades is a close friend of William’s. The son of Poseidon is his companion,” Michael answered stiffly, moving to the side so that her hand would slide past his shoulders completely.

“Interesting,” the woman murmured, a saccharine sweet smile curling her lips before she extended her hand towards the son of Poseidon. “My name is Drew Tanaka. Daughter of Lady Aphrodite, and the second heir to the district of Agápi. It is a pleasure to meet you, Lord Perseus.”

“Likewise, Lady Drew,” Percy murmured, leaning forward and, with the slightest brush, dragged his lips at the back of her hand out of courtesy. A pleased expression passed through her eyes; one which did not disappear even when the son of Poseidon immediately released her hand.

If the other three heirs noticed her lack of respect as she blatantly ignored the two, neither of them commented as she boldly seated herself on the spare chair beside the son of Poseidon. Jake’s eyes inconspicuously drifted to the son of Hades who was silently consuming his meal, an impassive expression on his features once more.

“Are you not supposed to be with Lord Mitchell, Lady Drew? I was informed that William invited him,” the son of Apollo stated, allowing the venom to drip in his voice.
“Mitchell is with Lord William,” Drew stated with disdain, her hands folding underneath her chin as she batted her eyelashes at the son of Apollo. She gestured to a young man at the other side of the room who was enthusiastically conversing with said son of Apollo. “I am here to enjoy the party, as a guest should. Isn’t that just right, Lord Perseus?”

Said man paused from his meal, confusion crossing his features as he glanced at the young maiden. At the flirtatious look that she casted at his direction, he visibly stiffened, at least to his male companions, before he cleared his throat.

“I… Yes, I suppose so,” was the only response the young heir could manage before he shifted in his seat, moving his chair considerably closer to the son of Hades who remained ignorant of the exchange.

“You should continue with your business, Michael,” Drew commented finally, flashing him another sickly sweet smile.

Michael growled at the statement, his eyes narrowing into slits and his fists clenching painfully to the point that his knuckles protrude against his skin. No matter what façade the witch was pulling, he could easily see through it. *Mind your own business*, was what she clearly intended to say.

Despite the reassuring glance that Jake casted at his direction, he was hesitant to move from his position upon noting the son of Hades’ unnaturally impassive expression. As if sensing his gaze, russet-brown eyes lifted to meet his, and the son of Hades offered a curt nod at his direction before resuming his meal.

“So… Lord Perseus…” Drew breathed his name, inching closer as she leaned forward once the son of Apollo departed from the table. “I have never recalled seeing you in any gatherings that I have been. I am sure I would have remembered such a handsome face, if that was the case.”

“I am here on an official business,” was the son of Poseidon’s curt reply.

“So much like my future brother-in-law, Lord Jason of the House of Zeus. Though, he has been betrothed to my sister and will be marrying her in a few months’ time. Pity. Young lords such as both of you should enjoy yourselves more in gatherings such as this,” the maiden gestured at the dance floor. “Bask in the *pleasures* of life while you still have the opportunity.”
She grasped his wine glass from the table, her free hand dragging across the rim before she slowly sipped at the red wine. Percy did not appreciate her blatant advances, and by the manner by which Jake was gripping his utensils while choosing to ignore her, neither did the son of Hephaestus.

“Who knows, maybe you would find your future consort here,” she implied as she flashed an alluring smile at his direction, her head inclining to the side as she slightly bared the tanned column of her neck. “Oh, idle chatter aside, I am not here to make discussions. Would you care for a dance, Lord Perseus?”

“I am not looking for a consort. And I am here with my partner. I hope you could respect that,” Percy stated firmly, a frown marring his features as he regarded the maiden critically. He was surprised at the mention of his other childhood friend, and the fact that Jason was actually betrothed to another – a daughter of Aphrodite nonetheless – and was to be wedded.

The daughter of Aphrodite glanced disdainfully at the son of Hades who simply ignored her presence as he slipped bits of pomegranate past his thin lips. Her eyebrows arched at the sight of the exquisite brooch, and her expression contorted with disgust and disbelief in a matter of seconds.

“Please, you could do so much better,” she stated with an amused expression, fiddling with a stray lock of her hair as he bit her lower lip enticingly. “After it was rumored that you were not betrothed to Lady Annabeth, the least you could do is to choose a better female consort—”

A sharp clang cut her statement as the son of Hephaestus forcibly dropped his utensils onto his plate, his eyes that were darkened with displeasure now glinted dangerously as his eyes glared at the daughter of Aphrodite. There were countless of reasons why he despised the woman, aside from the fact that she scorned at his close non-romantic relationship with Will. But he tolerated her presence as he should for he was properly raised to conduct himself as an actual heir to a district should. However, regardless of the fact that they were almost supposed to be related due to the relationship of their parents, there was a limit to how much he could tolerate.

When she stated the name of a certain daughter of Athena, and of Percy deserving a better female consort, Jake immediately sensed a drastic decline in the son of Hades’ mood. Though Niccolò di Angelo remained silent, the subtle lowering of his head and the manner by which he shifted it so that his hair would cover his eyes were enough indication that the young man would rather not listen to the conversation. She was breaching a topic that was too fragile to discuss.

Drew just crossed the line when she insulted the young heir in his presence – in their presence. And if the daughter of Aphrodite were to look close enough at the son of Poseidon, she would have noticed how those sea-green eyes immediately became icy cold as soon as she had crossed the line.
“I think you should go, Drew,” Jake stated in a cold voice.

The daughter of Aphrodite arched one of her brows mockingly, though the sickly sweet smile on her lips remained.

“I believe I was having a discussion here with Lord Perseus, Jacob,” she stated in a tone as if to provoke him to challenge her. “I am surprised that you have the audacity to interrupt our discussions.”

“I believe the term is meddling, my young lady. And equally, I am surprised that you have the audacity to insult any of my valued guests. Especially in my household.”

Jake raised his head in mild surprise as the suzerain stepped forward from out of nowhere. Or perhaps not, the son of Hephaestus corrected himself as he glanced about the room, noticing the countless pairs of eyes that were looking at their direction. Even the children of Lord Apollo had to pause on their ways, the expressions on their faces varying as they regarded what was taking place on the table. Or at least, what they assumed was taking place on the table as they were out of hearing distance. From the corner of his eyes, the son of Hephaestus barely noticed the familiar features of a certain son of Aphrodite, with said man seeming panicked and was becoming more paler by the second as he recognized the familiar voluptuous figure of his half-sister past the frame of the suzerain of the district.

The daughter of Aphrodite seemed equally surprised at the sudden presence of the suzerain, but she composed herself immediately as she stood upright, curtsying respectfully before Lord Apollo.

“Lord Apollo, I—“

“I believe you did not understand the situation you are in, young lady,” the suzerain interjected with a smile, though the lord was anything but happy of the current situation. “What did you believe were you achieving when you decided to insult my valued guests?”

The smile on the maiden’s lips slowly dropped, unease and panic flashing through her eyes as all hint of politeness dropped from the suzerain’s eyes, expressing only a dangerous coldness.

“You insulted the customs of my people, insulted my valued guests at my son’s celebration, and you have come to my household as an uninvited guest,” Apollo stated in a low voice so that only the heirs could hear. “You have been insulting me, young lady. Your brother is a welcomed guest, but I
suggest you leave before I ask any of my guards to force you out; as should have been done initially. I shall see to it that those guards will be reprimanded thoroughly for not conducting their tasks as per instructed, and I will guarantee you that your mother will be hearing from me of the atrocity you committed in my household.”

The daughter of Aphrodite paled visibly at the statement for the next few seconds, and her eyes casted to the sides, only to realize that the seated nobles were silently observing what was happening; her humiliation. Her upper lip curled with disdain and she casted a vicious glare at the son of Hades, but recoiled immediately at the sight that she saw. Even Jake, who was seated beside Nico, had to recoil and suppress himself from gasping in surprise at the amount of coldness and of how bloodthirsty his visible right russet-brown eye was.

With her nails digging onto her palms, she curtsied once more before heading towards the main door of the Grand Hall, her pride being the only thing that was keeping her head held high.

The suzerain followed with his sight the daughter of Aphrodite, casting pointed glances at any noblemen or women who followed the departing maiden with their eyes. The nobles rigidly went back to their own business, but their hushed murmurs and whispers were undoubtedly regarding what had just transpired. The heirs of Lord Apollo resumed their duties as well, though they occasionally spared a glance at their father who then was regarding the sons of Poseidon, Hephaestus and Hades respectively.

All of a sudden, Niccolò di Angelo slowly arose from his seat as he patted a folded napkin lightly against his lips.

“Excuse me,” was all that the son of Hades murmured as he placed the napkin atop the table before he briskly maneuvered himself past the suzerain of Ílios and headed towards the balcony.

“Nico…” Percy made a move to follow the son of Hades, but the firm hand of Lord Apollo stopped him from even making a step forward.

Without a glance to his back, the son of Hades disappeared into the balcony, his head slightly lowered so as to cover his eyes from view. The children of Lord Apollo noticed it – more so Michael, Will, and Kayla as they contemplated to check on the son of Hades, but was stopped by their father’s pointed looks. The daughter of Bellona, who did not understand what had transpired but was certain that something happened to the son of Hades, made a move to follow the young man, but was stopped as well when Will cautiously grasped her arm, redirecting her piercing gaze to the suzerain.
“Why are you stopping me?” Percy demanded with gritted teeth, trying to keep his voice low so as not to garner attention once more. “I need to be with him.”

The suzerain shook his head, dropping his hand from the son of Poseidon’s shoulder as he sauntered off once more, acting as if the earlier events had not transpired. There was a firm look in his eyes that both Perseus and Jacob had to acknowledge; that whatever intention the suzerain had for stopping the son of Poseidon was very serious.

“He needs the space so that he would not be smothered. Let him be for a few minutes. Let him breathe.”

When Niccolò di Angelo was fifteen, he was certain that he would never come to cherish another person as immensely as he cherished Perseus Tzákson. When Niccolò di Angelo turned eighteen, that realization did not change, but rather intensified further upon seeing the son of Poseidon once more.

To say that he tried not to feel – to function solely to serve his district and nothing more – was an understatement. But in the process of desiring not to feel, what he gained in itself was mere distraction from his memories and much haunting events that would eventually scar his being. He had temporarily forgotten the memories of that specific past, only for it to slowly resurface once more.

Drew Tanaka did not forcibly extract that memory in one sharp heave. It resurfaced slowly yet steadily since the time to fulfill his oath was decided. But only with Drew’s words did he absolutely recall.

Shifting his dull russet-eyes towards the sky, the faint glow of full moon greeted his sight. A canopy of luminous stars materialized from amongst the ocean of vast darkness that engulfed the entire district. Some flickered while some gleamed radiantly, but they were adequate to illuminate the night sky. Despite the occasional hooting of owls, the calling song of cicadas, and the soft melodious tune of the music inside the Grand Hall, it was peaceful.

The peacefulness of the night contrasted with his inner turmoil.

He could hear them – the hushed exchanges behind his back once the celebration resumed once more to its full swing. He could sense them – the lingering gazes upon his profile; he envisioned
them to be malicious and skeptical. With the kind of reputation that he held, it was rational for them to be cautious of his presence amongst them.

The son of Hades did not belong amongst such a crowd of people. Though the commoners – the suzerain disliked societal hierarchy, but it was not exactly avoidable in any district – accepted his presence in their district completely, it was a completely different matter for the nobles. They were much judgmental; much distrusting. The townspeople treated him as if he were one of their own – a civilian of the district of Ílios – instead of a foreign heir. And he could pretend, in that time spent mere hours ago of that beautiful morning, that he was back amongst his people who would not regard him with such disdain and scorn.

But in that room – in that room of nobles that were dressed in extortionate and flamboyant ensembles, to the point that they looked utterly ridiculous – he was regarded with such ill judgements.

The sheer thought of simply staying at the balcony until the end of the celebration – consequences and respect be damned – was becoming too tantalizing with each peaceful minute that passed by. The nobles that had been out in the balcony had disappeared inside minutes ago, silently and unintentionally offering him the privacy he so desperately needed. Truth be told, he would rather not enter the room once more, with the likely chance that another maiden would come to the son of Poseidon, or the possibility that he would see Percy be enamored and dance with a maiden. The mere idea of such possibilities caused his heart to throb with such exquisite pain, and his chest to ache with ill urges.

Jealousy is like arsenic.

“Théleis na chorépseis mazí mou?”

The son of Hades’ thoughts halted at the sound of that familiar voice, but he did not make any indication to face the person behind him. Leaning against the thick marble railings, Niccolò di Angelo hunched slightly forward, lowering his head as he gazed intensely at his interlocked fingers.

“But, you could easily have anyone in that room to dance with you if you wish so badly to dance,” he answered softly, without any bitterness dripping from his tone.

The person behind him shuffled slightly, and the slight tapping of heels against the floor was the only indication that the person was moving towards him. Within seconds, the person was by his side at a considerable distance, leaning against the railing just as he was.
“They are not you. Dancing with them would pale in comparison with the experience of dancing with you,” the person murmured, a playful lilt to his tone. “But it’s all right. There are other opportunities by which I could dance with you. Right now, I quite enjoy being out here with all this peacefulness.”

Niccolò di Angelo found himself slightly smiling at that, but the smile on his lips dropped only seconds later.

“I’m sorry, Percy. You wanted to celebrate tonight, and I am robbing you of that experience by staying here. You should just go inside, leave me be, and enjoy the rest of the night,” Nico suggested in a hushed voice.

“You don’t understand,” Percy sighed from beside him, shifting closer to place an arm around his shoulders in a comforting gesture. “This is a packaged deal, Nico. I can only enjoy it, knowing that you do as well.”

“That is some twisted sense of satisfaction.”

“It’s the only sense of satisfaction I have come to know since we were young, no matter how twisted it is,” Percy murmured in a low voice, looking down at the side profile of the son of Hades.

Niccolò di Angelo laughed humorlessly at that, his fingers tightening slowly with each passing second to the point that it should hurt with excruciating pain. Yet, instead, he felt nothing.

“Did you know? That Jason was already engaged and that he was to be wedded?” Nico whispered.

If Percy was surprised that the young man was actually discussing with him the son of Zeus, the son of Poseidon did not show any indication as he slowly shook his head. Not that Nico would notice as he had not moved from his position since he conversed with the third heir.

“No. But I suppose—… Many things could change in a span of a few years. All of us have grown apart; we could not have known significant events in one another’s lives,” Percy offered with a sigh, his head tilting back as he raised his eyes to stare at the full moon. “If I could change something of the past, I would have done everything just to keep us all together.”
“I heard rumors,” Nico admitted in a voice that was almost inaudible, neglecting the last statement for it would only severe wounds that retained from his own regrets. “I heard rumors… but I did not want to believe them.”

Percy shifted his head slightly, looking curiously at the younger male, more so because of how he responded with his last statement. The son of Hades was not looking at his direction, but from beside him, Percy could discern a forlorn and distant expression gleaming from those russet-brown eyes. Percy realized belatedly that Nico was probably reminiscing of a past memory.

“Confessions of love are wounding, aren’t they? Especially when that love is fleeting,” Nico continued, a sad smile on his lips. “Two years ago, it was likely a mistaken emotion when he professed of holding romantic feelings for me, with the vow that it would be unchanging.”

Nico heard a subtle hitch of breath beside him, but he chose to ignore it as he recalled of the past, his eyes closing.

“I was incapable of returning it, and he had acknowledged that before I could come to realize it myself. He simply wanted for me to know, but I have to wonder what if I had been capable then,” the son of Hades continued with a bitter chuckle. “I am still incapable of returning it; if it still exists for him. Though I suppose it would not matter anymore since he is to be wedded to a daughter of Aphrodite.”

“Is that why… right now…?” Percy questioned, unsure of how he should voice his question.

But Niccolò di Angelo seemed to understand his question completely as he firmly shook his head in response.

“No. Tanaka’s words simply forced me to remember some bitter memories and had me face some truths I had been trying to neglect for the past two years.”

“What truths?” Percy breathed, shifting his body so he that he was completely facing the younger male then.

“That I am incapable of anything that is remotely close to the feeling of love – giving and receiving.”

_I am incapable of loving anyone else but you._
“That I am too broken and easily replaceable. That the years seemed to pass so suddenly that I am confused what the future holds for me. That eventually, you and Jason would have families of your own, and I would be on my own. Just as I once had been.”

Nico turned to the son of Poseidon, his right hand clasping at the brooch that was pinned at the fabric atop of his heart.

“You are confusing me. If your actions to me are not pity, then what are you doing, Perseus?” Nico whispered, his hand enclosing the jewelry in a tight fist. “Why are you adamant on staying by my side?”

There were unfathomable expressions that crossed the son of Poseidon’s features in a matter of seconds, but they were all fleeting. It was hard to discern any concrete emotion, and Nico could not understand why the older male was possibly having an inner turmoil himself.

*You do not have the right,* Nico thought to himself as he stared into conflicted molten sea-green eyes. *You are the one who is confusing me while giving me these false hopes.*

“Because it has always been that way, Nico,” Percy chose to respond, stepping forward. “Regardless of how many years would pass by, it would always be us by each other’s side.”

*Do not disillusion me.*

“That does not last forever, Percy.”

“I want it to last forever, but that is just a mere concept, isn’t it?” the son of Poseidon offered with a small smile. “You are quite wrong with some truths of yours.”

Niccolò di Angelo arched a brow at that, silently challenging his companion to state the wrongs he had perceived in the truths – the facts – which he had come to accept.

“One, you would never have to be on your own again. I would never allow for you to feel alone ever again,” Percy stated as he placed his hand against the young man’s crown and caressed the dark locks, his voice firm with his conviction. “Two, you are absolutely not incapable of giving and
receiving love of any form.”

Before the son of Hades could pull back from their close proximity, Percy slowly leaned down, brushing his lips against a pale and cold cheek, just as the son of Hades did for him a few weeks back. It was gentle and light, but the warmth from those lips seemed to seep through his skin, coursing through his veins and burning him from within with a comforting fire. Instead of pulling back immediately, those warm lips lingered on his skin, causing Nico’s cheeks to flush with the slightest tinge of red.

“Eísaí polý ómorfi.” Percy breathed against his skin before placing a hand at the back of his head with the silent request that the son of Hades lean on him. “And if you feel too broken on your own, know that I would give anything – do anything – to keep you whole.”

Why are you doing this to me? Nico thought to himself as he lowered his head; anything to avoid those molten sea-green eyes from looking into his own and seeing the play of emotions that he had tried to reject for the past two years.

‘Eísaí polý ómorfi.’

You are very beautiful.

This – everything that Percy was doing – could not possibly mean more than comforting, platonic caresses. And that was what burned; what ached. For a part of him wanted so desperately to accept that it was something more; that a sliver of the feelings he harbored for the son of Poseidon was being returned bit by bit.

The worst of it all was that he could not place the blame for all of his internal turmoil on the son of Poseidon, for it was only him alone that inflicted his own wounds.

A sharp squeak startled them, and the immediate reaction of the son of Hades was to remove himself from the grasp of the older male. A flash of pain fleeted past sea-green eyes, but it disappeared almost as quickly as it appeared.

“I apologize, my lords!” A young female servant by the glass door squeaked, shuffling uneasily on her feet with her head bowed low. “I… I did not mean to intrude, but an urgent letter was given to me for Lord Niccolò di Angelo!”
What remained of the haze in said man’s mind mere moments ago dissipated immediately when the young servant said the word ‘urgent’. Glancing down, there was a pristine white envelope enclosed in her trembling hands.

“An urgent letter?” Nico cautiously repeated, causing the young servant to timidly raise her head. “Who sent it?”

“He said his name is Nakamura, my lord,” the servant hastily stepped forward, shakily handing the letter to the young heir before taking a few steps back. “He said that you would know who it was from once I give the letter to you.”

“What?”

As if he was doused with a bucket of ice, the son of Hades suddenly hissed out in disbelief, startling the son of Poseidon and the servant, with the latter immediately excusing herself from the young heirs.

Practically tearing up the envelope, the son of Hades plucked out the contents inside and instantly, his entire frame became rigid in just a matter of seconds at the single word that was written on a small piece of paper.

Come.

At the bottom of the formal invitation that was attached with the small note was the symbol of the district of Anemoi – the House of Hermes.

Chapter End Notes

Name(s):
Ø (Lee Fletcher) Leshem Ibsen Flecha
====== Leshem: Precious stone
====== Ibsen: Son of the archer
====== Flecha: A derivation of “Fletcher” with an origin of Old French
Ø (Michael Yew) Michael Laurence Yew
====== Laurence: Crowned with laurels
Ø (Will Solace) William Gallagher Solace
==== Gallagher: Eager Helper (Celtic origin)
Ø (Jake Mason) Jacob Rasmus Mason
==== Rasmus: Worthy of Love

Translation(s):
Sýmfono Symmachías – Alliance Pact.
Evlogiménos na eíste – Blessed be you.
Théleis na chorépseis mazí mou? – Would you like to dance with me?
Eísai polý glykós – You are very sweet.
Eísai polý ómorfi – You are very beautiful.

The full names of most of the characters are provided at the link below. That page is subjected to change as the story progresses.
Link: HERE

Thank you for reading this chapter! Until the next chapter!
Chapter Notes

This is my last update for the next three weeks. This chapter closes their time at Lord Apollo's district. Thus, come the next chapter, there will be a change in the location of the story. I love this particular chapter for many reasons, and this has more to do with the interactions between the characters above everything else. I hope you guys could love it as well as I do. Anyway, please enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“There is a law of the natural worlds (the spiritual and the physical) and this is something I have understood: that for every genuine existence, for every real manifestation and occurrence, there are ten thousand falsities. Before you meet what or who is genuine, you will first have met, or known of, what is fake; and ten thousand times so! There is no need to feel disappointments, any number below ten thousand deceptions renders you a lucky person! And you ask why is there a need for this to happen? Well, if you have not known what is false first, there is no way to understand what then comes which is truth. What is lesser is so afraid of what is genuine, that it finds it necessary to imitate and duplicate that imitation ten thousand times over, for fear that you will finally meet what is real. The more important that one existence is, the more imitations there are in the world.”

— C. JoyBell C.

“That’s the symbol of the district of Anemoi,” Percy breathed from behind the son of Hades, peering over his shoulders. “What do they need from you?”

“My presence is requested by Castellan. I need to go to Anemoi soon.”

Niccolò di Angelo slipped the note to his pocket before carefully folding the invitation and slipping it into the hands of the son of Poseidon. Percy stared at the young heir for a few seconds, as it to assess the situation by observing his companion’s reaction alone, before unfolding and reading through what had been written on the parchment paper.

“We need to inform Lord Apollo of this minor change of plans,” Percy stated firmly in a serious tone, folding the invitation once more and placing it back inside the envelope. “I’ll inform Butch that preparations to replenish our resources would be temporarily delayed while we pay a visit to Anemoi.”
“‘We’?” Nico repeated with a frown.

“I’m coming with you,” Percy said with finality, looking directly onto Nico’s eyes. “We have to stick together, and there is no way I am ever going to go back without you.”

Niccolò di Angelo pursed his lips, weighing the pros and cons of permitting the son of Poseidon to venture into the domain of Lord Hermes. The possibility of Luke being tolerant of the presence of Percy was unlikely, due to the latter coming from a district they had no attachments to. Nico intended to inform the suzerain of Ílios to accommodate for Percy in the duration of his absence; it was the most rational course of action in his position. But knowing Perseus Tzákson, not even violence could induce the older male to change his stand regarding the matter. And if Percy said that he was going, then he was going – by hook or by crook.

“It’s best to just say yes. You know that I will follow you by any means.” Percy voiced out the thoughts of the son of Hades.

“You are a very difficult person, you know that?” Niccolò di Angelo heaved a sigh, running a hand through his tousled locks.

“I know. And I’m grateful that you tolerate and accept me, despite how difficult I can get,” Percy answered with a sheepish smile before he pointedly inclined his head towards the Grand Hall. “The earlier we can excuse ourselves from the party, the faster we can gather supplies. Do you think Lord Apollo can spare some horses?”

“Stagecoach. I am not risking your safety,” Nico corrected, before firmly grasping the son of Poseidon’s left arm as the latter turned on his heels, heading back into the room. “You can just enjoy the celebration. I can manage with the preparations.”

Percy heaved an exasperated sigh, exaggerating it to some extent before he turned to face the younger male once more. Raising his free hand, he curled it into fist before lightly bumping it against Nico’s left shoulder.

“It’s not much of a celebration without you there, partner,” Percy stated, emphasizing towards the end as a knowing smile curled his lips. “Just know that you owe me a dance now, and that I will claim it on my birthday.”
“You would not need my protection then,” Nico murmured, pushing the fisted hand away from his shoulder.

“Ah, but you see, I am selfish. I would be absolutely jealous if someone manages to get a dance from you before I could,” Percy said, humor lacing his tone of voice, but there was something in those sea-green eyes that indicated truth and seriousness. “It’s about time we get back inside, isn’t it?”

Percy extended a hand towards his direction, beckoning for the son of Hades. ‘Partner’, Percy mouthed at him with that mischievous smile of his, before tilting his head towards the direction of the Grand Hall. In Nico’s perspective, it was probably humorous in a degrading sense how he wordlessly slipped his hand to Percy’s calloused hand without so much as a protest. He allowed for the older male to lead him back inside while forcing himself to blatantly ignore the attention that was suddenly showered upon them; to him, most specifically.

Most nobles preferably dismissed the presence of the two heirs with the prior knowledge of the stern expression they had received earlier from the suzerain of the district. The events earlier were neither of their business nor concern, and Lord Apollo simply emphasized that as he hushed their tittle-tattles of the matter. Nico immediately noticed the concerned expressions on Lee and Michael’s faces, and he merely nodded towards their direction to appease them.

Walking towards the suzerain, Percy and Nico belatedly noticed the presence of the third son who was having a heated discussion with his equally displeased father. The son of Hephaestus, who stood dutifully beside the son of Apollo, and a certain son of Aphrodite cautiously watched the exchange with uneasy expressions. William Gallagher Solace was practically hissing at that point, his fists clenched so tight that his knuckles protruded. Regardless of how apologetic Lord Apollo was – and the man was sincerely apologetic; his expression conveyed it – Will did not seem to find himself getting appeased as he conversed with his father.

“I don’t think we should intrude on them,” Nico murmured from beside the son of Poseidon, subconsciously tightening his grip on the older male’s hand.

“I don’t think time is much of an option in our hands at this point,” Percy reasoned, maneuvering them about until they reached the bickering father and son.

Noticing the approaching heirs, Jake gently nudged Will on the ribs, earning a piercing glare in return at being interrupted, before the son of Hephaestus inclined his head towards Percy and Nico. Whatever curses the son of Apollo had on his lips soon died as his eyes landed on the two, especially at Niccolò di Angelo. The son of Aphrodite seemed to visibly stiffen as well upon recognizing the newcomers, his eyes lowering immediately onto the floor as mortification dawned upon his features.
“Nico…” Will breathed as soon as they stopped before the group, his sky blue eyes flashing with hesitance as he struggled to continue, unsure of what he should say.

But the son of Hades merely shook his head before the blond could continue, wordlessly stating that he would rather not discuss what had transpired. The son of Apollo must have discerned something in his expression to cave in, as the man slowly nodded in understanding after a few seconds. The concern in his features did not fade regardless.

“I have a request, Lord Apollo,” Nico said as the suzerain turned to face them with a quizzical look.

“What is it, son of Hades?”

The son of Poseidon wordlessly handed the invitation to the suzerain, gesturing for the older male to read its content. Arching one of his brows, Lord Apollo carefully unfolded the invitation, and his eyes immediately landed on the stamped symbol of the district of Anemoi. A hard look crossed his sky blue eyes briefly at the symbol before those eyes shifted to the top of the invitation, gradually lowering as the suzerain slowly and critically read through the invitation. After reading through it at least twice, Lord Apollo refolded it once more before handing it to the son of Poseidon.

“When do you depart?” Apollo inquired, looking pointedly now at Percy.

The third heir arched his brow at that, his head partially tilting to the side out of curiosity.

“You are not going to prevent me from going?” Percy voiced out his inquiry.

“If I say that I forbid you from going, would you actually do as I say? Or would you choose to follow this young man even if it kills you in the process?” the suzerain rhetorically asked, before gesturing to the son of Hades. “I think we both know your response to that.”

“Disregarding the dying part, you are quite accurate, my lord,” Percy responded with an amused smile.

“If you can manage to actually keep him here, that would be helpful,” Nico murmured in a low voice, to which was pointedly ignored by the son of Poseidon and the suzerain.
“So when do you depart?” Apollo repeated, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Tomorrow. When the sun reaches its zenith,” Percy answered.

“So soon…” Will murmured from beside his father, his lips pressed into a firm line as he processed what was transpiring.

“And I thought we could have a longer discussion. But I suppose you have to handle your respective duties to your districts,” Jake voiced out from beside the son of Apollo, a small smile on his lips as he stared at the two heirs.

Percy offered an apologetic smile at that, and Nico lowered his head to avoid Will’s dissatisfied look. Lord Apollo had a skeptical expression on his face, his sky blue eyes notably distant for a full minute. One of his hands was raised to his chin; a finger lightly scratching the expanse of skin in a contemplative manner.

“We have to inform of Lord Poseidon and Lord Hermes of your unplanned visitation, Perseus,” Apollo stated firmly, demanding for the said heir’s attention. “Venturing into a district without an official invitation to your name is suicidal.”

“We are limited to two options here, Lord Apollo,” Nico intervened grimly. “The first one would be having Percy to accompany me and explaining the situation to Lord Hermes’ first heir, hoping that Luke would not act irrationally and tolerate Percy’s presence instead. The second would be to leave
Percy here in Ílios, which is the most rational action to take, but a certain son of Poseidon is too stubborn to budge with his own stand."

With the latter statement, the son of Hades offered an exasperated look at the son of Poseidon, only for the latter to return it with a defiant glare. If not for the situation, the suzerain would have merrily laughed at the childish exchange between the two heirs.

“So either option guarantees that this visitation to Anemoi would not be acknowledged publicly,” Apollo deduced, heaving a long sigh. “This invitation was not delivered by a messenger, I gather. And that can only mean that whatever matter you need to settle in Anemoi is urgent and classified.”

Niccolò di Angelo nodded at that before his russet-brown eyes cautiously glanced at the vicinity, critically surveying the area to see if there were prying eyes or eavesdroppers to their hushed conversation.

“I must go immediately. Luke never exaggerates with the word ‘urgent’. He must truly mean it in the worst sense of the word before he were to use it,” Nico said, a deep frown marring his features. “I have conducted discussions with him in the past; I should know.”

“If whatever this urgent matter is potentially unfavorable, how may I trust that you do not keep this a secrecy from me and my people?” Apollo questioned, disturbed now with the words of the son of Hades.

“You can never trust me,” the son of Hades stated firmly, the truth behind the statement reflected in how his eyes never wavered in its conviction. “But by the treaty that our districts have agreed upon, I swear upon Lord Thanatos’ name that should the matter have anything to do with Ílios, Skotádi will not withhold any crucial information that might endanger the people of this district. My district agreed that we shall cause no harm to befall upon your people, but that does not necessarily mean protection. We established a treaty; not an alliance.”

“But I will tell you this: Anemoi, Sofía, Gi and Krasí will not harm Ílios. They are aware of the consequences of foolishly defying Lord Thanatos, and the extent of our loyalty to the people of our home district,” Nico finished.

The suzerain was dissatisfied with the response, but he was certain that that was the only reassurance he could get from Niccolò di Angelo. Ah, the young man was truly a splitting image of his father, just as the second suzerain of Skotádi. But unlike Lord Thanatos, Niccolò di Angelo was much capable of mercy; much capable of having his decisions swayed. Lord Apollo spared a quick glance to the son of Poseidon; Niccolò di Angelo’s Achilles heel.
“Can you protect him?” Apollo gestured with his head at the older heir who sighed for the umpteenth time at the attention that was being given to him. “You do not get to argue, young man. Niccolò di Angelo’s security is assured, but not yours. You have no business to be there compared to him.”

“I will protect him. Failure is not an option,” Nico stated before Lord Apollo and Percy could engage in a heated debate. “Now, if there is nothing more that we need to discuss further, I need to speak with Lady Reyna about our sudden departure.”

The suzerain seemed satisfied with the response, nodding at the young man’s words before dismissing him with a flick of his right hand.

“’Reyna,’” Apollo stated when Nico turned on his heels. “You know she abhors the term ‘Lady.’”

The son of Hades smiled humorlessly at the comment before he excused himself from the suzerain and his companion, walking slowly yet steadily towards the daughter of Bellona. The maiden never strayed her eyes from the younger man, observing as the nobles followed with their eyes the young heir curiously, though kept a respectable distance as if offering him a clear path.

“I suppose what you both need is a stagecoach,” the suzerain commented from in front of the son of Poseidon, garnering the latter’s attention once more. “My soldiers will prepare your stagecoach for tomorrow, and gather supplies as well. Leshem shall visit the docks before your departure to inform your crew of the minor delay in your journey back to your home district.”

“We appreciate the assistance, Lord Apollo,” Percy murmured, bowing gratefully.

“You children get more and more troublesome as you age,” the suzerain remarked, shaking his head slowly before dismissing the son of Poseidon in the same manner as he did to the son of Hades. “I will hang onto the son of Hades’ words. Please do your utmost best to ensure each other’s safety. Especially yours, Percy. Dealing with your fathers is the second to the last thing I would want to do.”

“What would be the first?” Percy inquired.

“My decision to permit you to go becoming a reason to start a war between Thálassa and Skotádi,” Apollo stated in a low voice. “I hope you know what you are doing, Percy.”
Lord Apollo placed a hand atop the young man’s left shoulder, patting it once before he went his own way once more. Percy had to force himself to keep his head held high despite the comment of the suzerain. He did not need others to acknowledge what he himself was well aware of; that he was being foolish at the moment. But he would be damned if he were to abandon the son of Hades who had dutifully stayed by his side, regardless if the matter in Anemoi concerned him or not.

“Inject sedative drug into Percy. Do you think the healers have one that lasts for at least a week?” Reyna murmured without looking at the other person, casually sipping from the wine glass in her hands. “What were you thinking, Nico?”

“That would be a waste of resources,” the son of Hades commented, his eyes fleeting across the room, never lingering unnecessarily on the features of the gathered guests. “And I was not exactly thinking. He gave me no choice.”

The daughter of Bellona sighed from beside him, her piercing black eyes surveying the vicinity slowly. The hostility in her eyes were diminished, replaced with a disinterested and impassive expression that still had most noblemen hesitant on approaching the maiden. At a different circumstance, Niccolò di Angelo might take humor in it.

Reyna spared a glance at the young man, grimacing at the sight of prominent dark circles underneath Nico’s dull russet-brown eyes. It never ceased to concern her how the young man could manage so much burden at his age. No, she corrected herself, Niccolò di Angelo was enduring all of it and just barely. So much responsibility at his age.

Reyna Avila Ramirez-Arellano.

That was her name; or so it was until her entire family departed from Pólemos to Skotádi. It was the name she had abandoned – her name was simply Reyna now – along with the memories of her previous existence; the memories of a sin she had committed and could never come to completely forgive herself.

Julian Ramirez-Arellano.

Along with her name, she had buried him – her father – with it, with the sky and her sister as her sole witness. The sky wept as rain poured down in torrents and the wind howled in a requiem for the
unjust death. She could not recall experiencing regret at the moment that she did commit the crime, but it eventually, without her acknowledgement, manifested on her mind in haunting dreams that she so vividly would remember.

To be raised in a district that was of war was an unsuitable environment for growth. The life of the citizens – regardless of their ages – were constantly bargained in their everyday lives. Puddles of blood, stained on the soil and splattered on faded brick walls, were gruesome yet common sights that were silently dismissed; were ingrained in their minds to dismiss. Gun shots would occasionally resound, serving as a sickening croon of a lullaby at night. It was maddening. So very maddening…

Julian Ramirez-Arellano was a soldier of Pólemos who had enamored the half-sister of Lord Ares, Lady Bellona. They were lovers star-crossed from the very beginning – Lord Ares vehemently refused the union between his half-sister and a soldier – but neither anticipated that it could lead to the point of madness. The birth of her older sister, Hylla, and her own were blessings to the lovers, but the happiness did not last long. Paranoia of being under constant danger gradually increased with each deadly encounter with countless anonymous soldiers, until it led to the point where Julian was driven past the brink of madness. Incapable of discerning his children, who were then under his obsessive and constant care—… Reyna forced her memories to blur at what occurred thereafter.

It had been a blur of his older sister’s unconscious form sprawled on the ground, to her slaughtering the man whom they once addressed as ‘father’. And when Hylla was conscious once more, all that she could do was cradle her younger sister in her arms as Reyna sat in the pool of their father’s blood, her eyes too lackluster to resemble anything remotely familiar of whom she once was.

The blood-stained sword had slipped from her fingers then, clattering to the ground in a deafening thud.

Their mother, in one of her secret visitations, could only process the entire situation with devastation and pity before it was decided that she could no longer raise her children within the walls of Pólemos. And so at that night, they fled with the meager amount of supplies that they could manage. It did not matter where they landed; anywhere was better than the life within Pólemos.


Eventually, Lady Bellona decided to seek refuge in the district of Lord Hades, for if there was one district that Lord Ares would not be foolish enough to instigate war, it was with Skotádi. It had taken much to convince the suzerain that they possessed no more attachment to their former district; that they were willing to serve under the district of Skotádi if the suzerain was willing to offer refuge. It had been close to catastrophic when Lord Ares had finally found where they resided; catastrophic to the point that it almost cost them war. But Lord Hades pulled through for the family, even to the point of offering Hylla her freedom when the maiden decided to forge her own path. Reyna stayed,
as her mother did, but served as a diplomat for Skotádi if either the former or the current suzerain called for it.

It was with her residence in Skotádi that she was introduced to the second heir of Skotádi, Niccolò di Angelo. The first impression she had of the young heir was that he was irreparably broken beyond repair. The first time that she had been under the scrutiny of those russet-brown irises, all that she saw was that they were lackluster; unfeeling. As if the young body was just a hollow shell of what once was Niccolò di Angelo.

Reyna became intrigued with the young heir, silently witnessing from the sides his growth in the art of wielding a sword. Niccolò di Angelo was a prodigy with no concern of his well-being. Even battered and bruised under the tutelage of his half-brother and the suzerain, he was persistently stubborn, constantly pushing his limit with each passing day. He was growing in that aspect, but his eyes remained void of emotions.

Was he like her? She had to wonder. Had he committed something that was equally unforgiveable as her crime?

She was hesitant to approach him; to see something which might just as well potentially wreck her as it wrecked him. And so, she continued to observe him from the shadows, hoping to find some answers to what the young man was like.

Reyna did not understand the complexity that was Niccolò di Angelo until the day that the both of them stood in the same bloodshed grounds. Niccolò di Angelo strikes to kill, and she understood for once why he was dubbed *The Bloodbringer*. But when it was all over and the soldiers rejoiced of having successfully defended their district, the son of Hades was kneeling far at the side with his head lowered. Disregarding her own state to satiate her curiosity, she cautiously approached him. And when he raised his eyes – those shattered eyes – to meet hers, he wordlessly offered to her a small wooden doll that was soaked in blood.

“*He was clutching at it as if his life depended on it,*” Nico had informed him in a small voice that was almost inaudible, gesturing with a slight tilt of his head to the bloodied corpse of a middle-aged man before him.

It was the only instant that she felt compelled to shed a tear as the son of Hades pressed the doll into her hands, for Nico could not find in himself to weep for a life that he had claimed with his own hands. She cradled him in her arms as her older sister did for her, and in that instant did she realize
that they were much alike. In her admiration for that young man, she had forgotten that Niccolò di Angelo was every bit of a mortal as she was. He was capable of breaking; of feeling.

How they progressed to where they were now was a brief period in history that mattered little to Reyna in comparison to how she had observed how those eyes progressively became alive once more. In his growth, she had trained for him to wield a dagger with the consent of his half-brother, of course. And she had gifted it to him in the end; the other half of Diplasiázo, a twin dagger that was a family heirloom on her mother’s side. For in her perspective, the lives that she claimed with the weapon was equally his and vice versa. In a twisted form of comfort, they shared each other’s burden; seeking atonement for the same sins.

Reyna cherished Niccolò di Angelo with the same intensity as she cherished her older sister, Hylla. Reyna cherished him in a completely platonic manner; never striving nor considering for more, for the daughter of Bellona never had an inclination to gaining more than what they shared, and she was equally aware that the son of Hades longed for someone else.

A certain someone of tousled raven locks and deep sea-green eyes.

“You have grown so much,” the daughter of Bellona stated from beside the son of Hades, garnering the attention of the young man who stared at her with an inquisitive expression.

“I feel truly blessed to have served under your family,” Reyna continued, staring at her reflection on the red wine.

“You are family, Reyna,” Nico corrected, staring at her profile. “And just as I did, you have grown so much as well.”

“Indeed, we both have. And growing paves way for changes. In time, I would have to completely let you go,” Reyna murmured, shifting her head to face his direction completely. “You and I have to embark on our own journeys without pulling the other down, and… I do not wish to be one of the few that would do so onto you.”

There was the barest hint of a sad smile on Nico’s lips, and it was evident that Reyna could clearly see it. But, lifting her eyes to meet his, all she could fathom was a sense of acceptance.

“Is this where we part ways then?” Nico inquired, his head tilting back just as his eyes lifted to face the ceiling. “Because your words are foreboding.”
“Not today,” Reyna shook her head. “But, I have the feeling that the future holds promises. I am always with you; that would never change. But, I am certain that I would be needed elsewhere. When that time comes, I know you would be just as prepared as I am.”

Full yet thin lips pressed firmly onto a thin line at that foreboding statement, and the son of Hades remained silent for a full minute. In the midst of the jubilant nobles and the invigorating music, none could have discerned what was transpiring between them. Niccolò di Angelo had to admit that despite Reyna’s words, the whole conversation simply bids him a goodbye.

“You would not see us off tomorrow.” It was a statement, not a question.

“I think we both subconsciously know that it would be for the best,” the daughter of Bellona answered simply as she placed her wine glass on the side of a banquet table.

Nico lifted himself from his position on the wall and turned to face Reyna as the latter did as well. There was an unspoken yet mutual understanding between them; one which the son of Hades decided to acknowledge as he curled his right hand to a fist before placing it firmly on his chest, atop his heart. If there had been inquisitive eyes lingering on the peculiar exchange, both of them chose to ignore it.


“No, not yet. And never a permanent goodbye,” the daughter of Bellona slowly shook her head, but executed the same gesture. “Until we meet again, Niccolò di Angelo.”

It was an exchange from soldier to soldier; comrade to comrade. It was an exchange from a friend to another friend; confidant to confidant. It was an exchange between family, and despite there being no blood connection between them, they fully acknowledged the other as a sibling figure. None would understand their unusual exchange but only they would, and that was adequate.

“I can’t wait to see how your future unfolds, mi valiente soldado,” she murmured before she straightened her posture.

A natural smile curled Reyna’s lips for once that night, and it was returned equally by the son of Hades despite there being a hint of sadness in his own. And when the daughter of Bellona turned her
back on him and walked off to join the young maiden daughters of the suzerain, for some reason, Nico found that he was capable of breathing; that there was not that tinge of pain that he felt when his biological sister departed from his side.

With a shaky breath, the son of Hades slowly schooled his features once more, trying to seem indifferent as he casually scanned around the room until his eyes met molten sea-green irises. There was confusion evident in those eyes, but never prying, as if to respect the questionable exchange with the daughter of Bellona.

*Until we meet again.*

Niccolò di Angelo found himself subconsciously smiling; that gentle smile being unintentionally directed at the son of Poseidon who only responded with one of his own. Reyna’s words – those words – were not of a silly promise, but a certainty in the future.

And if anyone noticed the silent departure of the two heirs from the Grand Hall, none commented of it.

“Tell me about Anemoi.”

Russet-brown eyes lifted, watching the profile of the son of Poseidon from the corner of his eyes. Percy was similarly staring at his profile with inquisitive eyes, his head facing the younger male completely so as to offer the latter his absolute attention.

“What is it that you know of Anemoi?” Nico asked, his eyes looking forward.

The hallway was silent with only the melodious muffled music echoing on the empty hallway. A servant or soldier passed by occasionally, but they were rather much alone.

“The district is ruled by the suzerain Lord Hermes, and his consort Lady Maia Castellan. It is situated to the west of Ílios and north of Sofia. It borders the Northern Sea of Atlas on the west, thus having quite an unlimited access to trade canals. It is the main district for commerce, and ranks sixth in terms of its economic status; slightly above Ílios…” Percy stated, trailing off towards the end as he struggled to recall more. Eventually, he stared at the son of Hades once more, smiling sheepishly to indicate that that was all that he knew of.
Niccolò di Angelo repressed the urge to sigh at that, choosing wisely to swallow any criticism he had dangling at the tip of his tongue. To be honest, he did not understand how the son of Poseidon could know so little, especially since Percy was the only one of them three – the other two being him and Jason – who was strictly supervised in his education. How he was lacking in knowledge regarding other districts simply baffled the son of Hades.

“That is correct, to some extent. As of the present, only Lord Hermes rules Anemoi. Lady Maia Castellan or May Castellan – as Lord Hermes preferred that she be addressed due to his mother’s name being coincidentally Maia – was assassinated more than a year ago.”

Percy lowered his head at that. It was a positive thing that he was making inquiries now than later; he would be beheaded if he were to state an offensive comment, regardless if it was unintentional on his part.

“It is bordered on the north by the Sea of Arktos, Ílios on the east, Sofía on the south, and – as you stated – Northern Sea of Atlas on the west. Since it is a district of commerce, you should not be surprised to find that many travelers and merchants are situated there. Its population is similar to that of Ílios, though slightly larger by a few ten thousands. They are also the main district in the development of transportation. The symbol of the suzerain’s family is the caduceus. Quite amusing, since it is usually associated to medicine – what you would have expected from Ílios instead.

“You should be informed specifically as well of the six sons of Lord Hermes. The first son and heir to the district of Anemoi is Lord Gus, but he had died of a natural illness at a young age. I believed the illness was manifested for years since there were rumors of complications before his actual birth. He is not the child of Lady May though. The second son and first heir – the legitimate heir – to the district of Anemoi, the second suzerain come the following year, is Lord Lucas Theodosios Castellan. The third son and second heir is Lord Chrysostom Steafan Rodriguez. The fourth and third heir is Lord Cecil Homerus. The fifth and sixth respectively are the Stoll brothers: Lord Travis and Lord Connor. Do not be mistaken; they are not twins. Compared to the first three living heirs, neither Travis nor Connor desires to succeed over Anemoi, and are pretty much content being captains of the army. Lord Chrysostom and Lord Cecil have no desire as well since they firmly believe that Luke – Lord Lucas – is more than capable of succeeding over Anemoi.

“Lord Hermes has other sons and daughters as well, but they are unclaimed for their protection,” the son of Hades continued, voice dropping low in volume. “You should know as well that Anemoi is not as safe as Ílios, and that black markets actually exist within the district. Bandits usually lurk at the land borders, and as much as Lord Hermes tries to decimate their numbers, it is a frustrating process since many more are recruited from foreign districts. The residents are much wary and can be hostile to individuals from any foreign district.”
“That is why – under all circumstances – you are prohibited from venturing into town, regardless of who would offer to escort you. If I were to know that you did just that, I will personally haul you back to Thálassa,” Nico stated, turning his head to direct his eyes at the son of Poseidon. “Are we clear?”

Percy nodded at that, knowing that Niccolò di Angelo would never take any of his personal threats lightly. Even without the aforementioned threat, Percy was well-aware that he should minimize any interaction with the people of the district. This was not one which Thálassa had an alliance with, and in the face of these people, he would be considered an enemy; a threat.

“I won’t do anything that would cause more trouble for you.”

Nico paused mid-step upon hearing the statement, his eyes searching and staring directly into molten sea-green irises.

“Do you believe that you are causing me trouble now?” Nico inquired with a tilt of his head.

“I know that I am,” Percy murmured, looking away. “But I’m still going with you.”

“I don’t expect any less,” Nico said honestly, allowing an amused smile to curl his lips. “You would not be the Percy that I know if you would just cave in, and I am glad that those parts of you have not changed.”

“I thought you would be frustrated instead,” the son of Poseidon joked, nudging slightly the younger male’s ribs with his elbow.

“Whether it is of the good or the bad, either which you have retained, I am glad because it only meant that you remained true to yourself. Genuine people like you do not come around often; some only once,” the son of Hades answered with a shrug, as if what he had said mattered little.

But it did not matter to the point of being insignificant; at least, that was what Percy thought. A smile was quickly broadening on his lips at the unfinished statement; a statement he only heard a countless of times in the past from his deceased older brother’s lips, but had committed itself to his memory. A whole-hearted laugh slipped past his lips as he grasped on the younger man’s hand, tugging on it once as the son of Poseidon increased the pace of his walk until he was sprinting, dragging his startled companion with him.
“Then I should be as genuine as I possibly could, yes? Because genuine people are the ones worth keeping close,” Percy finished his statement before Nico could question his motives. “Let’s get changed and sneak out into town. I want the last few hours of memories in this place to be filled with good ones. These formal celebrations are not as fun as I hoped them to be.”

“Lord Apollo will be angry, Percy!” Nico hissed, struggling to match the older male’s pace. “Could you let go of my hand? It’s hard to keep up.”

“I am just being genuine, di Angelo. Like when we were before, with me causing problems and you saving our heads from our fathers,” was the man’s cheeky response as he gripped tighter on the hand. “And no, you have to keep up. Or else, we can’t manage to escape from the guards.”

But in truth, it was just an excuse.

_He is my friend._ The words he had said to Lord Apollo resonated in his head.

At that point, even Percy had to laugh at how he had been foolishly trying to convince himself as his hand slipped to grip the other’s hand possessively.

There is much to fear of daylight; it almost always illuminates a miserable world. Yet there are certain beauties attached to it that are not negligible – beginnings and ends. It could signify the beginning of a fresh day – a beacon of hope to many that wander aimlessly. Similarly, it could signify the end of a lingering suffering; a saccharine release from a burden. It could mean everything and nothing, at the same time. It could hold value or none, in the same note.

_And most often than not, it is a constant that had always been neglected; a part of the daily life routine that had been taken for granted_, Percy noted to himself, closing his eyes as the light temporarily blinded his sight.

The son of Poseidon had to pathetically laugh at himself as he sluggishly leaned against the stagecoach, banging once on the sides when the brown horses neighed too loudly for his appreciation. The horses were mocking him; or so, that was what processed in his mind as he glared heatedly at said animals. The three eldest sons of the suzerain, and even the man himself, observed him with quizzical looks while the son of Hades pointedly ignored his suffering companion.
In hindsight, venturing into the night and sneaking into their chambers three hours past midnight might not have been the best decision that Percy ever made, despite that it did lighten their moods immensely. His mind was crooning for him to rest; to bask further in the afterglow of a wonderful night out in the town. Sadly, that was not a luxury that he was permitted for a little while longer while they were bidding their goodbyes.

How Niccolò di Angelo could manage such a composed expression despite his evident fatigue was beyond Percy. The prominent dark circles underneath the son of Hades’ eyes did not escape from his knowledge, mostly due to the fact that he was always paying close attention to Niccolò di Angelo. Said male was preoccupied at the moment, skimming through their supplies whilst conversing with the chivying third son of Apollo who was only being partially restrained by an amused son of Hephaestus. The suzerain himself and his two eldest sons were observing the mostly one-sided exchange with slight amusement, though there was a certain wary expression that occasionally fleeted past their eyes.

“I think he gets your point, William,” Jake let out an exasperated sigh as he restrained the son of Apollo by the shoulder while the latter reprimanded the son of Hades for the umpteenth time.

“Yes. After the third time that you mentioned how I make ‘stupid decisions and travel with equally stupid companions’, I have understood your point completely,” Nico huffed in agreement to Jake, flashing an annoyed glare at the son of Apollo.

“Said ‘stupid companion’ is just a few feet away from either of you,” Percy commented, shielding his eyes from the sun. “We get it, Will. I get the ‘idiotic, irresponsible, stubborn, rebellious goof’ that was most likely directed towards me. By the gods, I think it’s miraculous how Jake can handle you.”

The son of Apollo arched a fine eyebrow at the comment, his expression becoming challenging in a mere second.

“I could easily get the healers to concoct a sedative drug to knock you out for a whole week,” the blond male threatened, his sky blue eyes narrowing.

“… I meant to say that Jacob should be more grateful for being allowed to be in the presence of such a vibrant ball of sunshine,” Percy muttered with a poker face, looking away when said son of Hephaestus eyed him in disbelief.

“Get in the stagecoach, Perseus. We all get that William is like a doting mother-hen,” the son of Hades sighed as he secured the last of their meager supplies before turning to face the family of the suzerain.
“He has the right to be, though perhaps he is showing it excessively,” the first son of Apollo – Leshem, or “Lee” for short – stated as he stepped closer to the son of Hades, pointedly ignoring his younger brother’s piercing glare at his comment.

If looks could kill, Lee believed that they would already be mourning for his own demise.

“Be safe; both of you. As per agreed, you have ten days to return. If you have to stay longer at Anemoi, ask one of their messengers to send a handwritten note from either of you. If we don’t receive a letter by the eleventh day, even I would not stop my father from informing Lord Poseidon and Lord Hades of your absence here in Ílios.

“… Or Will from being his reprimanding self when you two come back,” the son of Apollo finished in a low voice for only him and the son of Hades to hear.

“That would not happen,” Nico stated with such a firm conviction that the first heir almost completely believed it for a second.

Glancing back and forth between the heirs of Poseidon and Hades respectively, Lee could only mentally shake his head to retort the young man’s statement. Just that – the mere stubbornness of Perseus Tzákson and Niccolò di Angelo’s inquisitive nature – was enough to convince the future second suzerain that there was a high possibility that he and his father would have to address the fathers of said heirs. Truth be told, he did not want to entertain the idea.

“I promise,” Nico added as an afterthought, respectfully bowing in the presence of the family before he wordlessly entered the stagecoach.

Admittedly, it appeased Lee a bit; Nico’s promise. If there was one thing that was admirable of the son of Hades, it was his high regards for his promises; that they would be fulfilled regardless of circumstances.

A hand stopped Percy as he was about to enter the stagecoach, grasping firm on one of his shoulders. With a startled expression, the son of Poseidon cautiously turned to face the suzerain, gazing directly into vibrant yet unfathomable sky blue eyes. Lord Apollo did not bother to conceal his doubt on allowing the young heirs be on their own, but one look at their features told him that any form of restraints would be fruitless on his part.
“Protect him, will you?” Apollo stated in a low whisper for the younger man’s ears only.

Sea-green eyes visibly dilated with surprise for a few seconds before gradually narrowing with undisguised suspicion.

“I find it hard to believe that you honestly meant that, my lord. I gather that you meant it the other way around.”

Lord Apollo lightly laughed at the comment, though there was a lack of amusement in his eyes. His lips relaxed into a knowing smile before he patted the son of Poseidon on the shoulder that he was grasping onto.

“Not all protection can be provided physically, son of Poseidon,” the suzerain concluded, dismissing said man with a light shove towards the stagecoach. “I will leave you to process that thought.”

Percy stared intently at the suzerain, his expression twisted to confusion as his mind tried to process – with immense difficulty – what was told of him. When it seemed that Lord Apollo was not going to clarify his words, the son of Poseidon offered a curt nod before wordlessly entering the stagecoach, closing the door with a small click.

“Remember my words, di Angelo. Ten days,” Lee called out as the coachman, a soldier they had specifically tasked to dress in the clothing of a common slave, took a firm yet relaxed hold on the reins before clicking his tongue to the horses to start.

Said son of Hades wordlessly acknowledged the reminder, nodding to the family in a gesture of farewell before he slowly drew the dark curtains across the windows, concealing both of the heirs from the view. Lord Apollo stared at the stagecoach as it gradually disappeared into view, blending amongst the countless carriages of nobles, merchants and commoners outside the vicinity of the palace. As much as the son of Poseidon did not excel as splendidly as the son of Hades in terms of knowledge, the suzerain was certain that Percy would figure out his parting words.

Niccolò di Angelo was a wild card, and that could be equally interpreted as a positive or negative asset. True to his words, the son of Hades required such miniscule physical protection; the young man could defend himself much splendidly, exceeding some of the suzerains themselves. But the mind of the heir… that comprised much of the doubts Lord Apollo still had at that moment.

Most often than not, when Niccolò di Angelo had to make decisions regarding matters that tend to
get too personal to him, his judgement would strike him from the back. That was what Lord Apollo feared most; that the son of Hades would make a decision that might be exceedingly reckless on his part. The fact that Percy – that stubborn lad – was with him did not make the situation any better. The son of Poseidon, true to Lord Apollo’s belief, was the *Achilles’ heel* of Niccolò di Angelo. And if that would have to be proven true, there was that likely chance that the son of Hades would determinedly place his own safety beneath the older heir. The implication of that did not sit well with the suzerain.

“200 drachmas. di Angelo lacks trust. It would take Percy at least three months to admit that he harbors more than platonic feelings for Nico.”

His train of thoughts halted at the casual statement, and Lord Apollo slowly turned around to face his three eldest sons who seemed to be currently engaged in a wager. The suzerain had to mentally shake his head at the mischief that was gleaming in their eyes.

*And they brand me as childish,* Lord Apollo mused.

“300. Six months. The son of Poseidon seems to be denying it himself. Gods know his reasons;” Michael, who had been mostly silent the whole time, stated while arching a brow at his younger brother in a challenging manner.

“You two are insensitive, gambling with the feelings of those two…” Lee remarked, shaking his head disapprovingly at his brothers, before a mischievous smile curled his lips. “Make that 500. A year. They will probably circle each other first until one of them becomes daring or desperate enough to keep the other close. Most likely, that will be Percy though.”

“1000. No time limit. Percy will admit to it, and they would be debating on the many grounds of their relationship and make a fool of themselves in the process. Either way and in the end, Percy would be the one harboring lovesick eyes between the two of them, though he will constantly be in denial of it,” Apollo stated with a firm conviction, patting the shoulders of his sons as he sauntered past them, heading back inside his palace.

The three heirs kept silent; it was an established agreement that it was foolish to wager an amount higher than their father’s – who was much powerful and richer than any of them.

The son of Hephaestus repressed his urge to laugh at the exchange, though he failed to keep the amusement from seeping past his features as his teeth did peek out a little from between his lips. If he had to side with one person, he supposed he would have to agree with what the suzerain stated. He was not very observant, but he was not blind. He *did* see how Percy and Nico interacted – *gravitated*
towards each other naturally. Their gestures could never lie as much as their mouths would.

Lord Apollo inhaled deeply, lifting his head up just the slightest bit to stare at a familiar figure from one of the windows on the hallway facing the town, meeting a pair of piercing black eyes. He did not need a verbal clarification to know that those eyes had observed everything.

*If you have been observing everything, then you should know what the future has in store for the two of them.*

Those piercing black eyes narrowed into slits at the knowing smile that adorned the suzerain’s lips. Without as much as a wave or a gesture to excuse herself, the daughter of Bellona walked forth and down the hallway, never sparing a glance back to the amused Lord Apollo.

Chapter End Notes

Name(s):
Ø (Luke Castellan) Lucas Theodosios Castellan
====== Theodosios: “gracious gift”
Ø (Chris Rodriguez) Chrysostom Steafan Rodriguez
====== Chrysostom: “golden-mouthed”
====== Steafan: “victorious”
Ø (Cecil) Cecil Homerus
====== Homerus: “Security”
Ø (May Castellan) Maia Castellan
====== Maia: "nursing mother."
====== In mythology, this is the name of the eldest of the Pleiades and mother of Hermes by Zeus.

The full names of most of the characters are provided at the link below. That page is subjected to change as the story progresses.
Link: [HERE](#)

Thank you for reading this chapter! Until the next chapter!
Updates from this point is once every two weeks. Any delay, I would notify you guys through author's note. For now, please enjoy this chapter and do tell me how you like it or what you think of it. :) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“How each man kills the thing he loves
   By each let this be heard
   Some do it with a bitter look
   Some with a flattering word
   The coward does it with a kiss
   The brave man with a sword”

— “The Ballad Of Reading Gaol” by Oscar Wilde

The relentless pacing of the first heir was getting him more irked by the second, and his sole obsidian-black eye twitched occasionally to physically express his growing irritation. His right hand hovered close to the hilt of his sword, yet he lacked initiative to unsheathe the vicious weapon. He was not a fool – the difference in their prowess was overwhelming – and he had a clear understanding of how any form of violence on his part would result simply to an injured pride; humiliation. Though, the option of violence was slowly becoming too enticing as that athletic and muscular build paced to and fro from in front of him for the umpteenth time.

“I swear by the gods, Luke. If you do not take a sit in the next few seconds, I will not hesitate to call upon your brothers to help me subdue you,” was the growled threat.

Said man snarled viciously in response, cobalt-blue eyes glaring indignantly at his companion for a full minute before breaking the contact with an exasperated sigh. A calloused hand carelessly weaved through his short-cropped sandy blond hair, stopping short at his nape before clasping firmly on the pendant at the base of his neck. The silver caduceus glinted exquisitely against the light.

“I have a lot on my mind right now, Ethan. Don’t test me,” Luke said with gritted teeth, glaring once...
The heir briskly walked towards the open window on his study room, his fingers gingerly tracing the rich mahogany frame as he peered at the expanse of the district. The emanating pleasant mood beyond the walls of the residence merely agitated the blond male further, and Luke had to divert his eyes once more to the bleak interior of his study room to ease himself.

Ethan repressed the urge to roll his eye at the sight, and wisely chose instead to approach the roll-top desk that was pressed against the ecru-painted wall near the door. Grasping onto the tambour door, he carelessly rolled it up until it slammed back fully, revealing the piled notes sprawled atop of the desk. It was all a series of reports from the *hounds* – the informants from Anemoi that were scattered across the entire Pangaea – with occasional handwritten requests from officials within and outside the district. There was no logic as to how the notes were piled atop of the desk; placed with no sense of order and a lack of meticulous care. Though, Luke could not be blamed for his lack of personal order, Ethan thought to himself as he grasped onto the report that rested at the very top of the pile.

Luke did not trust the *hounds* of his father – the attendants George and Martha – and his mistrust was often the basis of his agitation when the pair would send alarming reports back to him. There was no questioning as to what was the reason – George was too much of a carefree coot. While Martha contradicted the man’s personality by being a serious individual by nature, it did not compensate enough for Luke. Aside from that, neither of them were working personally for Luke, and Luke simply distrusted those kind of individuals.

The lone obsidian-black eye scanned through the report with a neutral expression, though his lips quirked down by a fraction as he reached towards the bottom of the parchment. With the recent report the first heir received from the pair, the informant could see where all his agitation was stemming from.

*This is not good*, Ethan thought to himself as he placed the report down atop the desk once more.

“Have you taken any precautionary measures?” Ethan inquired without facing the heir, slowly adjusting the black eye patch that covered his left eye.

“You only need to know that the perimeter has been thoroughly secured,” Luke grunted as he plucked the report from the desk, reading it for the umpteenth time as he casually seated himself on the cream double chaise longue by the window. “The rest that I have in mind needs to be consulted with Niccolò di Angelo first, for these decisions have much to do with the allying districts.”

“And since we have *that* problem and an unwelcomed company, engaging in direct meetings with
the other suzerains is currently not an option you can take,” the informant concluded on behalf of the heir.

“That, and because Niccolò di Angelo is indispensable. Since neither Thanatos nor I am willing to risk the safety of our respective districts in our absence, having the second son of Hades make the visitation and decision in Thanatos’ place balances things out. There is, after all, no one in the entire Pangaea that Thanatos trusts most with these decisions than his half-brother,” Luke answered, folding the report in his hand before he leaned back against his seat. His knees bounced incessantly, earning a disapproving glare from his companion once more.

“You hold high regards for the kid.” It was a statement, not a question.

The first heir of Anemoi nodded in confirmation nonetheless, handing the report to his informant for the latter to place back on his roll-top desk. The dark-haired male took it with a grunt, tossing the parchment carelessly on top of the pile before redirecting his attention to the blond male. Luke, by then, had fully inclined his entire frame on the chaise longue. His right leg folded underneath his perfectly stretched out left lower limb; the man had no regards for the miniscule dirt stains that were falling off of his combat boots.

Luke was physically fatigued, and that was emphasized by the dark circles underneath his cobalt-blue eyes which were similarly lackluster. Ethan could say the same for himself, as he travelled from one district to another to carry out the tasks that were appointed to him by the heir. Luke himself had been tirelessly managing through on his own as much as was possible, and it was absolutely difficult at the present as his movements were restricted. It was absolutely frustrating.

“There exists hierarchy in this world that we live in, Ethan Nakamura,” Luke murmured as he closed his eyes. “It does not have a definitive form or basis, but it does exist regardless of how much we abhor of it. That hierarchy exists in clusters of people as much as it exists amongst us individually.”

“We exist in a hierarchy where vermin like Lord Zeus and Lord Ares are deemed indispensable by the people who are ridiculous enough to believe their deceiving words. Similarly, we exist in that hierarchy where the righteous govern the districts, with the interest of their people on their minds.

“By birth, Niccolò di Angelo was placed on a high pedestal; amongst the few that possessed the right to exist at the top. But he had proven himself well on his own, and he is by far the most indispensable amongst us all, even if he himself does not acknowledge his own worth…” Luke trailed off, his eyes slowly opening once more before lifting up slightly just to stare at the lone obsidian-black eye. “It should not be a universal truth, but it has become one – that our lives, you and I, are dispensable in comparison to people like him.”
The informant’s eye narrowed at that statement, but he did not refute it for it was the unfortunate truth. It did not make him feel less degraded nonetheless.

“Why am I even putting up with you?” the informant breathed in a low voice, his eye unable to resist from twitching as the blond male smiled with utmost yet wicked confidence.

“Because I was the one who saved you when no one else would. And now, you are too burdened with your gratitude to consider the option of leaving my side,” was the amused response.

Ethan had to smile in amusement at that, though there was a hint of disbelief in his obsidian-black eye that startled Luke. With a slow shake of his head, the informant sauntered towards the door, pausing once he had opened it to look at the first heir who was still lying down.

“Gratitude is easily paid through riches or service, not commitment. Perhaps you should reconsider that you would be amongst those righteous leaders, and I am merely serving you for I know you would become just as indispensable in the future. Rethink your worth, Luke.”

With those parting words, the man completely walked out of the room with the disbelieving muffled laughter of the first heir of Anemoi resounding in his mind.

In hindsight, if sleeping on a stagecoach was impossible, being inside one for hours was intolerable.

If only the son of Poseidon realized that being on a stagecoach was much torturous than being out in the open sea, he would have vehemently insisted that they be spared two horses instead, consequences and safety be damned. Unfortunately, that realization only set in a few hours thereafter leaving the suzerain’s palace.

The silence of his companion during the duration of their travel was maddening as the son of Hades would blatantly ignore his presence or attempts at conversation over the small book he borrowed from the library inside the palace. While Percy could have taken the same approach as well, it was unfortunate that he possessed a specific condition which made the action too taxing. But that was not the point.

Niccolò di Angelo was shutting himself off from him once more, and whether the young man was doing it consciously or not, Percy knew not of. It was not until the end of the first day when they
were settled in an inn on a village, and bid each other goodnight that Percy realized Nico had not turned the page of his book a single time. It was the start of the second day that Percy realized that Nico had been brooding, that ever so familiar distant expression present in his eyes. Percy hated it, and he did what he would always do to snap the young man from it.

Said young man was now glaring at him from across the stagecoach, a pale hand twitching occasionally at the hilt of the stygian iron sword. The book he had been reading was now in the possession of the son of Poseidon, placed aside on the space beside the older male. Though Percy seemed composed on the outside, he was internally debating with himself if he had made the wrong move when the intensity of Nico’s glare did not diminish with each passing second.

“Talk to me, Nico.”

The son of Hades snorted in response, the grip he had on the hilt of his sword tightening as he leaned back against his seat.

“And I suppose you have to snatch my book away just to do that,” Nico remarked in a low voice.

“You were neither reading it nor were you actually talking to me, Nico,” Percy sighed, his frame hunching forward until his elbows rested against his thighs. “You haven’t flipped a page since yesterday, and I know well that look in your eyes when you are brooding. So tell me: what is it that is bothering you?”

“Has it ever occurred to you that your concern often comes across as you being nosy instead?” Nico said, his eyes narrowing by a fraction.

“I thought you appreciate genuine people? I am being the genuine me by being concerned of your well-being. By prying, if I must.” Percy stated with a shrug, his eyes transfixed on Nico’s. His lips parted once more, only the words left his lips slowly and in a cautious tone. “Is it the words of that daughter of Lady Aphrodite? Is that what has been bothering you?”

Instead of the violent reaction that Percy suspected he would receive, Nico sighed in response to the inquiry then heaved an amused laugh the second thereafter. With the meager light that was streaming inside, the son of Poseidon could barely decipher the expressions in those eyes.

“We are already adults, Percy. It would be immature if I would allow petty comments to disturb me so much,” Nico replied, crossing his arms over his chest as his eyes drifted to the curtains by the door.
instead. Percy could imagine that he rolled his eyes to ridicule his query. “I have a thousand thoughts going through my mind, and none of them are definitive. You wonder what is bothering me; I wonder that myself.”

“I’m sorry,” Percy murmured, looking away as well. “I just… You were being silent.”

“And it makes you restless?”

“It makes me wonder if something was wrong,” Percy answered, pausing before correcting himself. “If I had done something wrong.”

“Percy, the only mistakes you can commit are ones that involve your safety,” Nico said in a low voice that almost sounded soft to the son of Poseidon’s ears. “You have never done me wrong – that is my role – and I am eternally grateful that The Moirai somehow slipped, allowing for me to meet you.”

“And Jason?” Percy asked, and immediately wished he had not when the son of Hades visibly stiffened.

Their brief conversation two nights ago regarding the son of Zeus plagued Percy’s mind since then; had plagued his mind continuously, and especially in moments of silence. In that confined space within the stagecoach and the long hours of silence that stretched between them since the day before, the conversation played through his mind a lot. It irked him – it was as simple as that. And as for the reason, he chose not to verbally acknowledge.

“I am grateful of that as well. He was… is a good friend,” Nico cautiously answered in a voice barely above a whisper. “But truth be told… I am just slightly more grateful to have met you. You pulled me out of my personal hell when most of them just simply gave up.”

“Just slightly above? I thought I was the greatest blessing in your life,” Percy joked, but the broadening smile on his lips indicated just how thrilled he was with the young man’s response.

“Get someone else to stroke your ego, Tzákson,” the son of Hades huffed in displeasure, but there was amusement in his tone that contradicted otherwise.

“It’s much better when you do it, di Angelo,” the son of Poseidon grinned, plucking the book from
beside of him before placing it atop of the other male’s lap. “This conversation is also much better than reading… *The Ruin of Palaiá Rómi Empire*… Huh. The historians have such morbid fascination.”

Nicolò di Angelo sighed at the offhanded comment, grasping the book in his hand firmly before using it to hit the older male’s head in a chastising manner – just enough for it to hurt. The son of Poseidon yelped at the pain, sitting back completely against his seat as he lifted a hand to massage his head. Nico’s lips twitched in slight amusement at the sight, but he schooled his expression immediately, flipping through the pages of the book before reading it out loud to the son of Poseidon.

It was not exactly ideal, but Percy would take it as he listened to his low voice, allowing for it to fill the silence in the confined space.

Soldiers were patrolling at the borders, Nico mused to himself as they reached Anemoi on the third day. It was not an uncommon sight in some of the districts, but there was a tension in the air that unnerved the son of Hades. The soldiers did not seem to be patrolling, but rather preparing themselves for an anticipated conflict. And if Niccolò di Angelo was certain of one thing, it was that his intuition never lies.

Percy had noticed his reaction, and almost stuck his head out then to survey the area. A foolish move, truly, and Nico exclaimed the same thing in his mind as he firmly slammed his right foot beside the son of Poseidon’s head before the latter could stick his head out. Percy’s breath hitched at the dangerous gesture, but one look at the son of Hades had him swallow all the complaints at the tip of his tongue. It was probably ridiculous, how the son of Hades had calmly conversed with the soldier through the slightly withdrawn curtain in that awkward position.

And when the stagecoach started to move once more, Percy blurted out the only thing that processed in his mind after the shock of having a boot nearly squash his face left his body.

“You have well-defined legs.”

… Which was, apparently, not what he should have stated as Niccolò di Angelo dropped his foot and squashed it on top of Percy’s left foot. If it was not for his immense focus on trying to suppress the pained groans from escaping his lips, there might have been the possibility that Percy could have noticed the faint blush that dusted the son of Hades’ cheeks at his comment.
The rest of the ride was uneventful as the son of Poseidon was prohibited from pulling back the dark curtains – even if only by a centimeter – by his companion. Yet, as much as he was burning with curiosity, he was intent on keeping his promise to Nico that he would not cause the younger man more trouble. It was evident in that moment when their stagecoach passed through the borders of Anemoi that Percy had limited say on what would happen thereafter. There was a silent yet mutual understanding between them. Ílios was Percy’s territory, but Anemoi… Anemoi was Nico’s.

If Percy wanted to survive, he had to play by the rules which Niccolò di Angelo would set.

“You need to listen to what I am about to say, Percy,” Nico murmured without sparing a glance at his direction. The son of Poseidon briefly saw thick iron gates, which denoted in his mind that they were close.

“The moment I announce to Luke that someone is with me, there is that high chance that he will greatly disapprove of it. The moment you show them your face, there is also the high chance that the soldiers would lunge at you for the enemy that they think you are. For this to work in our favor…” Percy was certain that Nico meant ‘for you to actually live’. “I need for you to entrust everything to me. That means that you have to be absolutely quiet, no matter what happens. If Luke were to address you, you only have to answer what you think is necessary. Nothing more, nothing less. Can you do that for me?”

“I can try—“

“Can you do that for me?” Nico intervened before the older male could finish his statement.

“… I can,” Percy answered slowly, uncertainly. He took a deep breath before answering once more, his voice oozing with more conviction. “I can.”

“Good,” Nico sighed in relief before sitting upright.

The son of Hades ensured that his weapons were secured at his side before silently gesturing for Percy to do the same. Percy would not verbally admit that he was experiencing slight trepidation at the critical instruction that he was given. Being in Anemoi so far was rather unnerving in comparison to Ílios and, to some extent, he was slowly grasping onto the reason why Lord Apollo and his family, and Nico, were adamant on having him stay.

The stagecoach completely halted after a few minutes, and to Percy, it seemed like hours before the
soldier that was appointed to them knocked lightly, indicating that they had finally arrived. Wordlessly, the son of Hades slowly raised himself partially off of his seat, giving a final pointed glance at his companion before he pushed the door open, slamming it behind him less than a second thereafter. Percy did not miss how the son of Hades maneuvered his body, shielding him as much as possible from view as he exited from the limited space.

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As much as Niccolò di Angelo expected the first heir of Anemoi to be present upon his arrival, a sliver of himself had hoped that that would not be the case. Once again, the Moirai mocked him as said heir was standing at the bottom of the steps to their stately home with his half-brothers – the captains of the Anemoi military – grinning expectantly by his side. Lucas Theodosios Castellan, in Nico’s perspective, seemed to have slightly aged in the many months that they have not seen each other. Perhaps it was fatigue taking its toll on the heir’s body, and it was evident in how he seemed to appear less healthy in comparison to his state in Nico’s previous visit.

The first heir of Anemoi was almost the splitting image of the suzerain when Lord Hermes was around the same age, if the thick and deep pale scar on Luke’s face was disregarded. It was, Luke had told him once, the only part of him that he regarded as a flaw, and a constant and painful reminder. It was also a part of his features that prominently set him apart from his half-siblings.

“Niccolò di Angelo. I have been expecting you,” Luke greeted the young heir formally, foregoing other pleasantries as he gestured for the son of Hades to follow him inside.

Nico grunted in return, but remained where he stood firmly, causing Luke to arch one of his brows at the questionable gesture. There was no best way to breach the topic but to be straightforward, the son of Hades had to begrudgingly admit when it came to the son of Hermes. As inconspicuous as he could manage, he surveyed the vicinity, noting the number of soldiers nearby and looking expectantly at his direction. He was slowly regretting more his decision of bringing Percy by the second.

“I have someone with me. He is under my protection.”

As soon as he stated that, the soldiers reacted immediately, inching closer with their hands resting atop the hilt of their swords. Nico reacted just as much without diverting his eyes from Luke’s speculative gaze. The Stoll brothers were intrigued, as far as Nico could see, and he certainly did not appreciate the sneaky looks on the eyes of said two.

“I believe that I sent an invitation only to you. Why did you bring another person?” Luke inquired in
“It would take a long time to explain, and I would rather do so only in your presence,” the son of Hades answered, keeping his expression neutral as he spoke.

Inching closer towards the stagecoach, Nico knocked twice on the door before taking a calculated step back when it parted open as his companion cautiously stepped out.


“I said, he is under my protection,” Nico snarled as he directed his attention to the approaching guards who immediately halted when the son of Hades lifted his sword by an inch from its scabbard. “Anyone who dares to harm even a strand of his hair dies.”

Luke narrowed his eyes at the threat while repressing the urge to release an exasperated sigh. Niccolò di Angelo never took his threats lightly, and if he said he would commit to something, he would actually execute it. Right now, the last thing he needed was a lack of cooperation with the son of Hades. Asking his guards to stand down was the most logical course of action, but…

Travis and Connor, on the other hand, either did not comprehend the situation or sensed the lack of threat as they casually approached the sons of Hades and Poseidon with crooked smiles.

“Perseus—No, Percy Tzákson, right?” Travis, Nico determined, stated as he and his brother stopped a few feet from him and Percy.

“Messy black hair that always makes the man look as if he just got out of bed, but somehow makes it work… sea-green eyes that look like twin whirlpools, and… unless Lord Triton de-aged, he certainly is the man,” Connor commented, leaning forward slightly, his eyes narrowing as he tried to examine the startled son of Poseidon. “That’s Leo’s description, right?”

“Valdez was never good with descriptions. But, Lord Poseidon only has three living sons as far as I know, and the youngest is just a child. This one does not have Triton’s ‘Punch me’ face, so this must be the man,” Travis confirmed with a broad grin.

“Stop fooling around, you two,” Luke barked out, glaring at his half-siblings whose grins broadened
instead in response.

“Come on, Luke. You know Nico,” Connor said with a slight roll of his eyes as he turned to face his eldest brother. “He would never bring the son of Poseidon here if he could not trust the guy completely. Nico is not that reckless. Maybe a bit stupid, but we need to hear his explanation first.”

“Shut up, Connor.” Both Luke and Nico snapped at the same time, glaring at each other for a second before pointedly glaring at the younger brunette.

“Εἰςαὶ Ἰλίθιος, δι Άγγελο,” Luke stated after a few seconds as he lifted a hand to his temple and began massaging it. A headache was coming; he could sense it. He could also sense that Ethan was laughing from his view at his study room.

Luke dropped his hand after a full minute, inhaling deeply as if to clear his mind before he looked at the guards who flinched at the intensity of the first heir’s glare.

“Go back to your posts. Tell the other soldiers that a son of Poseidon is within our borders, and is temporarily within or protection. If the news leaks out to the people, regardless of who caused it, I will personally request for the son of Hades to execute punishment to all of you. Am I understood?” Luke said in a menacing voice.

“Yes, sir!” was the chorused response before the soldiers briskly dispersed.

The son of Hades did not budge from his position, and his eyes never left the son of Hermes even as the hostility in them faded to a mere dull. Nico did shift his eyes for a second at his companion, just to check on his condition, only to find amusement brimming in those sea-green eyes. There was also contemplation, but the amusement was much prominent.

Nico redirected his attention once more to Luke, only to find that the son of Hermes was looking at him with mild disdain. The blond had his arms crossed over his chest, which was rising and falling heavily to indicate that the man was taking deep breaths. Nico was familiar with his gestures to know what it meant.

Luke was pissed.

“That’s quite an irony coming from you,” the son of Hades challenged in an equally low voice, resisting the urge to hit the Stoll brothers when said siblings whistled at his statement.

“You haven’t been here for ten minutes and you are already testing my patience. Out of all that I know, I expected you to be the one to lessen my burden, not add to it,” Luke turned his back to him before walking inside the stately home. “Follow me. Travis and Connor would bring the son of Poseidon to your bedchambers.”

“Before you protest,” Luke turned his head to the side, speaking once more before the son of Hades could interject. “The two of you will share a room in the duration of your stay. Consider that as one of your compensations for bringing a guest unannounced.”

Nico gritted his teeth at that, silently accepting the condition while simultaneously preventing himself from saying anything that was unnecessary. Trying to maintain his composure, Nico pointedly glanced at the Stoll brothers before gesturing to the son of Poseidon with his head.

“Stay with him until I get back?” Nico requested.

“No need to ask us, kid,” Travis commented, ignoring the glare he received from the son of Hades from being addressed as a kid. “Go deal with Luke.”

“Be safe,” Nico murmured to Percy before he briskly walked towards the direction where Luke disappeared off to.

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“So…”

The younger of the Stoll brothers breathed after a moment as they redirected their attention to the son of Poseidon who seemed to be at unease. Sea-green eyes were still transfixed at the direction where Niccolò di Angelo disappeared off to, his body gravitating towards it as he subconsciously inched forward. The siblings observed with a quizzical look for a few good seconds before Travis cleared his throat to garner Percy’s attention. At least, even just a sliver of it.
“My name is Travis Stoll,” the eldest of the two started when it was evident that the son of Poseidon would not introduce himself first. “This is my younger brother, Connor.” He gestured with his thumb to his younger brother. “We’re not twins, by the way. Heavy misconception with new people.”

Percy nodded slowly to that.

“My name is Perseus Tzákson, but I would prefer if you call me Percy. Nico explained that to me; that you two are not twins,” the son of Poseidon cautiously answered, his eyes shifting back and forth between the brothers. “But I can see why the people make the wrong deductions.”

Connor laughed at the statement, an amused twinkle in his cobalt-blue eyes – a common feature between the children of Lord Hermes, it seems – as he gestured for Percy to follow them inside their stately home. It was not as grand as the palace in Ílios – that was Percy’s initial thought – but it offered a much domesticated vibe. The interior was themed to a previous era – Percy wondered if it was the Early Middle Ages – which was interesting, and offered quite convincing the idea of living in an environment around that time. It was vast and spacious, lacking of furniture that was so abundant in Ílios. It was not extravagant, but it certainly had that appeal of a sense of freedom.

“Use our heights as basis. Travis is taller,” Connor stated as they sauntered towards a wide corridor, presumably leading Percy to the bedchambers as Luke had instructed. “Oh, and you don’t need to be so tight-lipped and reserved with us. Being strict is entirely a Luke trait. You’d be surprised how the rest of us, our father inclusive, are quite carefree. Though I suppose, Luke being strict is his way of showing how he’s taking his succession seriously.”

Percy decided to trust the son of Hermes, visibly relaxing in their presence. Not completely, but it was adequate for the sons of Hermes to grin in approval.

“He’s not pleased with me being here.” It was a statement, not a question. “Where are he and Nico headed to?”

“Training grounds,” Travis answered, turning around the corner to another long corridor. “To spar. Or to scare the soldiers by making it look like a duel to the death. It’s actually funny to watch the soldiers getting deathly pale when either of them manage to injure the other. Small cuts though.”

“They don’t fatally injure each other,” Connor added upon realizing that Percy was that close to bolting from them in that instant to find the son of Hades after hearing Travis’ words. “You rarely get to see them at it when Nico visits. It usually starts with Luke getting pissed, then Nico adding fuel to the fire. Today is just one of those cases. The kid can handle himself if his safety concerns you. You should know that the kid is one of those selected few that Luke spars with, just because they are
“Yeah. And don’t worry about Luke’s attitude. He just has a lot on his plate recently,” Travis continued. “Though he can just ask us to handle some of them, he’s very adamant on shouldering all the burden. He expects a lot of himself, not only because he is the eldest, but because he wants to stand on the same ground as Lord Thanatos. The man did set a high standard when he stepped up as the next suzerain of Skotádi. Grand celebration then too.”

“Both of you were there?” Percy inquired with mild surprise.

“Of course,” both brothers answered at the same time before Connor elaborated further. “Our district is in an alliance with theirs. It is customary on our part, and it shows that we acknowledge Lord Thanatos as the second suzerain of Skotádi, and that we give our blessings. The families of Lady Athena, Lord Dionysus and Lady Demeter appeared as well. In the case of the other districts, only the current suzerains attended the ceremony for… hmm… safety measures on their part.”

“It was tense. Lord Zeus, the old man, was not too pleased with Lord Hades’ heir being the first to succeed in our generation. He can’t blame it on Herakles though. It’s not Herakles’ fault that his father did not use his “virility” sooner,” Travis remarked, grinning from ear to ear as he and Connor high-fived while Percy covered his face while shaking his head. “Though Herakles did live up to be like Lord Zeus, unfortunately. Lady Demeter and Lord Hades argued as usual, but not in a catastrophic sense. You can’t pity Lord Hades though; he had to know what he was getting himself to when he decided to wed Lady Persephone.”

Percy had to nod at that; it was the only information he understood completely. Lady Persephone is the most favored daughter of Lady Demeter, and was initially the first heir of Gi until her marriage to the former suzerain of Skotádi. Lady Demeter abhorred any suitors of his daughter, adamant on keeping the maiden then firmly to her side. As it was, she did not approve of the marriage – still does not, at the present – and demanded that her daughter be returned to her; traditions of consorts be damned. Of course, Lord Hades would not permit that, and it was only with the intervention of many that they established a compromise. For the first six months of a year, Lady Persephone was to stay at Gi, and the rest at Skotádi. It was not ideal for both, but it was a compromise that they had to accept. Since Lady Persephone became the consort to the suzerain of one of the main districts, the succession to the district was passed onto an illegitimate child of Lady Demeter.

Additionally, Lady Demeter did not adore either sons of Hades, but had taken a liking to the sole daughter instead. Despite the fact that Lord Thanatos is a child of her Persephone, she got along much better with Nico – the illegitimate child of Lord Hades with a noblewoman – with the dull reasoning that Thanatos was too much like their father and that the Nico was much “flexible to work with.”
“Either way, there should be one in your district soon, right? Since Triton – gods forbid – is succeeding in a few months’ time,” Travis continued when the son of Poseidon did not make any comment. “Your brother is the eldest amongst the four heirs after all.”

“I’m not too sure,” Percy answered truthfully, his brows furrowing. “I know that Beckendorf and Lee would succeed the following year. But I am not informed of Lady Artemis’ heir; most of us are not.”

“Her name is Zoe. Zoe Nightshade,” Connor supplied. “Aside from her name and her status, we know nothing about her. Selini has always been that one district that is difficult to keep track of.”

Percy noticed the slight pause in the son of Hermes’ voice but did not comment or react visibly to it. He knew that ‘track’ was just the diminished term of ‘infiltrate’; he had known from Nico of that delicate information, which might cost him a lot if he were to reveal his limited knowledge. It was difficult to imagine that the district ran in that certain inappropriate fashion, much more that the heirs seemed unfazed of it.

No, Percy shook his head. It was wrong to assume that they were unfazed. It was likely that they became accustomed to the system to the point that they did not question it further. It was simply the environment which they were raised in.

“So… You and di Angelo.” It was not a subtle change in topic, and Percy was aware that the brothers thought similarly. Nonetheless, he allowed Travis to continue. “I know he has business here, but why did he bring you? I don’t mean that in a negative way, but the kid never brings anyone here and with you being… well… the son of Lord Poseidon, his actions are much questionable. Unless we go by… traditions of consorts—”

“All right, I will stop you right there,” Percy grumbled, halting in his steps as the sons of Hermes faced him with mischief gleaming in their eyes and their lips tilted in a crooked smile. “The answer is no, and I can’t tell you the reason why. Only he has the right to explain it to anyone.”

The brothers assessed him with undiscernible expressions, but there was one that prominently stood out initially, and Percy could tell that they were not convinced of his response. He was already expecting for the worst – his hand subtly inching close to the hilt of his sword – but the brothers wordlessly turned away once more, resuming their pace as they guided the son of Poseidon to the bedchambers. They mumbled mostly to themselves, barely audible to the son of Poseidon, but Percy did vaguely heard a mumbled ‘Suit yourself’.

The silence stretched on as they walked further inside the stately home, and Percy used that
opportunity to assess his surroundings. The stately home might not be as grand as the Palace of Yákinthos, but how ironic that it was much easier to get lost inside it. There was little the son of Poseidon could use to distinguish which room was which, or which corridor led to a specific location. He could only trust his sense of direction, but even that was inadequate.

“Well, here we are,” Connor declared after a while, and Percy’s wandering eyes suddenly focused on the younger Stoll brother.

Percy mentally berated himself as the son of Hermes pushed the door to the said bedchamber open. How many corridors did they pass through? How many twists and turns did they take? Percy noted none of that, and in his musings, the directions he took became a jumbled mess in his mind.

The three heirs entered the sparsely-decorated bedchambers, closing the door behind them. Stepping further inside the room while assessing insignificant details such as how it was only dimly lit and how the bed was just adequately big, Percy could tell that this was Nico’s room in his stays at Anemoi. But it was not the condition of the room or the meager furnishings that indicated that, no. It was the faint scent of petrichor that immediately assaulted the son of Poseidon’s senses upon entering; that same scent that naturally lingered on the son of Hades amongst other scents.

Percy slowly approached the bed, leaning down to caress the dark silken sheets and the shamrock-green cotton blankets. He had to smile slightly at the odd color combination.

“So… As much as you possibly want to be left alone to rest, Nico asked us to watch over you until then,” Travis commented as he seated himself on a beige couch placed against the wall on the left side of the room. Connor followed. “I would say that you think it would be unnecessary, and yes – that might be the case given a different time, but your added presence surely would have Luke asking us to do the same thing.”

“Why? He has my word that I won’t cause any trouble. I can defend myself physically as well, if that is an issue,” Percy grunted and allowed for the smile to drop from his lips, feeling offended that he was once more being treated less than what his capabilities were worth.

“Nico probably did not know it as well…” Travis answered, swinging his legs up and resting them atop his younger brother’s lap. Connor narrowed his eyes at his brother. “… but we have another important guest on the house.”
It was a mutual agreement in their books to *never* commit to an action that would push the other over the edge, but it was an agreement that both sons of Hades and Hermes seem to dismiss on more than one occasion. It was horrible when either one of them would tend to snap, but both of them losing it at the same time was catastrophic.

The soldiers who were patrolling around the stately home had to do their utmost best to commit themselves to their duties when the heirs sparred heavily. *Heavily* was an understatement since, by the end of it, their clothes were tattered and their skins had discoloration on many parts due to the bruises that were forming. Neither were in a better state than the other, and if it were not for the fact that it was a common sight to the servants and the soldiers, the situation would have been handled… differently.

The first instance that it happened was *bad. Really bad.* It was only Luke’s menacing threats to the soldiers and servants that prevented them from informing the suzerain of Anemoi of subsequent sparring sessions that followed. The involvement of the suzerain of Anemoi once was enough, and despite that Luke was his most favored son, he could only be too lenient. Lord Hermes eventually considered the sparring sessions as… *therapeutic* for his son, but whenever he determined it as too violent, the suzerain would step in. That was the last thing the son of Hermes needed, and the wrath that followed was the last thing neither the servants nor soldiers needed.

By the end of the second hour, Niccolò di Angelo had to reconsider that the draw could not compensate for his ruined tunic and mud-covered boots. While the latter had been dismissed with a servant to be cleaned, the damage to his tunic was irreparable to the point that he appeared to have been mauled by a wild beast. The amused glimmer in Ethan Nakamura’s visible eye was only deteriorating his mood further.

They were at Luke’s study room at the moment – at least, that was what Nico believed as he eyed the piles of report sitting in disarray atop of his table and some across the floor – and it was probably not ideal that the son of Hades was only half-dressed then. *There is no point in wearing bits of fabric and you might as well get partially cleaned so the smell does not soak to your skin,* Luke had stated before chucking a damp cloth at his direction. Right. It was not a convincing reason, but Nico would rather accept it than encounter anyone in the stately home who might overreact at his battered state and ultimately inform Lord Hermes. He had turned his back to the other two occupants in the room as he cleaned himself as much as was possible, before slinging the cloth against his left shoulder, substantially covering the mark on his chest.

“Before I offer my reason for asking you to come to Anemoi, I need you to tell me why you brought the son of Poseidon with you.”

Luke’s fully clothed state was mocking him.
“Would you like a fresh tunic, Nico? Of course, Luke, I would appreciate it very much,” the son of Hades said, temporarily dodging the topic as he glared at the son of Hermes.

“I sent one of the maids to get you a fresh tunic,” Luke automatically responded, his lips twitching the slightest in amusement, as if anticipating the foul mood of the son of Hades. “Now, answer my question.”

Niccolò di Angelo sighed at the inquiry, but ignored it for a few seconds as he seated himself on the double chaise longue, casually crossing his right leg atop the other as he leaned back.

“I am the Lieutenant Colonel of the First Division of the army of Thálassa. That does not necessarily mean that I have renounced my citizenship to Skotádi. Essentially, Perseus and I am… attached by the hip, for I serve to guard his life. You are well-aware that this is the first instance after almost three years since he last ventured outside of his home district. You called upon me when we were in Ílios. It should not be a question that I brought him,” the son of Hades answered in a tone that was almost monotonous. “I cannot disclose why I became a part of Thálassa’s army, but I can guarantee you that that is a mere show for my presence beside the son of Poseidon.”

“Cannot or would not?”

“Both. The latter is based on my pride as an heir.”

Cobalt-blue eyes narrowed at the response, but did not press further. Instead, Luke shifted his attention to his informant who simply raised his brow in return. Wordlessly, the first heir pointedly gestured to the door with his head. Ethan heaved a sigh at that, but nodded as he exited the room, silently following the order which Luke issued.

“He is your responsibility, di Angelo. Remember that,” Luke stated firmly, earning a curt nod from the son of Hades.

“I am aware of that. Lord Apollo stated the same,” Nico answered before crossing his arms over his chest. “That aside, there is a favor I needed to ask of you.”

“If that favor happened to be the reason why you had sent that black whistle weeks ago, then by all means, do tell,” Luke playfully crooned, folding his hands and using them as a platform to rest his chin on. “Of course, after you establish your payment, whatever favor you ask would be quite insignificant to me.”
“It is very significant,” Nico said, his voice completely serious. “It’s regarding Fai Zhang, the second heir to Pólemos. He is alive.”

The silence in the room was absolutely deafening. As much as Nico wanted to take humor in how those cobalt-blue eyes comically dilated in surprise, the son of Hades was certain that the information was no laughing matter in Luke’s mind. He could see how the gears were turning in the mind of the son of Hermes, analyzing the words that Nico uttered and determining if there was deceit of any form. But, with the adequate knowledge that they possessed regarding each other, Nico was sure that Luke knew that there was no lie in his statement.

At that point, Luke somehow wished that the son of Hades lied instead.

“I don’t even want to know his location or how you managed to find out an information that not even our hounds could not gather,” Luke grunted, raising a hand to massage his temples. “Just tell me what favor you need with that kind of information.”

“Tell Ethan to relay that information to Hazel. It’s fine if your hound lets my name slip. Else, Hazel would not believe it. But I need Ethan to tell her not to stop with her fruitless searches,” Nico stated firmly and with gritted teeth. “Right now, the least I need is a catalyst to start the war.”

“We might as well be heading to one with what I just found out,” Luke sighed, leaning back against his seat. “But we can discuss that tonight once you are well rested. I need your mind to be cooperating with me for this new issue I just received recently.”

“Is it bad?”

“If it is true, then everything might just become chaotic,” the son of Hermes answered truthfully before shaking his head. “I will send Ethan out in a few days. Perhaps it would be best that you send her a letter. That is much believable. Just instruct for her to burn it after reading.”

“I will consider it. Is that all that you needed to tell me? Because right now, the idea of resting on my bedchamber, despite doing so on the couch, is very tempting,” the son of Hades murmured.

“No. I have another reason for asking you to come to Anemoi,” Luke said, his tone taking a more cautious note as he observed the son of Hades attentively.
Rummaging through a drawer on his table, he plucked out a single parchment paper – creased on all edges, and folder and refolded so many times – and waved it slightly as he pointedly gazed at the son of Hades.

“What if I tell you that your biological sister, Bianca di Angelo, is well and alive?” Luke questioned, his eyes narrowing as he watched the gradual play of emotions in those russet-brown eyes.

“Regardless of how you interpret this information, I believe that you should still be aware of it. Do take note that before you feel any inclination to slit my throat with your dagger, I swear to the god – Lord Mercury – that I am not going to lie even for a single second about something as personal to you as this.”

Shock.

Disbelief.

Distrust.

Rage.

Those were some of the emotions that flashed through the son of Hades’ eyes before the young man lowered his head as the son of Hermes spoke. His disheveled locks slid forward slowly, covering much of his eyes – his raw and wild emotions – from the visibility of the first heir. There was a nagging voice at the back of his mind, beckoning for him to lash out at Luke and to accuse him of uttering lies, but the rational part of his mind would not indulge it.

Luke had sworn to their district’s patron god. By doing so, the first heir only emphasized firmly that there was no lie in what he had said and the words that would surely follow.

*Bianca di Angelo is well and alive.*

There was no reason for him not to believe in the son of Hermes’ words; not when the information was what he had hoped for in years. He should be happy, but… anger was ruling over him. He could sense it in his chest, and in the words that dangled precariously at the tip of his tongue. And
that feeling of betrayal – that same intense sense of betrayal that he had experience when he was just a mere child – was resurfacing once more.

If she was alive, why had she not come to see him?

“Where is she?” Nico demanded in a low voice, trying his best for the venom not to drip in his tone of voice.

“Selíni, but I don’t have the specific location. If my assumption is correct, she is serving as one of the Huntresses of Diana under the House of Artemis,” Luke supplied whilst carefully watching the son of Hades.

“That is equivalent to informing me that she is on the Eastern Hemisphere of Pangaea,” the son of Hades growled, his nails digging into his own arms. “How in Tartarus does that narrow down her location?”

The son of Hades slowly raised his head, revealing russet-brown eyes that were filled with a wild and untamed anger. Luke held his ground, keeping his composure intact as he spoke once more, but in a low voice.

“I said I don’t have the specific location. I did not say that no one has it. Do you not question why I am so pissed when the son of Poseidon came out of that stagecoach, di Angelo? I am much tolerant than you think, if you believed that the answer to that is irritation on my part. Two sons of the Big Three is already a risk. Three, on the other hand…” Luke trailed off before shaking his head.

Before the young man could demand from the son of Hermes of what the latter was saying, a loud series of knocks resounded throughout the room. Casually, Luke lifted both his feet, crossing one over the other as he rested them on an empty spot atop of his table. Closing his eyes while heaving a sigh in defeat, the son of Hermes loudly called for the person to come in.

“I need to speak with Nico,” Percy immediately stepped into the room and demanded of Luke, looking more frazzled than when they had arrived mere hours ago.

But before Percy could continue speaking, a slightly taller and familiar figure followed from behind, stopping just beside the son of Poseidon.
Nico’s mind stopped.

Niccolò di Angelo, in the past two years and so, had envisioned their next encounter so carefully in his mind; recited the words that he would tell that person the moment that they were to meet again. Yet, all the words died at the tip of his tongue, and his mind went blank for a moment as he stared at the person in shock.

It was amusing how nothing seemed to have changed much for that person for the past two or so years. His hair was that same tidy, military cropped blond hair that always annoyed him and Percy as it gave him that vibe of perfection. His electric blue eyes were the same as Nico remembered, perhaps much fatigued, but they held the same warmth that he could only vaguely recall at the present.

Yet at that moment, as their eyes met once more, Nico could not even stand staring at them for more than a few seconds, his head shifting to the side almost immediately to break the connection between their eyes.

“Hello, Nico.” Even without having to look at him, Nico could tell that the newcomer was smiling faintly, his lips curling and tugging at the small scar at the corner of his lips.

The fates were truly mocking him at this point.

“Jason,” was his hushed greeting.

Chapter End Notes

PERCICO EVENT ANNOUNCEMENT!
Hopefully, that got your attention, writers and readers alike. Percico Positivity Project, a Tumblr page, is hosting a Percico event on August 18 to August 28 that aims to promote Percico, and positivity in the pairing. The event on August has been announced at the link below, so if you are interested, please check it out! The admins are hoping to get the announcement to reach more fans, so if you want to help out, just pass on the message that there is an event on August please! :)

LINK TO THE ANNOUNCEMENT: HERE

Translation(s):
Eísaí ilíthios – You are stupid
The full names of most of the characters are provided at the link below. That page is subjected to change as the story progresses.
Link: HERE
Thank you for reading this chapter! Until the next chapter!
The Fine Line between Love and Hate

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Those who hate most fervently must have once loved deeply; those who want to deny the world must have once embraced what they now set on fire.”

- by Kurt Tucholsky

The pale body, battered and bruised, was occasionally assaulted by tremors as a damp cloth was gingerly and repeatedly pressed against the fresh bruises on the naked upper half of his body. The cold temperature inside the room was not lessening the tremors, rather adding to it as his damp skin was exposed. His companion, the only other person in the room, was silent the entire time while tending to him, not even lifting his head for a second to meet those russet-brown eyes. Nico could sense it – Percy was disappointed in him at that moment. The son of Poseidon never vocalized it, but it was evident in how he remained silent with his features scrunched up in displeasure.

“Percy?” Nico called out to the older male who stubbornly ignored him.

Those calloused hands continued to examine his skin, checking the expanse of it for any further bruises or recent cuts and diligently tending to them. Nico had known Percy for years to know that the anger of the older male was not directed to him. As much as it was his fault as was Luke’s, Nico was acquainted well with his old friend to know that Percy was directing all of it to the son of Hermes.

In truth, anger was the reaction that Niccolò di Angelo preferred much more in comparison to disappointment. Anger was an emotion that was easier to manage; easier to dismiss. Disappointment, however, was a much complex thing to handle.

“Percy,” Nico called out once more, grasping firmly on the hand that was pressing against the large bruise on his abdomen. “I’m sorry.”

The son of Poseidon was silent and unmoving for a full minute, his hand lax against Nico’s grasp. With his head downcast, those sea-green eyes were not visible to the son of Hades, and the young man had no chance at deciphering what was going on in Percy’s head. His silence was unnerving. Not knowing his thoughts was nearly maddening.
With a long sigh, Percy dropped the cloth onto his lap before flipping his hand, grasping Nico’s in his. Percy then raised his head bit by bit, looking at the son of Hades with impassive eyes.

“You are sorry, but you can’t exactly promise that this won’t happen again, can you?” Percy questioned before raising his other hand, flicking the son of Hades on the forehead. “Apologies are usually followed with ‘it won’t happen again’, but I figure that that does not apply to you, does it?”

“You can’t promise the same thing as well.”

It was the truth. By defending their districts, it was inevitable that there existed a tendency for them to get injured. At the end of a day – at the end of a bloodshed – they would either be considered as victors or additional casualties.

“I know,” the son of Poseidon smiled wryly at the statement, before using his free hand to stroke the exposed skin underneath his fingertips. “I didn’t notice it before. It’s hard to notice them in contrast with the tone of your skin.”

Multiple faded scars were scattered across Niccolò di Angelo’s torso. Most were miniscule, but some were very prominent in size. Percy possessed a fair share on his body, but it was not to the point that they covered most of his body. Scars heal, but they never fade. The fact that those scars were permanently etched onto Nico’s skin greatly bothered him.

“The first time, I almost died,” the son of Hades admitted, lifting his free hand to trace a huge faded scar on the right side of his chest. “I was careless, and there had been too many for one moment. One managed to sneak past my defense and… this happened. Thanatos had been so angry that he insisted to our father that the man who injured me was to be beheaded. Father… agreed.”

The son of Poseidon visibly swallowed at the information, his eyes dilated with surprise and mild fear. Thanatos, since their first meeting many years ago, was constantly watching over his half-brother, which both he and Jason always considered odd since their older half-brothers were the exact opposite with regards to them. Instead of expressing spite on Nico for being the illegitimate child that he was, Thanatos expressed no ill-feelings towards his half-brother and was rather attentive when it came to the young di Angelo’s well-being. At the end of it all, the reason why Thanatos was acting that way towards his half-brother did not matter to Percy. Nico deserved an older sibling figure like Thanatos.

“Your father and brother have always been… protective of you,” Percy murmured.
The son of Hades laughed humorlessly at the statement before shaking his head.

“I didn’t need either of their protection before they appeared in my life, and that fact will never change,” Nico stated firmly, his hand gripping Percy’s tightly for a few seconds before he released his grip. “Sorry.”

“Doesn’t hurt,” Percy answered before releasing his hand. “Anyway, you should get some rest.”

“As do you. You don’t seem to have taken a rest yet,” the son of Hades noted as he shifted his body, scooting towards the right side of the bed. Once he was settled as far to the side as he could, Nico turned to his side, his back facing the son of Poseidon.

Percy arched a brow at the gesture as he slowly lifted himself from the kneeling position. Once upright, he glanced hesitantly back and forth the empty space on the bed and the completely vacant couch.

“Is the empty space on the bed an invitation from you to sleep on the same bed? Not that I’m complaining, but I thought you would since you weren’t so thrilled in Ílios,” Percy said, staring at the frame of the son of Hades as he spoke.

“You are free to make your option,” was the murmured response. “I would take the couch, but knowing you, you would not let me.”

“Injured people don’t get a say on this matter,” Percy answered dully, and he could imagine the son of Hades rolling his eyes in response. “And I still don’t see how sleeping on the same bed could pass as something scandalous. We have done that several times when we were younger, and you didn’t hear anyone complaining of it.”

“I’m not having this discussion with you,” Nico stated, looking over his shoulder to stare at Percy with narrowed eyes. “You get the couch or the other half of the bed. Your choice.”

It was not much of an option, if Percy had to be perfectly honest. It would be difficult to fit his entire body on that couch, and there was no doubt that he would achieve in garnering more bruises than rest after a few hours. Shedding his footwear and upper attire, the son of Poseidon slipped under the covers, situating himself to the far left as was possible to give his companion the space he needed. It was a tight fit – their skins were almost touching – but at most, it was comfortable.
Silence filled the room completely, neither comforting nor deafening. With the son of Hades’ back facing his direction, Percy could barely tell if the young man was already asleep or not. Not that Percy could rest as well. Seeing the son of Zeus, his old friend, after so many years gave him... complicated emotions.

He should not have, right? He should be thrilled to see Jason once more; be thrilled over the fact that the three of them were gathered under one roof again after so long. Yet, Percy could not even force himself to show happiness. His emotions were complicated. He could only imagine how much worst it was for the son of Hades, who clearly had no expectations to see the son of Zeus.

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"Hello, Nico."

Percy was unaware that the son of Zeus entered the room shortly after he did as he was too focused on the son of Hermes who was extremely displeased of his appearance. It was only the greeting that garnered his attention; the name of the son of Hades and that familiar voice causing his head to turn to the side.

Jason Liam Grace, in the two or so years since they have last seen each other, did not change much in appearance. He was a bit bulkier and maintained that 'one-inch-taller-than-Percy' height of his, but he appeared the same as he did nevertheless. His blond hair was maintained in that military cropped style, and his eyes were the same shade of blue that Percy remembered. Said eyes were now focused at the figure seated on a double chaise longue – a figure that was battered and bruised.

The manner by which the person uttered "Jason" sounded far more bruised and wounded than the person was, physically.

Staring at the profile of the son of Zeus, it was as if Nico was fifteen once more, abandoned at the docks as Jason offered a wordless goodbye.

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"I like you, Nico. Much more than I should," Jason uttered as he dragged three fingers across his heart – an old gesture to dispel evil – as if his confession was utterly vile and sinful.
Nico was uncertain what hurt the most then – the realization that he was incapable of reciprocating the young man’s feelings or that gesture which Jason did, as if he were categorizing his affections for the son of Hades as a sin; evil. In truth, perhaps it was to a certain extent. Harbor ing emotions for one of the same sex was not completely acceptable, and for someone of his status, it was all the more frowned upon.

“But it’s Percy you want, isn’t it?” Jason stated with confidence, and a surprising lack of hostility. But his question did not sever Nico any less, as his mind strayed to said person.

The object of his affections was elsewhere in the district, gracing his potential consort – his future wife – with his presence. It stung, and Nico was all but forced to endure silently. The silence he offered was the sole confirmation Jason needed as the latter forced himself to smile, albeit with a hint of bitterness.

“I wish it was me. But even if it was, we couldn’t be.” Jason murmured, looking away as he brushed three fingers to his chest once more. Every stroke was like a slap to the son of Hades’ face. “Just as much as I want to remain your friend still, but I don’t think that’s possible.”

“What?” Nico’s blood ran cold.

Jason firmly gripped onto his satchel bag, fixing it repeatedly despite there being no need, as if to preoccupy himself. His eyes would not meet Nico’s, even if the latter had his gaze fixed onto the older male.

“Until we meet again, Nico.”

But to Nico, it sounded like a permanent goodbye.

That was the sole response the son of Hades received in response, and the last exchange he had with the son of Zeus. Shortly thereafter, he departed for his own district, uttering a promise that he for once could not keep as he bid Percy goodbye, with the latter not knowing that it was meant to be a permanent parting. It was only months later that Nico had taken his first kill as he was sent to defend his district when it was deemed that war was inevitable; that it was to come sooner or later. But in that duration, Nico only acknowledged one fact as he unwittingly submerged himself to isolation once more.
Jason was surviving on his own, and Percy... Percy was likely blissfully betrothed at that point, and had no room for Nico in his life anymore. Their memories which Nico treasured dearly was gradually fading with each passing day, and he could not help but view himself as dispensable once more. Was that all he was allowed? A few short years of happiness?

Once again, Nico was alone. But this time, there was no hand that reached out to his aid.

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"By the gods, Nico." Percy was certain that he should have addressed Jason first, but he could care less at the moment as he immediately approached the son of Hades, kneeling down before the young man. "Why do you have all those bruises? The Stolls said you were sparring! You look like you were beaten up!"

"If it’s any consolation," Nico started, slowly lifting his head just enough for only Percy to look in his eyes. "Luke is not in a much better shape. The only difference is that he still has his dignity, and I don’t."

With that, the son of Hades gestured to his naked upper body before offering a small shrug.

"One of the servants should be bringing me a fresh tunic soon. Don’t worry, I’m fine," Nico dully finished.

"Some definition of ‘fine’," Percy growled, lifting Nico’s arms – one after another – before examining the expanse of his chest and the bruises that littered across the skin. "You told me to entrust everything to you. If I had known that you would be this reckless…"

Niccolò di Angelo narrowed his eyes dangerously at the son of Poseidon, only to find that the latter was glaring at him with equal intensity. For a second, Nico faltered as his mind registered that look in Percy’s eyes. It was the same as when he had unintentionally gotten injured by Theseus, resulting in a sprained ankle. Right now, Percy was not angry at him. Disappointed though? Yes.

“I’m sorry,” Nico murmured in a low voice. "Just don’t inform Lord Hermes of this, will you?"

“You never tell Lord Hermes,” was a chorused remark from the residents of Anemoi, in varying tones of mixed exasperation and warning.
But Percy simply grunted in response while closely assessing his forming bruises. Nico shifted his attention elsewhere, only to find that Luke – the bastard – was smirking with that mischievous look plastered across his features. The son of Hermes was taking amusement in the sight presented before him, despite his initial irritation at the unwanted presence of the son of Poseidon in his study room. There was a slight calculative expression in those cobalt-blue eyes, one that Nico did not appreciate at all.

His russet-brown eyes slightly shifted to the son of Zeus, only to avert mere seconds after. Jason was still looking at his direction, but there was a conflicted expression and something else in his features that the son of Hades could not discern.

Moments later, the Stoll brothers slowly entered the room without knocking, causing Luke to sigh in irritation once more and to lower his raised feet to the carpet. The brothers merely grinned and waved at the older male before casually situating themselves beside the young di Angelo. Ethan Nakamura followed shortly thereafter, with a beautiful woman trailing behind him. Neither Percy nor Nico recognized her, but by the manner that she cautiously but firmly grasped onto Jason’s arm, the son of Zeus was acquainted with her.

The woman possessed a lush and long chocolate-brown hair, braided with gold ribbons down one side so it fell across her shoulder. She adorned a perfect make-up and a white Celtic dress that accentuated her dark tanned skin and the different colors in her kaleidoscopic eyes. She was absolutely beautiful, and at the back of Nico’s mind, he had a fair idea of who the woman was.

“Sure. Just enter my study room without knocking, why don’t you all?” Luke murmured bitterly before directing his attention to his brothers. “Weren’t you two told to keep watch of the son of Poseidon?”

“That ‘son of Poseidon’ has a name, and his name is Percy,” Percy interjected before either of the brothers could respond, not looking at the son of Hermes as he spoke and slowly stood up.

While Niccolò di Angelo was unamused of his companion, Luke simply raised one of his brows in question of the other’s behavior, but did not comment further. The son of Poseidon has guts, Luke would credit him for that.

“We are keeping watch of him, aren’t we?” Connor nudged at his older brother who simply grinned in return.
“He gets off the hook just because he knows how to knock,” Luke stated in a monotonous tone before directing his attention to his informant.

Ethan raised his eyebrow at the pointed gaze that was directed at him but did not react further. It was not his fault that the woman insisted to come, and it was not his place to argue with the maiden. Luke had that authority, and it was entertaining to see how the man would handle the woman.

Grasping the folded black tunic that was passed to him by one of the servants outside, Ethan rolled it up before looking at the son of Hades.

“Heads up, di Angelo,” Ethan said as he tossed the tunic to the son of Hades who easily caught the material with one hand.

The approval in those russet-brown eyes did not escape from anyone’s acknowledgement as the son of Hades assessed the attire. With a murmured thanks, the son of Hades steadily stood up and faced the wall, hiding the mark on his chest as he placed on his tunic. It did not miss Percy’s eyes, how both Jason’s and the woman’s eyes widened in wonder and surprise at the sight of the tattoos that adorned Niccolò di Angelo’s back. Percy remembered reacting in the same manner when he had first seen them as well.

Judging from the lack of reaction from the residents of Anemoi, they were probably accustomed to the sight that they did not question it.

“Since most of you could not be bothered to knock, we might as well get this over with,” Luke heaved a sigh before slowly standing up. The first heir of Anemoi looked at the son of Hades. “Are introductions due?”

“… No,” Nico stated as he brushed his dishevelled hair back, walking towards the open window and placing the damp washcloth there. “The three of us… go way back.”

The son of Hermes glanced back and forth at the heirs of the three main districts for a couple of times before nodding in understanding.

“I assume the young lady with Lord Liam is his betrothed then,” Nico continued after a while, pointedly dismissing the son of Zeus in favor of staring at the maiden. “I believe that introductions are due on our part for her benefit.”
Percy winced at the formality in that voice. In his peripheral vision, he noticed the son of Zeus reacting in the same manner from being addressed by his second name. While it indicated that they were acquainted, addressing the blond male by his second name only meant that the son of Hades decided to be distant.

Luke noted the change in the son of Hades’ demeanor as well, but did not comment as he gestured to the maiden who detached herself from beside Jason to curtsy.

“This is Lady Piper Macri, daughter of Lady Aphrodite and the third heir to the district of Agápi,” Luke stated. “She is the consort to the second son of Zeus.”

Luke pointedly glanced at the son of Poseidon who nodded in understanding. Stepping just slightly closer, Percy respectfully bowed before introducing himself.

“I am Lord Perseus Tzákson. Son of Lord Poseidon, the third heir to the district, and the captain of the army of Thálassa. It’s a pleasure to be acquainted with a fair maiden,” Percy murmured, offering a polite smile to the daughter of Aphrodite. “But please feel free to call me Percy. ‘Perseus’ sounds too old.”

The son of Poseidon immediately glanced at his companion, wondering how Nico would react to the fact that the maiden was another daughter of Aphrodite and the consort of the son of Zeus nonetheless. This woman, Percy noted as he briefly took her appearance in, was Jason’s future wife. He was thrilled for the son of Zeus, but he would be damned by the gods for the reason he had in mind for experiencing that emotion.

The son of Hades followed Percy’s gesture, bowing low before the daughter of Aphrodite for a few seconds before raising his head.

“I am Lord Niccolò di Angelo. Son of Lord Hades, the second heir to the district and lieutenant colonel of the army of Skotádi. It’s a pleasure to finally meet the consort of our good friend,” Nico stated, the smile on his lips slightly hollow. “You see, we only heard the news while we were gathered at Ílios for Lord William Gallagher Solace’s birthday celebration. From your sister, to be exact. I believe her name was Lady Drew Tanaka. She was a… lovely woman, but it was a pity that she had to leave soon.”

“If I may ask, what has she done?” Piper questioned, her voice laced with resignation and disappointment, as if she had already expected the worst when it came to her sister.
“Lord Apollo said he would be involving Lady Aphrodite in this, right?” Percy asked Nico, who only nodded in return, before looking back at the maiden. “To sum it up, it was chaotic. Your brother though – Mitchell, I believe – I think he would beat himself up with guilt over it. I hope you could tell him that whatever happened was not his fault.”

The daughter of Aphrodite naturally smiled at that before nodding curtly.

“Mitchell is a good kid. I will see to it that he won’t be dragged with Drew’s… punishment,” Piper offered with a firm conviction to her voice.

The son of Poseidon nodded in appreciation to that before turning to his old friend and allowing a broad smile to grace his lips as he sauntered forward, stopping only a few feet before the son of Zeus. Jason assessed him with a quizzical look, but there was a natural smile playing along his lips as well.

“I haven’t seen you in more than two years! How have you been?” Percy asked as he lifted his right hand, bumping it against the son of Zeus’ shoulder in a friendly gesture.

“I’ve been… busy,” Jason paused briefly as he answered. “I’ve been managing the army of the district as the captain.”

“I can see that,” the son of Poseidon remarked as he grasped the other’s shoulders, assessing him like a proud parent. The smile on Percy’s lips dropped by a fraction, and his eyes held a subtle seriousness in them as he pulled back from the younger male. “Ah, congratulations on being betrothed. I was expecting that you would be the first amongst us three, but I did not realize it would be so early.”

The smile on Jason’s lips dropped much visibly in comparison to Percy’s, but the son of Zeus managed to keep the rest of his features composed as he smiled wryly.

“Neither did I,” was the honest response.

The daughter of Aphrodite stiffened from beside her consort, and her eyes instantly averted when Percy turned his attention briefly to her. So he was not imagining it – the tension that existed between the betrothed pair. Percy had to admit – they looked like the perfect pair. But if there was something that the son of Poseidon learnt in the past two years and so, it was that affection could not be faked, no matter how one would desperately try to portray it.
“I hope you know what you are doing.” Percy murmured in a low voice so that it was only audible to the son of Zeus.

Percy did not wait to check the reaction of the son of Zeus before he walked back to where he originally stood, his sea-green eyes shifting inconspicuously to the son of Hades. As expected, the young man remained silent and indifferent of the interaction, those russet-brown eyes shifting back and forth between them with a lack of actual interest.

Percy shifted his attention to the first heir of Anemoi who seemed as if he could care less of their interaction as he scanned – with utter disregard for them – through the reports that piled up his table in a disorderly fashion. Somehow, just by looking at the older male, Percy could understand why the son of Hermes seemed to be on edge and quite temperamental. Running a district was no child’s play as it entitled the successor with too much responsibilities and inhumane expectations. He had seen how it physically withered his father throughout the years; he had seen how Lord Hades had withered with each of his visitation to the man’s district. If taking on the role had a prerequisite, it was an unyielding and tenacious devotion.

“While it is nice that all of you have gotten acquainted, this room is not exactly for that kind of purpose,” Luke stated as he looked up from the reports in his hands. His tone indicated as well that the impromptu gathering in his study room was anything but “nice”. “If all of you, except the sons of Zeus and Hades, and Ethan, would kindly leave? I have something confidential to discuss with them.”

Percy narrowed his eyes at the instruction and was adamant on not budging from his spot even as the Stoll brothers and the daughter of Aphrodite obediently yet hesitantly made their way out. Luke narrowed his eyes at him, but before the son of Hermes could order him to leave once more, Nico interjected.

“He’s staying in the room,” the son of Hades stated firmly, causing the son of Hermes to redirect his narrowed eyes to the young man. “I need him to be in the room.”

To say that the remaining occupants in the room were surprised was an understatement. The initial surprise – of the son of Hades stating that he needed the presence of another individual – left Percy in a matter of seconds as he saw that familiar expression on Nico’s eyes.

“Does this discussion have anything to do with her?” Percy questioned, looking at Nico directly.
The son of Hades narrowed his distant eyes at the inquiry but curtly nodded in confirmation.

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Eight years.

Nearly eight years had passed since Bianca di Angelo departed from Skotádi – nearly eight years since she abandoned her younger brother to fend for his own. Most assumed that she died; it was impossible for an adolescent to survive on her own for long. Though Percy convinced Nico to believe otherwise for so many years, he possessed the same doubt of her survival. After finding out that the supposed daughter of Hades was actually alive, Percy was not sure what he was supposed to think.

Eight years’ worth of assumptions that she was dead.

Eight years’ worth of silence.

Eight years’ worth of grief for Niccolò di Angelo.

As much as Percy wanted to dismiss the negative emotions that were stirring in his chest, it was becoming impossible. If he was feeling this way for someone he had not met, Percy could only imagine how much worse it was for the son of Hades. Percy did not need to ask Nico how the latter was feeling. It was indisputable that Bianca di Angelo was one of the few that Niccolò di Angelo cherished like they were his entire world. There was no doubt that Niccolò di Angelo would search for her, now that he had found out that she was still alive. There was no doubt that Niccolò di Angelo loves his sister.

But, there is a fine line between love and hate. And at that moment, the emotions of the son of Hades were gradually inclining to that bitter hate.

Slowly and so as not to startle his companion, Percy peeked over the younger male’s shoulder, only to find that he was already asleep. Muttering a series of hushed apologies, Percy slowly guided the son of Hades to properly rest on his back. A sad smile curled his lips by a fraction as he stared at the sleeping figure, one of his calloused hands gingerly brushing against drying tear streaks.

“Tell me what to do, Nico,” Percy murmured as he slowly shifted to a sitting position with his knees
bent. “Tell me what to do so your happiness doesn’t have to be dependent on them.”

But Niccolò di Angelo did not respond, and sleep did not consume Percy as well. Plagued with his thoughts, all he could do was stare at Nico, brushing the younger male’s dishevelled locks in a poor gesture of comfort.

A person’s life is predetermined by the manipulations of the people who exist at the top of the world. Those who are capable of establishing their own lives are no exceptions to these manipulations, but they are capable of playing the wicked game of life.

Jason Liam Grace was never one of those capable players. At a young age, his life was already predetermined when his biological father, the suzerain of Ouranós, claimed him and his older sister as his children. It was at a young age that foreign concepts such as “illegitimate”, “adultery” and “bastard” were introduced to his life, as the actual wife of his father and the man himself engaged in heated arguments on a daily basis. Those arguments always ended with an ultimatum – “either that bastard girl leaves, or they both go!” His older sister made the decision when she departed – with meager supplies and belongings – from the district that they once called home.

His life was predetermined when his actions and decisions needed to be informed beforehand and approved before he could execute them. His life was predetermined when everything in it were forcibly chosen for him. His life was predetermined when he started to lose a say; a free will.

That was the defining difference between him and both Perseus Tzákson and Niccolò di Angelo. He was never dictated as a player in the game of life. He is a pawn amongst the many pawns under the control of his father and his consort. He is a bargaining chip. He is… dispensable.

It was his being dispensable, and the fact that he had no say in being subjected to manipulations that paved way for the existence of his hollow betrothal – a loveless marriage for the sake of attaining a strong alliance. I hope you know what you are doing, Percy told him. He questioned himself of the same thing, repeating it in his head like a mantra with each passing second of his predetermined existence.

His future wife, Piper, deserved much more than his half-hearted conviction. The woman deserved much more than the saccharine crooned lies that were attached to their beneficial arrangement. The woman deserved much more than a man who could not even offer as much as a sliver of his heart to her. A part of him desired so much to break that glorious illusion which Piper had of him; to shatter her beliefs of who he was, based on exaggerated tales passed on from countless lips. But how could he, when the woman would gaze up at him with such warm and loving eyes, baring her heart openly
for him to accept?

Jason was neither blind nor a fool. Despite that unspoken desire of his, without doing anything on his part, he could clearly see how Piper was gradually grasping onto the situation of her unrequited affections. Her vibrant kaleidoscopic eyes were becoming wearier with each passing day, and it was gut-wrenching that both of them could only endure their arrangement – their engagement that was slowly becoming meaningless – at this point.

They need each other, but Jason did not need her in the way that she wanted to be needed by him. They need each other, but Jason did not need her in the way that Percy and Nico needed each other. It was excruciating for both of them – for her to have to endure this, and for him to subject her in such a meaningless engagement – but it was inescapable.

In reality, they were both bargaining chips.

They were both dispensable.

“Your friends… They’re… unique,” Piper commented while fiddling with the pages of the book on her lap. “What were you three like when you were younger?”

Their bedchambers – two separate rooms that had a connecting door in between – was neither grand nor excessively furnished. It was a trivial matter to the son of Zeus, and surprisingly, the daughter of Aphrodite seemed comfortable and completely at ease with the lack of grandiose.

Jason had the decency to focus his attention on her despite his need to focus on the documents that were sitting atop of his desk. With as much caution as he could muster, he turned his chair to the side so that he was facing her direction completely; a gesture which Piper appreciated as she offered him a small yet grateful smile.

“We were… a complicated bunch,” Jason answered slowly, allowing himself to smile naturally as he reminisced of good memories of his past.

“I was the one who always fusses over them. Percy usually drags us in chaotic messes, and more often than not, either one or both of them gets injured. They are both negligent of their well-beings. One of us has to step in and fulfill a more responsible role, and… I did.”
“Percy was a handful. He would always get the three of us into trouble with his father, Lord Poseidon. He also had this inexplicable tendency to mess with the servants and the soldiers, so there was rarely a visit where none of us get reprimanded by his father,” the son of Zeus recalled, chuckling fondly at the countless memories.

In truth, it was indisputably one of the things that he missed from the past. Despite the countless reprimands that he endured in the presence of the suzerain of Thálassa, Lord Poseidon was nothing short of the father that he was – is – to Percy. He treated him and Nico as if they were his own sons as well, and continuously forgave them for indulging his son in his mischiefs. Jason would neither deny nor express guilt over the fact that he desired for Lord Poseidon to be his father instead, at one point.

“Nico, on the other hand, was always the one to save the three of us from the troubles that Percy caused,” Jason continued, staring distantly at the wall. If he had been paying close attention to the daughter of Aphrodite, he might have noticed the subtle change in her expression. “Somehow, he always manages to rationalize with Lord Poseidon regardless of how bad Percy messes up. It’s a known fact that he is the most intelligent, and most mature out of us three despite being the youngest.”

“You must treasure them a lot,” Piper stated quietly, the book on her lap untouched since the start of their conversation.

That was an understatement, but the son of Zeus did not vocalize his thoughts. The son of Poseidon was like the sibling that Jason initially wished his half-brother Herakles to be. Was it foolish to covet the same mutual understanding with another being of the same standing as he was? Apparently, Herakles did not comprehend their existence to be the same, claiming himself proudly as the son of his father and Lady Hera. For Jason who could not accept another woman to fill the void that his mother left, that bold proclamation ultimately shut him off from the family. He did not have a father in Lord Zeus, or a mother in Lady Hera. He did not have a brother in Herakles as well, and he had come to accept that truth. There was no ‘family’ within their presence – just a mere fabricated image.

The son of Hades, in a truth that only he could come to know, was and still remained as the sole person who ensnared his heart completely. The years that passed by did not change what his heart and mind had come to acknowledge. Niccolò di Angelo was his first love. Still is.

“They are family,” was the curt response from the son of Zeus, avoiding those prying eyes as he turned back once more to his work.

No, that was not completely true. They were family.
“What did you want to discuss tonight, Luke?”

“Take a seat first. Let me get the necessary documents.”

Lucas Theodosios Castellan glanced inconspicuously at the son of Hades as the latter silently obliged, seating himself casually on a sienna upholstered chair adjacent to the first heir’s study table.

Sleeping was supposed to reduce fatigue and clear the mind, but in Niccolò di Angelo’s case, it seemed ineffective for both intended purpose. The young man looked much fatigued than he was hours ago, and there was a shattered look in those lackluster russet-brown eyes that slightly disturbed the son of Hermes. Perhaps, it would have been the wise option to conduct this when the son of Hades was in a better state of mind. It was clear that the news of his supposed deceased sister offered an unintended and unwelcomed result. Luke was willing to bet that the son of Hades had not a morsel on his stomach yet since his arrival hours ago.

Bianca di Angelo. Luke never met the girl – woman now, he supposed – but he could easily deduce how significant she was – is – to the son of Hades. She was an unwelcomed topic; her name could easily pass as forbidden, given how it was strictly unmentioned in the presence of Lord Hades and his family. But, that did not strip her of being the older biological sister of Niccolò di Angelo. If the current state of the son of Hades implied anything to him, the fact that she was alive after all these years was taking its toll on him.

Deep family relations were never completely comprehensible on Luke’s part, and he did not possess any intention on comprehending it.

“Get us some fresh tea, Ethan. We have a long discussion ahead,” Luke instructed, causing said man to narrow his eye dangerously at the first heir.

“I am your informant, not your servant,” Ethan growled in a low voice, glaring at the son of Hermes from where he casually leaned on the wall just beside the door.

“Yes. So inform one of the servants to get us some fresh tea then,” Luke answered in a monotonous voice, glancing briefly at his informant as the latter yanked the door open. “You already know what I would be discussing with di Angelo. You can check in with the son of Zeus and his proposals after getting one of the servants to serve us tea. I would fill you in on what we will do after I have had my talk with di Angelo.”
The resounding bang had the son of Hermes wincing visibly, his cobalt-blue eyes glancing at the
closed door to assess if he had to consider replacing it with the amount of force Ethan slammed it
shut.

“It would be wise of you to consider how close that man is to butchering you into pieces,” Nico
commented with a hint of disinterest.

“It would be wise of you to keep those comments to yourself,” Luke countered as he sauntered
towards his roll-top desk. “You do not hear me commenting of how you and that son of Poseidon
coordinate with each other. Ethan and I have a unique working system, as do you and your friend.”

From his peripheral vision, Luke noticed how those russet-brown eyes narrowed dangerously at his
direction, but the son of Hades remained silent nonetheless. It was a silent and mutual agreement at
that point that any personal jabs were currently trivial and unproductive, and Luke took that as a
silent indication to immediately start their discussion.

“I received a report from Martha, one of father’s trusted informants, a few weeks ago,” Luke started
in a serious voice, rolling the tambour door on his roll-top desk up before he pulled out a few
documents. “That report was the last I received from her, or any informant that was assigned to the
same district.”

“What district?” the son of Hades inquired, sitting upright as Luke handed a crinkled parchment
paper to him, refolded several times to the point that it would tear with the slightest of force.

“Pólemos,” Luke answered. “I don’t know if you are aware, but Pólemos is on a… lockdown. I
suppose the districts of Skotádi, Thálassa, and their alliances are not aware of that as well. All of us
steer clear of that district, and for good reasons.”

“To my original point, we disguised and dispatched some of our men upon receiving that report, but
all of them were forced back at the borders, regardless of any ‘business’ they have within the district.
There was an outbreak of an unknown epidemic, the soldiers informed them without any further
elaboration.”

“If there was one, Ílios would have been informed. I would have been informed,” Nico stated firmly.

“Which means that they are lying or are forced to lie,” Luke concluded for him. “Cases of epidemics
are serious matters that need to be addressed immediately. It is customary that they seek assistance from Ílios, so that there could be a formulated prevention before it becomes a pandemic disease. Furthermore, the other districts should also be informed so that respective measures could be implemented. But, there was no announcement from their district – no report, no formal letter. Pólemos was simply put on a lockdown.”

“Are they trying to prevent people from coming in?” the son of Hades inquired as Luke sat on his seat once more, crossing his arms over his chest.

“They are not trying to keep people out. They are trying to keep people in,” the son of Hermes corrected before gesturing for the young heir to read the report in his hands. “That is Martha’s last report.”

“George and Martha are amongst the many informants we dispatched to Pólemos, and were assigned to keeping track of the production overview on the different services,” Luke continued as the son of Hades read the report, his expression unchanging as he carefully processed each detail that he was reading and what Luke was saying.

“To ensure that the ratios remained balance,” Nico murmured without glancing up from the report. “As was signed before the thirteen districts were established.”

“Precisely, and for good reasons. Lord Kronos utilized much of Pangaea’s resources in order to retaliate with the revolutions. That signed agreement was to ensure that history does not repeat itself again,” Luke commented.

“Each district has their own asset. Take for example Pólemos, whose strongest asset is its military service. The people there are well-trained for the purpose to kill; not to defend. It was how Lord Ares ensured that his power and rule remained firm on his people, aside from his false promise of establishing a classless, egalitarian society that deceived people into the system of a communistic governance. Addressing that military service, there is a quota for each district on the number of their personnel in the said service – the highest being in Pólemos. But recently—“

“There is an increase in the number of its military personnel, and the service age for the male population was questionably reduced from eighteen, to sixteen. Furthermore…” the son of Hades trailed off, his eyes visibly dilating in shock as his hands clutched tightly on the paper, re-reading the words until they were firmly engraved onto his mind. “… No. That’s impossible. Pólemos does not have enough resources to produce quantities like that. Even if they do, hiding it from our knowledge is impossible.”
“I am sure you can understand as well why I was not keen on believing the report when I read it. Father went to Skotádi nonetheless to have a discussion with Lord Hades and Lord Thanatos regarding this matter,” the son of Hermes answered in a low voice, lifting his earlier tea cup to his lips before taking a sip. The cold liquid was disgusting on his tongue. “I asked for your presence here because this requires immediate response. Despite my disbelief, the circumstances Martha stated are completely plausible. In addition, Martha wouldn’t…”

“Martha would not lie about the death of her husband,” Nico finished, folding the report once more before placing it onto the desk, his hands slightly trembling. “What actions have you taken thus far? Have you considered discussing this with Daedalus as well?”

The son of Hermes arched his brow at the inquiries, his head tilting to the side as if to emphasize the quizzical look on his features. With his cobalt-blue eyes transfixed on the young heir, Luke slowly reached forward to grasp the folded paper before placing it inside one of the compartments on his table. His expression remained unchanged, but there was an edge of hardness in his eyes that did not escape from the eyes of the son of Hades.

“You would not inquire if we have yet to send an extraction team to the House of Ares?” Luke voiced out while looking directly into those unflinching eyes.

“I know you, Luke,” the son of Hades declared in a firm yet cold voice. “I know those people and how the system of Anemoi functions. Being compromised is not an option. Martha knows it as well, or else she would have requested for help. By being trapped in that district, they only have the option to play a cruel and twisted game of hide-and-seek with the soldiers. They are as good as dead. But would you decide to take an action in favor of those lives you lost? I don’t think so, Luke.”

“You and I are neither foolish. Sacrifices exist; it is an inevitability in this world. You never cling onto the past; onto losses. That is who you are, Lucas Theodosios Castellan.”

“And that is where we are different, Niccolò di Angelo,” Luke responded, matching the young heir’s tone of voice. “I move forward because going back is utterly foolish. Your intentions on moving forward, on the other hand, are naïve. You believe that all lives and all deaths have purpose to them. Believe me, they don’t.”

Niccolò di Angelo could only bite his tongue in response, swallowing the foul words that dangled at the tip of his tongue. There were many trivial aspects that distinguished him and Luke, and it was mostly their beliefs that utterly separated them like two sides of the same coin. Their goals and intentions were set similarly, but beyond that – the personal decisions and reasons of each other – was neither of their business nor concern.
‘Dispensable’ was a word that Niccolò di Angelo would never come to associate with another individual but himself. But Lucas Theodosios Castellan, contradictory, has a system of classification in his mind that separated the people into two categories: dispensable and indispensable. Niccolò di Angelo would be damned if he was not certain that those casualties – *those people* – classified as merely dispensable commodities to the son of Hermes.

They were both shattered in their own ways. Being numb and negligent to losses were defensive mechanisms their hearts gradually attained in time. Because it was the only way to live; to survive. It was the only way to continue existing without breaking apart at the seams.

“That son of Poseidon – Percy – influenced you, didn’t he?” Luke concluded, eyeing the son of Hades attentively. “In contradiction to what you believe, you still have a soul, Niccolò di Angelo. Tartarus has not completely damned you yet, and I assume that it is only Percy that keeps hold of you. He makes you feel less of the monster that you and I know you are; that *we* are. In his mind, you are still that same person that he befriended in the past…”

Luke trailed off as he rested his elbows atop of his table, folding his hands and using them as a platform for his chin to rest upon. All the while, his eyes never averted from the son of Hades.

“He knows who you are in the past. You, who was capable of smiling freely and indulging in the freedom that only youth could offer. But he doesn’t know who you are in the present. *I do.* I know you – that person who is capable of killing. I know that person who has grown and learned how to fake a smile. I know that person who is not capable of mercy. Tell me, di Angelo. How far are you willing to delude yourself from the truth for this man?”

“Your mind must be in a jumble if you believe that he is the only person who influenced my beliefs, Lucas,” the son of Hades remarked, and Luke had to repress his desire to flinch and back away at the dangerous glint in them. “Enemies and comrades – faces and reputations can deceive what the eyes cannot. You would be surprised how most people who you thought could make you would break you, and vice versa. Influences are determined from actions, not words. Life is a cruel joke, Lucas, and there is no joke that is worse than those that are put into words. We are playing the same damned game, but one of us is ahead of the other.”

“Care to wager who that person is?” the son of Hades challenged, his lips curling to a humorless smile.

The son of Hermes narrowed his eyes at the son of Hades for a few seconds, critically contemplating the words that the young man uttered. *Life is a cruel joke, Lucas, and there is no joke that is worse than those that are put into words. We are playing the same damned game, but one of us is ahead of the other.* Indeed, life is a cruel joke. It always had been for him, but he stopped caring at some point. There was no point in contemplating a truth universally acknowledged. There was no point
contemplating a mundane existence.

He was well-aware of who was ahead of whom.

“My movements are restricted, especially with the son of Zeus and daughter of Aphrodite within our borders. There is not much that I could do aside from increasing the soldiers at the perimeters,” Luke stated to address the son of Hades’ original question, dismissing their former topic forcibly.

But Niccolò di Angelo was not having it. The son of Hermes started it, and he would be damned if the older male could just simply walk out of their discussion.

“I do not understand you. You act as if you despise me at times, yet you tolerate the presence of the son of the enemy within your borders for an information that would not benefit you. Why?” Nico demanded.

“Regardless of what you believe, you should know that my brothers consider you as part of our family. I consider you as a part of our twisted and complicated family,” Luke answered, an amused smile curling his lips as he registered those narrowed eyes. The smile did drop from his lips seconds thereafter as he continued in a more serious note. “I am not as heartless as you perceive. I look after my family, and ‘family’ has never been defined by blood for me. If I am capable, I provide for what my family needs.”

“You need this, don’t you? You need this closure from your past – from your sister. Otherwise, your present and past will always coincide. What room do you have to consider the future?” Luke questioned rhetorically before taking another sip of his tea. “I am not requesting any payment for this. Whatever you choose to do with it, that is entirely up to you.”

Though you already know what it is you need to do, don’t you? Luke chose to leave that unsaid.

“And if I choose not to do anything?”

“We both know how that that is not your forte,” was the amused response. “But suppose you do so, then you will only continue to fall apart, though eventually it would come to that.”

“It’s true that all things eventually fall apart. It is just a matter of who brings them down.”
With that said, Luke let the conversation end at that. If the son of Hades acknowledged his immediate shift in topic, the young man did not comment further. There were many trivial aspects that distinguished him and Niccolò di Angelo, and it was mostly their beliefs that utterly separated them like two sides of the same coin. Their goals and intentions were set similarly, but beyond that – the personal decisions and reasons of each other – was neither of their business nor concern.

But if there was another aspect that separated them, it was the fact that Luke had nothing to run from. Niccolò di Angelo, on the other hand, spent most of his entire life running. It was true that they were playing the same deadly game, but if Niccolò di Angelo continued destroying himself, it would not matter to Luke who was ahead or who was behind.

Ultimately, the young son of Hades would fall apart. Luke could only hope that Niccolò di Angelo would not come to that point. But whether it would be Niccolò di Angelo himself… or his biological sister… or Perseus Tzákson who would bring forth his downfall, not even Luke himself could determine.

Chapter End Notes

Piper’s appearance might startle most of you and some of you might say that, “No, Piper doesn’t look like that!” Yes, I know that that is not Piper’s usual look. On the descriptions, that was actually her appearance upon receiving the blessing of Aphrodite. I am not dismissing Piper’s actual appearance. I will use it in the future as a part of her transition in character.

The full names of most of the characters are provided at the link below. That page is subjected to change as the story progresses.

Link: [HERE](http://example.com)

Thank you for reading this chapter! Until the next chapter!
“Love and war are the same thing, and stratagems and policy are as allowable in the one as in the other.”

- Miguel de Cervantes

There are people who naturally grow and mature, and there are people who are forced to do so. Perseus Tzákson perceived himself to be on the latter category.

Alike the many individuals that fall under the same category as himself, it was a necessity – a prerequisite – to ensure the welfare of his people. Never completely for his own sake. It was a known fact that he was exposed to as a child when his mother passed away – that his existence should serve an actual purpose.

Why should such a term be associated to a child? But if there was one thing that set him aside – another prerequisite to fall under the latter category – it was the fact that the other half of his life was a wretched lie. Regardless of the fact that he was a child then, as long as he possessed an attachment to a suzerain, then that fact becomes completely trivial against his newfound responsibilities and obligations. Responsibilities and obligations – another set of terms that should not be associated with a child. He had to consider that there was a possibility that he would succeed as the second suzerain to his district, regardless that he had two older brothers then. For some inexplicable reason, their father raised him with that mentality, favoring him more than any of his half-siblings. It did not make sense, but he had no desire to determine the reason. Determining the reason would mean having to narrow the gap between him and his father, and as much as he accepted the truth of his identity, that did not necessarily mean that he could accept Lord Poseidon as his father without ill-feelings.

Adults are liars who use kindness as a deception. As a child, kindness scared him. Which was why, out of all people, his father and Theseus scared him the most. At the end of the day, there was that constant foreboding that they would take back their kind gestures and generosity from him. As an adult, that constant foreboding never ceased to resurface.

Niccolò di Angelo was neither a child nor an adult. That was the first impression Percy had the first
time that he met the son of Hades. Although Nico had the physique of a child, his mentality was that of an adult. Percy did not know how to classify him, and the unknown was dangerous. Due to that, he had subconsciously been expressing his wariness of the son of Hades, and it was only until Nico demanded that he leave at some point that Percy took notice.

“You’re just like the rest of them: a liar. I don’t need people like you in my life.”

To be labelled as one of those people he despised most was excruciating, but reflecting upon his actions, Percy could not deny that he had been one back then. Subconsciously… and in the smallest of gestures, he had been a liar. It only came to his understanding then that regardless of age, every single being was born with the barest trait of a liar, and it was entirely up to a person if he would nurture it or let it remain stagnant.

Being an adult was not any easier in comparison to being a child. Being an adult, forgiveness does not come immediately after warm and loving hugs. Being an adult, there are wounds that cannot simply be bandaged up and deemed immediately as, “All better!” Being an adult, comfort cannot be sought so easily as when one is a child. Being an adult, one is forced to grow and mature to settle everything independently.

That was who Percy had become, and Niccolò di Angelo was one of those individuals that fell on the same category as him.

“Have you eaten yet, Nico?” Percy inquired as he peered over the son of Hades’ right shoulder. “What are you even reading?”

“I don’t have time to eat. I have a lot to do in just four days,” the son of Hades answered without glancing at his direction, lifting the parchment paper close to Percy’s face as the latter squinted. “This is a report on the summary of agricultural produce in Anemoi for the past six months. Luke requested for my input regarding purchase of supplies from Gi. I would consider Krasí instead, for Lord Dionysus tend to not make demands in comparison to Lady Demeter, but that would be impossible for what Luke proposes.”

“What kind of demands does Lady Demeter make?”

“Always regarding Persephone,” the son of Hades grunted as his companion’s weight pressed down against his back as Percy leaned on him. “Father loathes dealing with her, but if the matter demands attention, Persephone is always the one to deal with her mother. Of course, it never has been in the favor of father, but he had to respect Persephone’s decision, especially if it is for the benefit of our people.”
“Is that the reason why Lord Hades had an inclination to agriculture a few years after Skotádi was established?” Percy asked with genuine curiosity.

“If you were in the same position as him, I think you would have started even earlier. Not having to depend and conduct business with Lady Demeter on a monthly basis relieved him immensely of unnecessary stress,” Nico stated, offering a low and almost inaudible chuckle before he read through the report once more, his expression furrowing seconds thereafter as he immersed himself with his task.

If any of the soldiers training at the small amphitheater were apprehensive at the sight of the son of Poseidon draped over the son of Hades, none of them vocalized it, though some did cast wary glances at the heirs occasionally. It was a rarity to see the son of Hades tolerant of any physical contact, as it was refreshing to see an heir – Percy – conduct himself with a childish undertone. Regardless of the stressed sighs and whines that the son of Poseidon would emit, the son of Hades remained tolerant and unfazed, pointedly neglecting his companion despite the constant weight upon his back. At some point, the weight was too unbearable that Nico slipped forward all too sudden, causing Percy to tumble down a few steps. The soldiers easily expected a fight, but all that the son of Poseidon did was curse and smile sheepishly while the son of Hades grunted in response.

The location was not ideal with the documents Niccolò di Angelo had in his possession and the critical decisions that he had to make regarding each matter, but the sight of the soldiers training offered distraction, and entertained and kept the son of Poseidon at bay. After Percy’s unannounced presence in the son of Hermes’ study room the day before, Nico was not too keen on permitting the Stoll brothers – or anyone else, for that matter – to keep the son of Poseidon entertained.

“I don’t understand how you could devote yourself to these,” Percy murmured, his voice muffled as his lips were pressed against the fabric of the son of Hades’ apparel. “You have the makings of a good leader.”

“For what it is worth, you did astoundingly well with Lord Apollo and his council. I honestly expected that you would snap on the first day in his presence,” Nico remarked without looking up. “A good leader is a person who possess an immense amount of devotion; devotion that can be measured by his love for his people, and you have so much of that to offer.”

Apparently, not enough. A brittle smile curled Percy’s lips, unnoticed by his companion.

“Anyone would follow a leader who prioritizes the welfare of his people amongst everything else,” the son of Hades concluded, his tone firm with complete certainty.
“That is why I can’t become one,” Percy stated, resting his chin on the younger male’s shoulder as he spoke in a tone full of conviction. “Because I am willing to sacrifice the rest of my people if it could save those who mean the entire world to me. Loyalty has always been my fatal flaw, Nico. Just as holding grudges are yours.”

“But it’s not that you are incapable of forgiving, but you’re hesitant to suffer again,” Percy concluded, tightening his grip around the son of Hades.

*Just like with Bianca,* was Percy’s unspoken thought. Yet, without vocalizing his thought, the son of Hades seemed to grasp where he was heading, with the manner by which he phrased his statement. Niccolò di Angelo stiffened in his grasp, but did not pry himself from the son of Poseidon’s grip. Doing so – they both mutually agreed – would mean admitting that the thought was true.

Percy was not lying though, when he stated that the son of Hades’ fatal flaw was holding grudges. It was a flaw that was rampant and dominant in the children of Lord Hades – even the man himself. Forgiveness for them comes with a price, and it is with a thousand nonexistent repercussions that they withheld offering forgiveness, even to themselves. Forgiveness for them is rarely offered, and the more is their grudge directed to themselves, the more impossible it becomes for them to offer forgiveness.

Forgiveness comes with forgetting, but in their bloodline, that compromise is nonexistent.

“May we join you?” A feminine voice inquired in a silvery voice that was almost drowned out in the constant clashes between metals.

Sea-green and russet-brown eyes shifted simultaneously to the side to look at the approaching daughter of Aphrodite, with a cautious son of Zeus trailing behind her. Niccolò di Angelo briefly regarded the couple inconspicuously with mild disinterest while Percy acknowledged them with a polite smile. His arms instinctively wrapped more firmly around the son of Hades, and it did not escape his attention how those electric-blue eyes became unnaturally cold for a split second.

“You may, but I think it would be best if we have some distance between us. I don’t think the soldiers would appreciate being continuously pushed on edge,” Percy stated, gesturing with his head at the taut soldiers who were glancing at their direction, before resting his chin on Nico’s crown.

Niccolò di Angelo briefly offered a curt nod at their direction in acknowledgement of their presence, but nothing further thereafter. Those russet-brown eyes of his were immensely focused on the
document at hand, as if it were the sole most important thing in existence at that moment. It might as well be, if the son of Hades would continue to convince himself that in his mind as he pointedly ignored the presence of their new companions. Specifically, the son of Zeus. Percy would be willing to wager that it was not purely intentional. There was a wide rift existing between the two men that was simply unattended for long, and neither was willing to make a move to seal that rift.

If the daughter of Aphrodite found the two heirs’ proximity intriguing, the woman did not vocalize her thoughts as she elegantly situated herself to sit approximately ten feet from the son of Hades, while Jason followed Percy’s example by sitting behind his consort – without the public display of affection. Her hands folded daintily atop of her lap, and there was a grace in her posture that could only be the product of a proper upbringing. For a second, Percy was reminded of someone else.

“They should be at ease. Jason shared with me how the three of you were good friends when you were younger. That should be enough to convince them that nothing catastrophic would happen,” Piper remarked, returning the son of Poseidon’s polite smile.

Percy snapped out of his musings, allowing a smile to naturally fall onto his lips as he engaged in a conversation with the daughter of Aphrodite. In comparison to his recent experience, Piper was a much preferable and natural companion than her half-sister.

“They wouldn’t even allow me to spar with them, or anyone for that matter,” Percy huffed his complaint, before turning to the son of Hades. “Why won’t they allow me to spar, Nico?”

The answer of the son of Hades was almost immediate, his voice orotund even with the loud clanging of metals in the background.

“Because I told them not to,” was the nonchalant response from the son of Hades. “And they value their lives too much to oppose what I say.”

Percy had to roll his eyes in response to that, but the small smile that played along his lips expressed otherwise of his supposed exasperation. With only the view of his side profile, none of the other two could tell of the taut expression on the son of Hades’ features but Percy. It was taking a lot of Niccolò di Angelo to refrain from excusing himself, and heading elsewhere that was preferably far from the other two. It was taking a lot of Percy’s presence to keep the son of Hades grounded. The young man could pretend all he wished – of being disinterested and nonchalant – but with the manner by which he was gripping the upside-down document in his hands, Percy was convinced otherwise.

“They should at least allow us to tour the streets of Anemoi,” the son of Poseidon complained
further, rambling just to prevent a discomforting silence from settling in between them. “But the soldiers are strict with keeping us inside this stately home.”

“Safety measures.” Percy did not miss how Nico stiffened further when the son of Zeus responded in his deep and rich voice. “The streets are not safe for us. We are not entirely as welcomed as Nico because this isn’t our districts’ ‘territory’, so to speak.”

“I could endure this if they would only allow me to spar— … I take my words back and I repent,” Percy mumbled the latter statement upon feeling sharp nails digging onto one of his arms as he persisted on what was clearly forbidden. Nico merely nodded in return before Percy resumed once more. “That aside, what brings you two here in Anemoi?”

It was a perfect question to divert the attention to the other two instead. Piper seemed perturbed of Nico’s blatant dismissal of their presence, and if Percy could get her attention to drift away from his silent companion, then he might as well endure the boring political business discussions that might follow in a matter of seconds. He did not need to know the answer of the son of Zeus; it was provided when the three of them and the son of Hermes had been gathered.

Bianca di Angelo. She was the reason for Jason’s presence here in Anemoi, for the son of Zeus requested that he be the one to inform the son of Hades with regards to her supposed whereabouts. As much as Percy questioned his motives, he did not vocalize it out loud. Piper Macri surely must have been dragged into Jason’s plan, out of their betrothal and the traditions that come along with being bound to each other.

Percy observed them closely, and with a contemplative expression. As far as he was concerned, their current arrangement was a glaring lie. How either of them could endure such fiasco was beyond his comprehension.

“Discussions for a trade agreement with Anemoi,” Jason answered with a sigh, his expression grim. “With Ouranós’ declining economy…”

Percy nodded in understanding. Throughout the years, in comparison to both the House of Hades and House of Poseidon, Ouranós gradually declined in status. After all, the son of Poseidon thought bitterly, that was the reason why there was a brewing war. Lord Zeus firmly believed that the entirety of Pangaea was his to claim, and it was only a matter of time before the suzerain acted upon his misguided beliefs.

Percy shifted his attention to the son of Zeus, carefully assessing the younger male before him. He had to consider it – the possibility of having to face Jason in war. They had sparred on so many
occasions when they were younger, and those had been for the sole intention of training. There was no way he would kill the younger male – a person whom he considered as family – if the situation were to ever come to that point. Percy could not imagine killing someone he considered as a brother.

“I am expected to be here as Jason’s consort,” Piper stated after a moment of silence. Percy almost thought that she uttered that with hostility, but with the expression on her face, she meant it as she had said it. “But I am also here to learn. Mother, the Lady Aphrodite, expresses her wishes for me to succeed in the case that something happens to my older sister, Silena. Though Drew is the second-in-line, she is not as keen on handling responsibilities and wants nothing to do with the duties of a suzerain. She remains her title though, for… specific reasons.”

“How come Herakles is not handling this though?” Percy questioned with genuine curiosity.

“Herakles is… joyously basking in his recent marriage. Either way, he is too ill-tempered to be responsible for this,” Jason answered slowly, a frown settling onto his features.

“Married?” the son of Poseidon repeated, eyes dilating with surprise. “Who managed to handle that devil incarnate?”

Percy was about to slap his hand against his mouth for his offhanded comment before the daughter of Aphrodite – he and Jason mutually agreed that Herakles was a certified incarnate of the devil long ago – but said woman just slightly raised her hand, an understanding smile on her lips. Glancing at the son of Zeus, the curt nod he received in return was the only confirmation he needed.

_She knows._

“I would not know about handling him, but she seems too pleasant in comparison to him. Their personalities simply contradict each other. Her name is Hebe, and she is a daughter of one of the highest nobles in Ouranós,” Jason supplied.

The sharp laughter that the son of Hades emitted all of a sudden startled the three heirs, their attention becoming directed immediately to the young man whose features – aside from his curled lips – were not visible to them. It was the kind of laughter that was a mixture of disbelief and hysterical amusement, and Percy was not too sure how to react to it.

“Nico?” the third heir cautiously called out to the son of Hades who shook his head in response.
“It was nothing. I just thought of something amusing,” the son of Hades excused himself, the smile on his lips gradually dropping as he regained his composure once more.

Percy frowned at the response he received, but decided that prying would not get him anywhere. Reluctantly, he faced the son of Zeus once more, who was equally staring at the son of Hades with a puzzled expression. It was a rarity, after all, for the son of Hades to express himself with a lack of ill-emotions, much less emit a laughter naturally.

“Why the early marriage though?” Percy pressed. “Marriage is not a prerequisite to succeed, is it?”

The son of Zeus shook his head.

“No. It’s because of Hera and her beliefs that a family should be established at an age as early as twenty-five. Considering that Herakles is already beyond that age, the marriage was more or less forced on them. Hebe was promised to him at a young age, or so I have heard,” Jason offered with a shrug. “If Hebe is unable to carry a child for him within the following year, they would have to resort to an Entrusted Lady. Either option, Hera demands a child.”

“What is an Entrusted Lady?” Percy murmured against the son of Hades’ unruly locks, nudging the younger male by shifting his weight forward.

“An Entrusted Lady is a woman mutually chosen by a wedded man and woman to be the bearer of their child. By this mutual agreement and a signed contract, it is thereby declared that the conceived child by the wedded man and the Entrusted Lady is the couple’s own child – not illegitimate. While the child is conceived, it is the couple’s duty to ensure that the personal needs of the Entrusted Lady are met, as well as financial aspects thereafter for her “services”. An Entrusted Lady is usually sought by a couple with problems in conceiving a child. While it is common with a man and a woman, couples of the same sex are also resorting to the same method to have their own child,” Nico explained in a monotonous voice, pushing back against the son of Poseidon with a grunt when the weight on his back became too unbearable.

“That’s amazing!” Percy stated, grinning. “I mean, take for example – Can you imagine Will and Jake capable of having their own mini-me children?”

Niccolò di Angelo snorted in response, and Percy was willing to bet that an amused smile was playing on his lips once more. The documents on his hands were long forgotten, partially folded in his grasp.
“I don’t think they would appreciate you meddling with their personal lives in that manner. Neither would Lord Apollo appreciate being addressed to as ‘grandfather’ in the near future,” the son of Hades stated without looking up.

“You just have to defend me then,” Percy boldly proclaimed, nudging the younger male and latching more firmly to him. “All of them has a soft spot for you.”

“You can suffer on your own,” was the son of Hades’ immediate response, inducing a high-pitched whine from the son of Poseidon.

The remaining two heirs observed the interaction with varying expressions that could not be completely fathomable as a whole. It was a rarity and a refreshing sight to see two heirs of opposing sides managing to interact with each other with no hint of hostility, offering those that surround them the lack of need to hover in the eventuality that they would get violent with each other. No, violence did not seem plausible between the two; that was what Piper thought of as she observed them.

It was so easy to assume that the playful bickering and the caresses were absolutely platonic, but as a daughter of Aphrodite – the connoisseur of men and love – she could not be fooled. It confused her how two people could gravitate towards each other subconsciously and so naturally; how there was a communication in their bodies that could not be verbally processed. And it disturbed her, because she neither see what those sea-green nor electric-blue eyes saw. It disturbed her, for it was an unknown she could not compare against.

It disturbed her, for those longing eyes were what she coveted for so long, yet another was the recipient of it – a man, no less – but the recipient’s sight was set elsewhere.

Why won’t you look at me like that? Piper had to question in her head as she slowly lifted her eyes to look at those distant electric-blue irises. The expression in those eyes were absolutely pathetic in the way that it mirrored hers.

Aren’t we pitiful? Gently, she closed her eyes and rested her head against one of Jason’s knee, her lush hair falling across the side of her delicate face and shielding her expression from him. I look at you in the same way as you look at him, and you cannot have him in the same way as I cannot have you.

“Lord Tzákson! Lord di Angelo! Lord Castellan requires your presence in his study room!” One of the female servants called out to them from the top of the amphitheater while the two were in the midst of their light bickering.
It was only then that it dawned upon the son of Poseidon that they had been negligent of the presence of their other companions. Plastering an apologetic look on his features, Percy was about to offer his apologies for their – his, specifically – childish antics, but the image they currently portrayed before him stopped him immediately.

When had there been an instant that an apology could sound so mocking? Percy questioned that to himself as he withheld the apologies dangling at the tip of his tongue.

“We should probably go and see what he needs,” Percy stated, forcing himself to smile naturally and with an air of obliviousness as he cautiously released his grasp on the son of Hades before pulling the latter upright. “We’ll see you both later?”

“Perhaps,” was the son of Zeus’ curt response, his voice tight with the amount of control he was grasping onto.

It was clear that Niccolò di Angelo noticed the immediate change in the son of Zeus’ tone of voice, for he cautiously allowed for his eyes to turn and directly look into those electric-blue eyes. But before he could manage to do so, Percy excused the both of them hurriedly, and yanked against one of Nico’s hand.

It was neither ideal nor the least subtle gesture, but Percy would be damned if he would allow Nico to get the slightest glimpse of the pain and jealousy in Jason’s eyes at that moment.

You do not have the right to look at him like that, Percy thought, a slight bitterness leaking onto his thoughts. But why are you?

“What was it earlier that you were laughing about?” Percy inquired once they were at a fair distance from the amphitheater.

Niccolò di Angelo spared a glance at his companion before redirecting his attention to the front once more. Crossing his arms over his chest, the son of Hades heaved a chuckle once more, inducing a broad smile from the son of Poseidon.
“Remember that woman they mentioned? Hebe?” Nico inquired, to which Percy offered a curt nod. “She is a daughter of one of the most influential nobles in Ouranós, but her parentage is not completely true.”

“You see, if you think of that kind of arrangement, would it not be best if Herakles was married off to a daughter of Lord Ares instead? At least, that would establish that Pólemos and Agápi would remain on their side,” the son of Hades continued, his eyes lowering to his heels as it clacked rhythmically against the floor. “Instead they questionably chose a noble’s daughter. Thus, some of Anemoi’s informants were tasked to look upon it, and the findings were… amusing.”

The son of Hades spared a cursory glance around them, checking if there were prying eyes or eavesdroppers, before he resumed in a low voice barely above a whisper.

“Do you ever question why Lord Zeus and Lady Hera never had a child of their own?” Nico inquired.

“I thought it was because Lady Hera was enraged with Lord Zeus’ infidelity that she wanted to bear no child of his. That is what everyone believes, after all,” Percy answered, his head tilting to the side in confusion.

Niccolò di Angelo slowly shook his head at the response, his lips twitching once or twice in repressed amusement.

“I suppose that is one of the reasons. The real reason why they never had a child is because Lady Hera is infertile,” Nico stated nonchalantly, pointedly ignoring the shocked expression on his companion’s features. “For a woman, though our generation has progressed from ill-treating infertile women, it is still considered a shame and thereby disgraceful to the family. Lady Hera always wanted a child with Lord Zeus; the rightful heir to the district of Ouranós, and not some illegitimate child from an affair with a commoner. It was what pushed her to resort to the option of seeking an Entrusted Lady.”

It was amusing to watch the play of emotions on the face of the son of Poseidon as the latter processed the information. His features comically contorted from shock, disbelief, horror, and some that Nico could not begin to fathom.

“Wait. So—“
“In order for an Entrusted Lady to be valid, there must be a signed agreement between the two parties, and the couple requesting the “service” must mutually agree upon the woman. Lord Zeus had chosen an Entrusted Lady, but Lady Hera was not having it as the woman was one of those timely affairs of the suzerain. Thus, the consent was not mutual. Unfortunately, Lord Zeus already managed to get his desired Entrusted Lady pregnant, but Lady Hera was against the woman in the first place. But with the signature of Lord Zeus and the Entrusted Lady, the child could not be completely deemed as illegitimate since it was settled legally – aside from the fact that the suzerain could easily manipulate the law to his favor. It would be disastrous if word got out that Lady Hera was infertile; the woman was not keen on keeping the child. So they set a compromise,” Nico explained as they ventured inside the stately home, navigating through the corridors. “In exchange for power and wealth, the woman was to keep the child and raise it as her own. Of course, the woman agreed, and her family eventually became one of the most influential in that district.”

“That child would not happen to be Hebe, right?” Percy asked hesitantly, quite dreading the answer to his inquiry.

The wicked smile on the son of Hades’ lips confirmed it completely.

“She is just slightly older than Hazel. Herakles is just slightly younger than Thanatos. Let that sink into your mind,” Nico remarked, bursting into laughter seconds thereafter when the son of Poseidon’s features contorted with horror. “I guess, being descendants of Paliá Elláda, it would not be so uncommon to be married off to your relative, much so if it ensures that power stays within the family.”

The amused expression on Niccolò di Angelo’s features did not drop, but rather increased as Percy’s expression contorted more and more comically by the second. It was undeniably a shocking information, and even Nico had reacted to it with discomfort the first time he had heard of it. It was disconcerting to hear that they were related by blood for having the same father, much so the difference – the gap – between their ages, which was close to a decade. With the age of seventeen, Nico could not envision someone who was almost of same age as his younger sister to be already wedded.

“It would be best if you do not share that with anyone. I believe only the suzerain and his consort, and the family of the Entrusted Lady knows of the arrangement. Otherwise, Herakles would not have married the former maiden,” the son of Hades stated when his companion did not comment, his features still contorting comically.

The servants passed them by with quizzical expressions, wondering what the heirs could possibly be discussing, just by judging at their animated discussion. Percy was still greatly disturbed, as was emphasized by his unfathomable expression.
“I have no intention to share that with anyone,” Percy answered, stressing on certain parts of his response to get his point across. “Can we not discuss that anymore? I appreciate the image I have in mind of your half-siblings before you used them as a hypothetical example.”

“Perhaps, if you answer a question of mine,” the son of Hades offered, his lips still lightly curled to a small smile.

The son of Poseidon simply tilted his head to the side, wordlessly gesturing for his companion to ask away. Preferably, Percy would appreciate any form of subject change at the moment, so long as it could get the mental image of Thanatos and Hazel being remotely intimate out of his mind.

“What was it that you saw in Jason’s face just now that had you hurriedly pulling me away from the amphitheater?”

Perhaps, not any form of subject change.

The horrified expression that comically adorned his features dropped instantly at the inquiry, and Percy was certain that the son of Hades immediately took notice of the distinct change in his reaction. Subconsciously, Percy plastered a fake, innocent smile upon his lips.

“What do you mean by that?” Percy asked.

The brief flash of pain that fleeted past those russet-brown eyes had Percy immediately regretting his response. The smile on his lips dropped, and his head lowered as if he had been reprimanded; or rather, expecting to be. But Niccolò di Angelo did not do so, maintaining his composure as they continued walking down the corridors, with the son of Poseidon now slightly trailing behind him.

“We have known each other for so long, Percy. You can never pull off an innocent look with me unless you are actually innocent,” the son of Hades offered wryly. “Is it that you can’t tell me or you won’t tell me?”

Percy did not have to look up to know that there was disappointment in those eyes. He hated knowing that he caused it, much more than the fact that it was directed to him.

“Neither,” Percy answered truthfully, his eyes casting towards the side. “There was something that I just did not want you to see. It was not… would not have been good for you.”
The son of Hades frowned at the vague response, but did not press further. It was in these moments, when the older male was being secretive, that Nico was certain that it would be meaningless to press for further information. It did not repress him from being curious of the response he received.

“Please don’t be mad with me,” Percy requested in a low and soft voice, causing Nico to halt and to turn his head to properly look at the older male.

The son of Poseidon still had his head lowered and his eyes casted to the side, but there was an expression of fear that barely peeked to those sea-green eyes. The third heir’s entire frame was completely rigid, and despite his state, Nico found himself subconsciously smiling at the sight.

Somehow, no matter how many years had passed by, the fact that neither of them appreciated emotions of anger or disappointment of the other directed to them never seemed to have changed. The fact that Percy was recoiling from him was enough indication that that part of Percy did not change – the part that had always been wary of kindness and generosity.

“The day I will get mad at you is the day that I could actually cause harm to you,” Nico stated, stepping just slightly closer to the son of Poseidon, just so he could earn his attention completely. “That part of you has not changed, and I still firmly believe that your fears are not applicable with me. Maybe you should stop lying to me to make yourself less insecure.”

“I didn’t mean to lie,” Percy answered truthfully, eyes transfixed onto Nico’s. “Especially not to you.”

“I know,” Nico breathed, and Percy felt a pang of pain at the exhaustion in his voice. The worst was that he could not blame the younger male for feeling as he did, just because there had been countless instances in the past when something similar happened. “We are adults now. To be honest, we would only continue to lie more and more as we age. It slowly becomes pointless to apologize repeatedly over something that would eventually repeat itself in the future.”

As the son of Hades turned around and resumed walking as if nothing happened, the pang of pain in Percy’s chest only seemed to increase by the second at the implication of those words.

*I don’t want to become a liar, Nico. I don’t want either of us to become what we despise most.*

Percy slightly jogged to catch up to him, and when he did, the son of Poseidon merely grasped onto
one of his arms, clutching onto it as they headed towards the son of Hermes’ study room. Niccolò di Angelo neither flinched nor stiffened in his grasp, as if he was expectant of the gesture, which was likely the case. The younger male’s lack of reaction was the only response Percy was sure to receive. It was – in their complex way – a wordless gesture of offering an apology and asking for forgiveness.

Being an adult was not any easier in comparison to being a child. Being an adult, forgiveness does not come immediately after warm and loving hugs. But, being a child of Hades makes forgiveness all the more unattainable.

Percy did not ask for forgiveness out loud so that Nico would not have to offer it out loud. For if there was something about forgiveness that was displeasing, it was that it required losing a part of yourself by acknowledging it.

In silence, there was everything to gain but none to lose. At least, that was what they were both forced to believe in.

The heirs stopped shortly before the door to the son of Hermes’ study room that was left ajar. Disregarding proper decorum, the son of Hades pushed past the door and was immediately assaulted by an immense citrusy scent. Niccolò di Angelo cupped a hand over his mouth and nose by instinct as he stepped inside the room, rolling his eyes at the familiar sight he was greeted with.

The study room was completely different from when they had arrived, and absolutely much better in comparison. The clutter of papers that once littered the carpet was now neatly piled systematically atop the dusted table, where the first heir was currently seated across, and diligently signing one document after another. At their entrance, the first heir briefly glanced up from his task before heaving a long sigh.

“Sure. Just enter without knocking, why don’t you all?” the son of Hermes breathed, returning to his task.

“Since when did you wear glasses?” the son of Hades casually inquired upon closing the door behind them, sitting on the sienna upholstered chair that he occupied the night before, with Percy occupying an identical one parallel and facing towards Nico.

“They are reading glasses. I only use them when I have to continuously sign stacks of documents,”
Luke answered in a monotonous voice, not sparing another glance at the two new occupants in the room. “If you are wondering who cleaned the mess in this room, Chris, Cecil and Ethan’s combined berating forced me to do so. Don’t expect to see Chris and Cecil though. They are having their rest since they patrol the borders at night.”

“I should commend them nonetheless. It’s almost miraculous that we could see the carpet now,” Nico remarked, his tone slightly impressed to the point that it sounded almost mocking. “That aside, why did you call for us?”

“Straight to business as always, di Angelo,” the son of Hermes murmured in an almost absent-minded manner, his cobalt-blue eyes firmly transfixed at the document before him. “Did you inform Percy what we discussed yesterday?”

Niccolò di Angelo stiffened at the inquiry, his eyes narrowing in a mixture of surprise and suspicion at what the son of Hermes was implying. At the mention of his name, the son of Poseidon fixed his posture, though his head tilted slightly to the side as his features contorted with confusion.

“No. I did not believe that the matter would concern their district or allying districts,” Nico answered with a frown.

The first heir of Anemoi slowly shook his head at the statement for a few seconds, halting only once he had penned his signature onto the bottom of the parchment paper. Placing the signed document atop many others that had his signature, Luke placed his quill pen on its ink pot before he finally raised his head to properly address the two.

“Not exactly,” Luke stated as he leaned back against his seat for a second before rising to his feet.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Luke beckoned for the heirs forward to where a four-foot vintage celestial bronze world globe was situated at one of the corners, along with multiple shelves of old dusted books and faded scrolls. There were countless miniscule markings on the surface of the globe, and the fresh scent of charcoal on the markings indicated that they were only recently carved. Turning the globe, the son of Hermes halted once the Eastern Hemisphere of the Pangaea was completely facing their direction.

“The main agricultural districts are both located at the Eastern Hemisphere,” the son of Hermes stated, pointing at the respective districts. “While it is most plausible that they might instigate an attack on the districts of Lord Hephaestus or Lady Athena, the fact that the Eastern Hemisphere is the most vulnerable for an attack. If those districts happened to be claimed, Anemoi, Sofía and Ílios would be susceptible to attacks on two fronts.”
“The huge plot of land on the eastern border of both Gi and Krasí is presumed to be inhabited by the Huntresses of Diana – the people of Selíni. We can interpret that they are the first line of defense on the East, provided that what the son of Zeus stated was true.”

The son of Poseidon’s eyes narrowed at that statement while his lips twisting into a grimace.

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“The Huntresses of Diana are scattered throughout Pangaea – on the mountainous regions to be precise,” Jason explained to them as they hovered over a map that the son of Zeus had produced, once pressed and folded neatly within the pockets of his attire. “My sister, Thalia, let it slip that Lady Artemis wanted no part in the brewing war between the main districts and had moved Selíni to a region that was completely uninhabited except for a few tribal groups.”

“It is a risky choice though,” the son of Zeus continued, eyeing each and every one of them to get his point across, and Percy did not miss how those eyes lingered on the son of Hades’. “This region is rumored to be where some disbanded forces of Lord Kronos currently reside. Finding Selíni in these mountainous region is like finding needle in a haystack, but with heavier consequences.”

The silence that followed thereafter was almost deafening. Percy turned his attention to the sons of Hermes and Hades who had contemplative and distant expressions in their eyes. Ethan, the informant that he was, was preoccupied with studying the map, analyzing the mapped mountainous regions with a critical expression.

Finally, after what seemed like a long time, the son of Hades spoke.

“What do you think of this, Luke?” Nico inquired in a low voice, his eyes shifting to the silent son of Hermes who was still staring distantly at the map.

“It is possible. But I have to agree on the son of Zeus here that those regions are far too dangerous to explore,” Luke commented, crossing his arms over his chest. “If the territory of Selíni is somewhere in those dangerous mountainous regions, then that is not an area that could be freely explored.”

“Perhaps not by a group,” Nico stated so nonchalantly and so vaguely, but Percy understood what he meant with his statement nonetheless.
If venturing on his own would get him to Selíni, danger be damned, but Niccolò di Angelo would do so. All the more if it meant finally being able to confront the sister that disappeared on him for so many years.

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Since then, the son of Hades had been obsessed in studying the map of the mountainous regions; doing so when he believed that Percy was either unconscious or too preoccupied to notice that he was immersing himself in it. But Percy silently observed him – on the previous night when he presumed that Percy was asleep, with nothing but a quaint oil lamp to illuminate the small desk where Nico was hunched over, documents of Anemoi pushed to the side.

Even then, at that moment, Percy was certain that there was a map in one of his pockets, awaiting to be unfolded by the son of Hades. Percy was conflicted on how to go about with finding Bianca di Angelo. A part of him wanted to grant the son of Hades’ innermost desire of finding his biological older sister with that fabricated belief that it would fill some void in him that existed when she departed from his side. Yet, a part of Percy wanted to prevent Nico from pursuing her further, knowing that there was a lesser risk of pain with that option.

Percy had seen how the mere name and memory of Bianca di Angelo could break Nico apart. That Niccolò di Angelo of the past and the present… He did not think he could handle seeing him breaking down utterly; completely.

“What do you propose we do then?” The voice of Niccolò di Angelo snapped Percy from his musings. Lifting his head which he had unintentionally lowered, Percy observed the interaction between the other two.

“Not necessarily ‘we’. I called for Percy here because he might be the key to our predicament,” Luke stated, startling both sons of Hades and Poseidon.

“Me?” Percy breathed, a frown slowly marring his features as he regarded the first heir with growing suspicion. “And what predicament are we discussing about?”

“The House of Artemis is essentially in alliance with the House of Poseidon. If there is anyone that Lady Artemis would listen to, then there is a higher chance of it being you,” Luke explained briefly before glancing at the son of Hades. “Nico can explain it to you once you two are on your way to Selíni. It’s not safe to discuss these matters in detail here.”
The son of Poseidon glanced at his companion to confirm what the son of Hermes had said, but Nico had his eyes transfixed at the son of Hermes, narrowed into slits with wary and suspicion.

“I thought you did not want anyone aside from our allying districts to be involved in this?” Nico questioned in a low voice. “Besides, the possibility is low—“

“But it still exists,” Luke interjected before the young heir could finish his statement. “You are already bringing him with you, aren’t you? He might as well appeal to Lady Artemis. You know fully well that we need the help of Lady Artemis on this.”

Niccolò di Angelo gritted his teeth in response, but did not refute the statement. He turned his eyes to the son of Poseidon for a split second before he lowered his eyes to the plush carpet.

“If what you ask is within reason, I will do it,” Percy stated in a firm voice, looking back and forth between the two heirs.

“Define ‘reasonable’,’” Luke murmured, shaking his head as he let out a small chuckle.

Reaching into his pockets, the son of Hermes slowly pulled out a parchment paper that was folded several times until it was conveniently small. Stepping close to the son of Poseidon, Luke casually handed it to him.

“This is a word per word copy of a report I received from one of our informants weeks ago,” Luke stated, and if it were not for the situation, he would have laughed at the pathetic attempt of an innocent look that the young man was portraying before him. “Nico already informed of me last night of what you know. I will only say this to you: If you value your life, keep what you know to yourself.”

The first heir turned his back to them as he sauntered once more to his seat, casually crossing his arms over his chest as he leaned back.

“I need you to read that once you get to the mountains. Once you have done so, you have to burn it,” Luke continued, his tone gravely. “Only a selected few knows of this. I don’t necessarily trust you, but gaining the trust of di Angelo is almost impossible. If he trusts you, then by extension I will allow myself to offer you the benefit of the doubt. That does not necessarily mean that I would not kill you the moment you give me a reason to mistrust you.”
Percy could only nod in understanding as he clasped the paper firmly on his hand for a few seconds before shoving it inside one of his pockets. As much as his curiosity to knowing its content was overwhelming, he had to abide by the son of Hermes’ wishes.

“Is that all you need us for?” Nico inquired after a while, unintentionally shifting closer to the son of Poseidon as he stepped away from the globe.

“Percy can go. You, on the other hand, are needed here to discuss those documents I handed to you the previous night,” Luke stated, grasping onto another document from the pile, and preoccupying himself once more of his former task. “Afterwards, I need your help in personally dealing with a few nobles.”

The son of Hades heaved a sigh at the menial tasks but offered his nod. Turning back to the son of Poseidon, Nico offered the older male a curt nod before gesturing towards the door.

“I will see you back in the bedchambers. Is that all right?” Percy inquired, his voice barely above whisper as he addressed the son of Hades.

Niccolò di Angelo simply nodded in return before Percy excused himself from the room, closing the door with a soft click. There was an urge in him to eavesdrop at the conversation from behind closed doors, but knowing Niccolò di Angelo, the son of Hades would not appreciate his breach in privacy. The fact that Luke decided to trust him – if only by a sliver – was something that Percy greatly appreciated, and would prefer not to lose immediately just because of his curiosity.

Before he could take a few steps forward, a hand firmly grasped onto one of Percy’s shoulder, pulling him back. The son of Poseidon barely had the opportunity to process the firm weight on his left shoulder before his eyes directly met electric-blue irises. His mind was completely blank from the shock of the sudden gesture, and he could not come up with any form of greeting before the person beat him to speaking.

“I assume you have free time. I want to talk to you for a while.”

Percy could not fathom how he always found himself in situations that were undesirable for him. As a child, it was completely expected by him, with the numerous mischiefs that he pulled off regardless of the countless reprimands of his father and stepmother. But as an adult, perhaps he should
reclassify them now as the gods’ act of vengeance.

Percy hated confrontations – the ones that would start lightly and gradually build up to the other person’s main and actual point. He hated those instances where the other person would beat about the bush, just to lash at him with varying negative emotions. Unfortunately, he admittedly is a hypocrite for committing himself to those confrontations most of the time. He appreciated more the confrontations which Nico and Luke offered – direct to the point and no sweet nothings lacing their words. It was much easier to endure and manage in comparison.

“I never thought I would actually see you two again. It has been two years and… many things seem to have changed.”

Though, said heirs were not the only ones capable of immediately getting their points across. There were a numbered few that Percy could mention, but those that beat about the bush were still overwhelming in number in comparison. He wondered if it was by human nature that most people were incapable of conveying themselves directly without the attachment of unnecessary repetitive phrases such as “How are you?” But wondering of such trivial matters never did him anything; never provided him the answers that he coveted to hear and understand.

“You have grown a few inches over the past two years. I also heard stories regarding you from commoners and servants and soldiers alike, and—“

It was best to leave the pondering of the world’s mysteries to Nico; Percy gathered that much. The son of Hades was much capable of rationalizing between logic and emotions; at least, more so than Percy could manage. The fresh memory of what occurred earlier plagued the son of Poseidon’s mind once more. They had agreed upon it countless times that neither should lie to the other. Yet, growing up, that was simply unavoidable. Nico was accurate when he mentioned how adults – what they were at that point – would only continue to lie more and more as they age until apologies eventually become meaningless and repetitive.

Percy did not like the implication behind that.

“I heard that you are better at handling a sword now. I remember how we used to spar—“

The only thought in Percy’s mind at that moment was to go back to his and Nico’s temporarily shared bedchambers. He was already planning in his head how he should properly apologize to the young heir, phrasing and rephrasing the words in his head until they seemed like a garbled mess—
“That aside, how has Lord Poseidon been?”

“I think it would be best if you simply get to the point, Jason,” Percy stated in a cold voice, the friendliness and warmth that was in his tone not so long ago, now gone. “What do you need to know about Nico?”

Electric-blue eyes slowly lost their warmth and was gradually replaced by a cold and hard edge. The son of Zeus halted mid-step, stopping a few feet in front of the son of Poseidon. There was a brief moment where realization passed through those electric-blue eyes, and Percy responded no differently to it than when he had spoken mere seconds ago.

“You know.” It was a statement, not a question. “About Nico and I.”

Percy gritted his teeth at the statement, having to bite the tip of his tongue to refrain himself from exclaiming irrationally. The words “Nico” and “I” on the same statement, spoken from Jason’s tongue, left a bitter aftertaste on Percy’s own.

“He told me himself after Piper’s sister trampled upon his dignity,” Percy confirmed in a cold voice, taking the slightest pleasure in how Jason winced, and how there was a brief flash on grief in those eyes. “That was also how we found out about your betrothal.”

“And you think it’s a mistake.”

“That is your statement, not mine,” Percy countered, narrowing his eyes as he observed the son of Zeus.

But Jason avoided his eyes as he stepped inside the cloister-enclosed garth of the stately home; away from the prying eyes of servants as they scurried past. Percy cautiously followed the younger male, who stopped shortly in front of a small fountain. The crystalline clear water gurgled loudly, effectively muting – as much as was possible – the noise emitted by any servant or soldier passing by.

Gingerly, Jason seated himself by the water fountain, absent-mindedly admiring the clear flowing water. Percy chose to remain standing upright, situating himself a few feet from the son of Zeus.

“I have never been the one to decide my course of actions. Everything, from the moment that I
stepped into my father’s home, was predetermined for me,” Jason stated in a monotonous voice. “As is this betrothal.”

Jason glanced up at Percy, who was silently staring at him with his arms crossed over his chest. With how those eyes were transfixed at his figure, the son of Zeus was certain that his old friend was listening to each and every single one of his words.

“Piper eventually knew that I do not reciprocate that adoration – that love – which she offers. But she does not know how I felt – still feel – for Nico,” Jason continued, pausing once more as he directly met those sea-green eyes.

“I am still in love with Nico.”

“You don’t have the right to look at us, at him, with jealousy or pain in your eyes,” Percy growled, his hands clenching into fists. “Neither do you have the right to claim loving him when you allowed yourself to be tied to someone that is not Nico.”

“None of my actions have ever been my choice!” Jason snapped, his fists clenched into fists atop of his lap. The gurgling of the fountain slightly muted his outburst. “And I have the right to feel what I choose to feel, because it’s the only thing I have that need not be decided for me!”

The heirs heatedly glared at each other, neither backing down as their eyes remained transfixed on the other. There was tension in the air, only partly suppressed by the lack of silence as the fountain continued to gurgle loudly in the background. Both heirs had their hands clenched tightly into fists, to the point that their knuckles protruded.

Jason could understand where Percy’s anger was coming from. The son of Poseidon always prioritized the safety and happiness of the son of Hades – above everyone else, inclusive of himself. When it came to the son of Hades, the rational part of the son of Poseidon’s mind would cease from functioning.

“If you think seeing him would accomplish anything for you, I am telling you this, Jason: I will take Nico with me back to Illos in a heartbeat,” Percy continued in a low voice, simultaneously keeping it and his emotions controlled.

“The only reason why I had to personally inform Nico of his sister’s possible whereabouts is because in the case that I am mistaken, I will take full responsibility of it,” Jason declared, lowering his voice
as well, as he redirected his glaring eyes to the covered path. “I know how much Nico loves his sister despite his constant rejection of her. If I had known that she was Nico’s sister the moment Thalia paid me a visit with her in tow, I would have done everything – even if it took isolating her elsewhere – just to get Nico to see her.”

“I should have known; the resemblance was uncanny,” the son of Zeus continued, his voice lowering further to a mere whisper.

“None of us would have,” Percy said bitterly, casting his eyes to the covered path as well. “All of us presumed that she was dead.”

It was impossible not to derive to such an assumption after so many years of hearing absolutely no information with regards to the daughter of Hades. Eight years – that was how long Niccolò di Angelo endured her silence, acknowledging wordlessly the possibility that his biological sister was dead. The son of Hades did not pursue to search for her, dreading the possibility of having to face one day a tragic story of her demise; the fact that she was really dead.

Finding out that she was alive was a lot crueler in comparison to death. Percy still was uncertain the level of his animosity towards the daughter of Hades, regardless that he had yet to meet her to judge her based on her raw actions and decisions.

“It would make him whole,” Jason stated after a few moments of silence, his head still lowered. “At least, a huge part of him would be whole. You know that he will seek her relentlessly, now that he has found out that she’s alive, don’t you? Regardless of what anyone will say.”

“I know,” the son of Poseidon confirmed, a flicker of pain flashing through his eyes. “I have half the mind to tell him not to go, that seeing her would just make his hatred on her more established. I don’t want that for him – for him to tread that fine line between love and hatred, and actually choose the latter in the end. He already feels betrayed of her from her abandonment of him in the past. How do you think that intensified now, in the present?”

Jason frowned at his old friend’s words, his features contorting in confusion at how the son of Poseidon phrased his response. He had expected the third heir to be acceptant of the idea of the son of Hades finally meeting with his sister, regardless of the circumstances. Both of them had grown with Niccolò di Angelo, enough to know how much it meant to the son of Hades to be able to meet his sister once more.

Hearing Percy state that he had half the mind to prohibit the son of Hades from seeking her out was unlikely of the son of Poseidon. At least, the son of Poseidon who Jason once knew.
“If you have the slightest care about Nico—” Jason started to threaten, but was cut-off when the son of Poseidon snarled at him.

“You have no idea how much I care about him,” Percy practically spat, lifting his sea-green eyes from the covered path and glaring at the son of Zeus once more. Jason had to prevent himself from recoiling at the intensity of that glare.

“I care for him so much that I would always be so willing to carry him whenever he would manage to injure himself. I care for him so much that I would constantly be by his side – whether it was to listen or simply be there as his companion. I care for him so much that I could care less of how many hours of sleep I would lose, so long as he would not feel all alone on the nights that he would cry in his sleep for Bianca. I care for him so much that I crossed the ocean countless times in the past the second I hear that he was sick. I care for him so much that it did not matter if I would not sleep an entire day, so long as I can ensure that he was all better. I care for him so much to stay by his side without him needing to ask of me. I care for him so much that I would willingly endure all that he went through in the past two years if it means that he doesn’t have to endure the countless nightmares that would leave him gasping for air on most nights. I care for him so much that I could care less about my reputation to others if it means I could defend his.”

“You have no right to talk to me about ‘care’, when all I have been doing is trying to keep him whole after people like you and Bianca decided that breaking him was an available option,” Percy snarled, his fists trembling erratically by his sides as he repressed himself from acting on his emotions, and potentially punching the face of his old friend.

Jason could only stare at the son of Poseidon in shock; never having been the recipient of such immense anger. All the retorts to the accusation that was bestowed upon him died at the tip of his tongue as he directly faced those intense sea-green eyes, burning with the raw emotions of hatred, anger, and something else that Jason dreaded to see.

It was why the words died at the tip of his tongue, along with the anger in his features, as if he had been doused all of a sudden by a bucket of freezing water. He might as well have been; it was much preferable than the realization that dawned upon him.

“Percy… Are you… Are you in love with Nico?”

The son of Poseidon bitterly chuckled at the inquiry, and Jason only vaguely registered how there was a moment when pain flickered in those dulling sea-green eyes. A smile curled those full, thin lips, but it never reached the owner’s eyes that gradually clouded with emotions that the son of Zeus was incapable of fathoming.
“You would know, wouldn’t you, Jason?” Percy stated rhetorically as he backed off a few steps, absent-mindedly brushing his right thumb against his lips before turning his back to the son of Zeus. “You only need to know one thing: Nico is very important to me.”

Without as much as a goodbye, the son of Poseidon walked off and left the son of Zeus be, retracing the path that the two of them had taken in order to reach the cloister-enclosed garth. All the while, Jason had his head lowered, his eyes distantly staring at the covered path as he contemplated of Percy’s words.

*You would know, wouldn’t you, Jason?*

Jason did not need any more confirmation aside from that.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is the LAST chapter in Anemoi. For now, perhaps. The full names of most of the characters are provided at the link below. That page is subjected to change as the story progresses.
Link: [HERE](#)
Thank you for reading this chapter! Until the next chapter!
An important note for the following 3 chapters:
Initially, I planned to stop updating (resuming end of October) upon posting the next chapter. BUT... But since ending on the next chapter might have many of you awaiting for me with pitchforks come October, I decided to stop updating at Chapter XVII (17) and resume on the end of October. Reason for the halt: Job. With that, the next three chapters will be updated weekly. So you can expect 15 next week, 16 two weeks from now, and 17 on the 27th. Why the specific date? My birthday gift to myself and to you guys haha! So yeah, please look forward to the next chapters!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I can control my destiny, but not my fate. Destiny means there are opportunities to turn right or left, but fate is a one-way street. I believe we all have the choice as to whether we fulfil our destiny, but our fate is sealed.”

- Paulo Coelho

Hacking down the poorly constructed straw dummies had to be one of the sanest decisions that Percy made.

With each clean swipe of his blade against the pathetic material, the son of Poseidon sensed his immense anger gradually ebbing; replaced with a sense of calm. The opposite could be deduced from the small band of soldiers whom gathered as they observed the third heir make a spectacle of himself. With each clean swipe of his blade, their agitation increased as another straw head would create a dull thud as it joined the dozens that have been already strewn across the training grounds. Regardless, none dared to approach the heir lest faulty approach might result to their heads joining the dozens.

Anaklusmos – a shimmering medium-length bronze xiphos with a double-edged blade, a leather-wrapped grip and a flat hilt riveted with gold studs – had been wielded by many, and each owner were simply added to that long list of a tragic history it possessed. When his father bestowed it upon him, it was with the belief that he would be the one to “offer a happy closure to the series of unfortunate tragedies it has witnessed”. Percy believed otherwise; that it was working its curse upon him as it did for countless many, and he was inevitably heading towards a tragic demise.

Anaklusmos is one of his treasured possessions, regardless, as it was the sole blade that perfectly and absolutely befitted him.
Said blade was used like a sickle to harvest crops as it continuously hacked one dummy after another. He was surprised that no one told him to cease, though that might be greatly attributed to the son of Hades. The reminder of the young man had him visibly pausing for a few seconds; contemplating in that brief moment how Niccolò di Angelo might respond to his actions in the likely circumstance that he were to be informed of it. Regardless of what response he would receive thereafter, Percy would simply have to accept it. At that point of time, the only thing that mattered to the son of Poseidon was to completely quell the raging anger that consumed him.

That occurred weeks ago, and if Niccolò di Angelo possessed knowledge of his prior activity, said son of Hades did not make any attempt to address the matter. The son of Hades was much preoccupied with matters that the son of Hermes had tasked of him – of Percy, to some extent – and Percy would rather Nico invest himself in what was substantial rather than on his antics.

Weeks had passed and Percy still lacked the capacity to conclude his thoughts of meeting Bianca di Angelo – of Nico meeting his biological sister. Events of the past few weeks – of the son of Hades depriving himself of rest in exchange of repetitively assessing regions and pinpointing the woman’s possible location – had not made his impression of Bianca di Angelo much tolerable. He despised himself for it. His despise for himself was only fueled with how the sons of Lord Apollo handled their unplanned journey; more so the partial reason behind it – they could not disclose Luke’s task for them. Will vehemently protested to it, but the final decision was in Niccolò di Angelo, and his decision was to track his sister down. Percy could not take off of his mind that expression of mixed disappointment and respect that Lord Apollo casted upon his direction on that day.

Presently, Percy could not be certain of their location except that they were somewhere along the east – on the mountainous regions – camouflaged in a dense thicket with only a small campfire to illuminate their surroundings. The son of Hades was sound asleep with his head resting atop of the son of Poseidon’s lap – much to the latter’s insistence as a compromise for their lack of comfort. It was that low and even breathing, the crackling of burning wood and the sound emitted by cicadas that kept the older heir company in that comforting silence while said heir slowly watched the burning parchment paper on the campfire. The words were indiscernible now, but if Percy were to close his eyes, he could vaguely remember snippets of what had been written.

“… –under a drastic purge. Situation has been compromised. Sending an extraction team would be too much of a risk… –no way out.

“Informing allying districts immediately is a very highly suggested advice… Military personnel alarmingly increased… Ratio unbalanced… –direct breach of signed agreement.

“–increase in warships that are well-hidden at the naval dockyards… Possible course of destination to Vóreio Eirinikó Okeanó… –mainland vulnerable…

“All of us are trapped within Pólemos with an unlikely chance of survival… –George amongst initial casualties. Death toll will continue to increase with subsequent weeks.
"We are willing to die for Anemoi. May our god Mercury continue to bless Anemoi in its dire hours.

- Martha"

The letter was dated weeks ago, and Percy could only grit his teeth as he imagined how many had already died within the walls of the House of Ares. Percy could not comprehend how neither Luke nor Nico buckled under the weight of the situation; how Luke managed to keep himself whole upon being the recipient of such a devastating information.

No, Percy shook his head. It was absolutely wrong of him to assume that the man managed to keep himself whole; that the death of many of his people did not make him falter for a second. The heir to Anemoi had to keep an appearance to the public – had to present himself as that strong pillar to his people. Buckling under the weight of such casualties and situation was never an option. Percy repetitively inquired of the son of Hades to provide him with hints as to the content of the parchment letter whenever his curiosity threatened to get the best of him. The son of Hades uttered no response to supply him with the barest hint towards the content, informing him only that it was something that he would “utterly dread”. That was a huge understatement.

Regardless that they were not his people, the information did not reduce how the son of Poseidon felt – devastation. Regardless that they were not his people, the fact that they were nonetheless innocent people did not escape from his knowledge. With how the situation was escalating slowly yet steadily on all sides, there was no time to mourn for those that had passed but in silence. Yet, Percy could not come to do so as he was bombarded with matters of his own.

Vóreio Eirinikó Okeanó; the letter had mentioned. The ocean stated was a mutual boundary of Gi, Krasí and Thálassa. But if the location of Selíni was accurate, then it was likely that the district of Lord Poseidon had to step up and defend it. Thálassa was vulnerable in the aspect that its strength was equally its weakness. Having the ocean as its boundary on all sides was not ideal. If what the report stated was true and highly likely, then Thálassa would have no choice but to be actively involved in the evolving, yet still partially cold war.

The son of Poseidon’s thoughts halted as the young heir slightly shifted his head atop his lap, his face completely facing the direction of the low fire. The glow of the fire splayed a soft yet warm shades of orange and yellow across his tender skin, making him appear ethereal in the son of Poseidon’s eyes. In these rare moments wherein Nico was unconscious, Percy could see how befitting his name truly was. It would be a lie to deny that the young man possessed the features – in his vulnerability – of an angel.

Gingerly, the third heir brushed his fingers gently on the son of Hades’ right cheek, feeling the seeping coldness underneath his fingertips. He and Nico existed at the right place at the wrong time. It was a fact that Percy had come to acknowledge long before everything became utterly complicated before their eyes. It was the reason why he had unintentionally lost his composure before the son of
Zeus, departing from Anemoi with that barely concealed animosity lingering between them. Oddly enough, the son of Zeus let them depart without so much as an attempt to approach the son of Hades in the duration of their stay. There was a subtle difference in the daughter of Aphrodite’s demeanor and disposition though that did not escape from Percy’s acknowledgement, but he did not allow for himself to dwell too long on what he deemed as trivial.

“That I am incapable of anything that is remotely close to the feeling of love – giving and receiving.”

The words that Niccolò di Angelo uttered on that night resurfaced from Percy’s memories as he pulled his hand back, settling on placing it atop the young heir’s arm in a poor attempt to ensure that he was warm. His sea-green eyes cautiously darted all over their surroundings once more, straying once every few minutes at the sleeping figure in his arms, admiring the features that he had become so familiar with.

He had stated that Nico was wrong to deduce that, but what the son of Hades was unaware of was the extent of his statement. Niccolò di Angelo was not incapable of giving and receiving love of any form; there were many who would willingly contest the son of Hades’ claim.

Jason Liam Grace fell in love with the son of Hades, and would vehemently protest the latter’s claim if he were to hear it. And Percy…

Perseus Tzákson was this close to losing himself, and disproving the son of Hades once and for all.

No form of training could have prepared the son of Poseidon of the difficulty of trekking a mountainside forest. The task was arduous beyond what he initially expected, and the gradual increase in their altitude and drop in temperature was making it difficult to breathe. The son of Hades equally did not seem to fare well, but he was not expressing his strain as much as Percy was. Had it not been for the thick padding on their apparel, neither might have endured the cold temperature for as long as they have.

How much time had passed since they started? It was too easy to lose track of time, and with the dense thicket shielding the warm rays of sunlight from reaching their chilled skins, they were merely at the mercy of their sights. Warm puffs of air escaped through Percy’s chapped lips that quivered in the slightest, and his breathing was coming out unevenly and in ragged pants. The son of Hades must have noticed his strain for the young man stopped seconds thereafter, turning on his heels to face the older male.
“We should rest,” Nico declared, his voice the slightest bit breathless.

Percy immediately shook his head, lifting his right hand to clutch at the fabric atop of his heart, trying to even out his breathing as his lungs struggled. Nico narrowed his eyes at the gesture before he strode towards the son of Poseidon, cautiously guiding the older male to rest his back against a tree.

“You need to rest,” the son of Hades insisted as he placed a hand against Percy’s lower back and chest respectively, guiding him to a much comfortable position. “It’s natural that your body felt fatigued. We have been trekking for hours.”

“How is it possible that you possess more stamina than I do?” Percy rasped, tilting his head back as he rested it against the rough bark.

The son of Hades heaved a hollow chuckle, kneeling before the son of Poseidon as he rummaged through a sackcloth bag, pulling out a leather water flask before handing it to his companion.

“You seem to have forgotten who has trained me to be as I am today,” the son of Hades responded, causing Percy to wince in understanding.

“Right. I am constantly reminded why I was never keen on receiving training from Thanatos when it was offered,” Percy breathed, remembering that manic glint on the former suzerain of Skotádi’s black eyes as Lord Hades casually offered his eldest son to train Percy. Percy had known even back then that the suggestion was not favorable for him, and so he had declined.

“Are you sure you can manage?” Nico inquired, diverting the topic back to the son of Poseidon as russet-brown eyes assessed his exhausted state. “I can accompany you back… if you wish.”

“No,” Percy interrupted immediately, dismissing Nico’s suggestion before the latter could completely finish his statement. “I have to go with you and talk to Lady Artemis. Besides…”

Percy paused briefly as he shifted in his position, adjusting himself so that he was sitting upright and their eyes were at eye-level with each other.

“There is nothing at this point that could prevent you from seeing her, isn’t it?” Percy concluded,
offering a small smile at the son of Hades.

The smile which the son of Poseidon offered lacked the sincerity and the amiable quality it usually possessed. Niccolò di Angelo would be foolish not to acknowledge it for the poor façade that it was. Raising his right hand, he chidingly flicked his companion’s forehead with enough force for it to hurt.

“You act as if you have me completely figured out. You are wrong on what you claim. Many things could stop me at this point, Percy,” Nico answered firmly, causing that smile to slowly drop off those chapped lips. “One of them is your safety. It’s not within my intention to risk it; I would be foolish should I choose to risk it. I would willingly turn back now if that meant ensuring your safety.”

Safety. It was always his safety that functioned as a determinant, Percy thought bitterly to himself.

“What if I ask for it?” Percy blurted out without as much as a second thought, his eyes transfixed on those russet-brown eyes. “What if I ask instead that you do not seek her at all?”

Niccolò di Angelo hesitated at the inquiry, his expression becoming conflicted as he tried to process what the son of Poseidon was asking of him specifically. His eyes roamed about the area in unease as his lips parted a significant amount of times, but no sound left him.

“I…” The son of Hades breathed after a while, closing his mouth for a second before re-opening it once more. “You don’t wish for me to seek her.”

It was a statement, not a question. The son of Poseidon could only flash a bitter smile as he nodded in confirmation of the statement. The howling of the wind temporarily filled the silence that threatened to uncomfortably settle between them as the son of Poseidon slowly roamed his eyes throughout their surroundings. His teeth gently pressed his lower lip in between, his expression becoming contemplative as he returned the intense gaze that was directed at him.

“I’ve seen you break before me countless of times. You always come this close to breaking apart completely. I don’t want you to come to that point, Nico,” Percy admitted, trying to force that pleading tone off of his voice. “I don’t wish to see you come to that point and be unable to pull you together again.”

Those russet-brown eyes mellowed under his scrutiny, and for once in the past few weeks, a ghost of a smile was curling those pale, chapped lips. Niccolò di Angelo was slowly shaking his head as he
retrieved the leather water flask from the son of Poseidon’s grasp, concealing it once more inside his sackcloth bag. Casting a cursory look at their surroundings, the young heir eventually situated himself to sit beside the older male, his head tilting back to stare at the canopy.

“If I didn’t know your intentions, I would have hit you for implying that I’m weak. But, I doubt you will have to see that – me falling apart before you,” Nico declared after a while, with such certainty that Percy almost believed him for a second. “I have the capacity to search for her, just because I know you would pull me back before I come to that point. That is the only reason why I am able to continue.”

“I do not trust myself to make decent decisions when I am overwhelmed with my emotions,” Nico admitted as he continued to speak. “I do not trust myself on anything when it comes to those instances. But I know I can trust you to guide me through.”

Nico paused for a few seconds, shifting his head to the side so that he was looking directly at the son of Poseidon. He gazed directly onto those molten sea-green eyes before he resumed speaking.

“Didn’t you mention it once that we will always pull each other back?”

“I remember you mentioning that it would be you to pull me back. Never the reverse,” the son of Poseidon stated, allowing himself to smile slightly when the son of Hades chuckled in return.

“I suppose we can make an exception just this once,” was the humored response as the son of Hades gradually lifted himself to his full height.

“I need to do this, Percy. You know this just as well as I do,” Nico stated as he wiped the mirth off of his features. Leaning forward, he extended his right hand to the still seated son of Poseidon. “But I can only do this if I have the assurance that you would be there.”

There was a moment when Percy hesitated to take that hand, knowing that doing so would fully mean that he was offering his unspoken consent to the son of Hades – that he would permit Niccolò di Angelo’s risky actions of tracking down his sole biological sister. There was a moment when Percy did not wish to take it, and there was a moment when he almost did not.

Yet, he did. For if their situation had been in reverse, Percy was certain that Niccolò di Angelo would not deny him what Percy almost did, regardless of how far it might break either of them. On so many grounds, Niccolò di Angelo was a much better person than what the younger would care to
Upon firmly grasping the extended hand, the son of Hades slowly pulled him up to his full height, and Percy staggered just the slightest bit before he regained his bearings.

“Please endure this a little while longer,” Nico murmured as he released his gloved hand before gesturing forward – Percy assumed the direction was north – with his head. “If my guess is correct, Selīni should be—”

The heirs immediately tensed as a series of muted howls pierced the silence of their surroundings. The howls were coming from no concise direction; it was as if the howls were being emitted everywhere, gradually increasing in volume at an alarming rate. The son of Poseidon turned to his companion, only to find the younger male slightly hunched forward, attuning his ears to the cacophony of howls and guttural growls.

There was the faintest sound of rustling leaves; of muted footsteps as dried leaves were crunched under one’s heavy footing. The howling of the wind did not cease amidst those few seconds, but the sounds seemed to increase in volume with each passing second that followed. The warning bells on Nico’s head were ringing loudly, to the point that the son of Hades could almost hear a distinct sound of it against his ears. There was something off with their surroundings – there was another presence amongst them; an unwelcomed one. He needed to get them both out of there immediately.

“It has been a long… long while since we have had fresh meat in our territory,” a raucous voice declared, halting any plans of escaping the son of Hades had in mind as he almost gestured for his companion to follow him.

Niccolò di Angelo bared his teeth as a man stepped forth from a dense group of trees, sufficient for both heirs to make out his horrid features, yet adequate for the man to remain partially shrouded by the shadows. The man’s pale, sickly-looking skin was pulled too tight against his skull, and his visible teeth seemed unnaturally as sharp as fangs. His eyes glowed of a bright red, dilated with an evident and unsettling hunger as they roamed over the two heirs’ frames. He possessed greasy and ragged, dark locks, and he was poorly dressed in thick robes of tattered fur from various animals. From the repugnant stench coming off of them, they were neither cured nor of fresh kill.

A six-foot black wolf was situated by his side, with its gleaming eyes, that seemed too intelligent for an animal, dilated equally with an unsettling hunger. Dried mud, grass and dirt were caked thickly on its fur, yet it did not seem to mind its state as it snapped its jaws at them. Bits of animal flesh and fresh blood dripped from its exposed fangs; the sight of which causing both heirs’ stomachs to churn with unease.
“Your clothing suggests little of where you have come from,” the man stated with an exaggerated hum as he slightly paced about, appraising critically the apparel the young men adorned. “But it does not matter. Status matters little once you become the meal of my wolves.”

Niccolò di Angelo held his ground despite the threat, occasionally glancing at his companion to check upon his state. He fervently hoped that Percy would not foolishly announce their status. There was something regarding the newcomer that greatly irked the son of Hades – beyond those putrid, fur ensemble of robes that covered his frame – though Nico could not determine what it was exactly. He shifted his stance slightly to Percy, halting immediately once those gleaming eyes transfixed onto his frame, following his every move.

“We are just passing through,” Percy stated from beside the son of Hades, noting the guarded posture of the latter and the predatory gleam in the newcomer’s eyes. It was enough of a confirmation for him to know that the man could not be trusted under any circumstance.

“You are still in my territory,” the man said, taking a step forward but stopping once the son of Hades growled low in his throat at his direction. “No one who has stepped into my territory has ever lived. Both of you made a poor choice of coming here. Do entertain me, children. What reason could you possibly have to be here?”

“To seek the Huntresses of Diana,” Nico stated, foregoing any reason to keep their agenda a secret from the man with the knowledge that either option would cause the man to attack them with his approaching wolves. He might as well risk that chance that the man would know the location that they sought.

In response, the man barred his teeth viciously at them, inducing for the wolf beside him to snarl at the heirs in response. Slowly, more wolves – at least half a dozen – emerged from the trees, evenly spacing themselves and forming a semicircle around the man. Their appearance was identical to that of the first wolf, and their size equally matched against one another. Nico had to wonder how much force and time it would take for him to get his blade through the skin of one before proceeding to execute the same action with the rest. The man settled down after a few seconds, and there was a wicked glimmer in his eyes as he assessed both heirs.

“Artemis has visitors,” the man crooned in a sickeningly sweet tone. “An unannounced visit, I gather. Had you known better, you would have wisely chosen to pass through Gi. Instead, here you are, to be fed to my lycanthropes. No matter; your lack of knowledge is the best blessing for me and my hungry pack.”

The man gestured at his pack of hungry wolves, and the term that the man used sparked a memory on the son of Hades’ mind. Recognition briefly filled his eyes before he masked it with his usual nonchalant composure. As inconspicuous as he could possibly manage, Nico inched his right hand
closer to the hilt of his sheathed sword without straying his eyes from the enemy.

“You are Lycaon then, the one who declares himself as the king of the wolves,” Nico said, narrowing his eyes at the man who returned the gesture. “The servant of Kronos who slaughtered one of his own sons and fed his remains to the wolves, and caused the death of the remaining fifty-eight who were forced to support their father in his foolish cause. How are you alive when you should have died decades ago?”

“I was a great man,” the man – Lycaon – boldly declared, pacing behind his wolves while observing the heirs critically. “Until that scum, Zeus, decided to meddle by opposing Lord Kronos. When he miraculously emerged victorious, it was by his decree that all who supported Lord Kronos was to be executed.”

Lycaon paused as he reached one end of the semicircle, barring his teeth once more as he flashed a wicked grin whilst he paced to the other end.

“But of course, I was one of the few that escaped. Most of those that escaped have died by now – tracked down by that scum for fear that a new opposition group may arose from our disbanded group, and challenge his current ruling. But as for I? No. Who would in their right mind would resort to living under the constant danger posed on the mountains? Who would in their right mind resort to living out in these very woods? Alas, no one suspected that I have been dwelling here for decades,” the man heaved a chuckle, sheer amusement dancing across his eyes before they hardened once more. “It was such a perfect, cunning plan, until Artemis and her female servants claimed the northern area.”

“She and that other meddling band of tribal women,” Lycaon spat, the sheer thought of the aforementioned disgusting him. “Claiming my hunting grounds as their own; claiming my land as their own. These mountains belong to me; always belonged to me since Zeus forced me to reside here.”

“For what it’s worth, Lord Zeus is equally becoming the man that his father used to be. Perhaps, much more foolish,” the son of Hades commented, his right hand resting completely atop the hilt of his sword once the man stopped at the other end of the semicircle.

Lycaon grinned at the statement, flashing his sharp teeth at the young heir as he took a few calculative steps back, clicking his tongue at his pack of wolves an innumerable times before redirecting his attention to the sons of Poseidon and Hades respectively. The moment the wolves so much as inched closer, both heirs were immediately on guard.
“You are quite amusing, child. It has been a while since I have heard someone who carry the same sentiments of Zeus as I do. For that, I shall make both your deaths as quick as possible,” Lycaon declared as the wolves slowly prowled closer to Percy and Nico. “Consider it an honor to be the meal of my pack.”

“That is not happening anytime soon,” Niccolò di Angelo boldly declared as he swiftly unsheathed his sword, taking a defensive stance as the wolves lunged at their direction.

A sharp tearing sound resounded through the premise, followed by an eerie scraping noise, before one of the wolves fell limp to the damp ground. Blood steadily seeped from the fallen wolf, tainting the ground in that horrifying crimson shade as they poured from an open wound on its head where the shaft of a wooden arrow protruded.

Niccolò di Angelo barely had enough time to register a volley of arrows being shot from the canopy before Percy forcefully pinned his frame against the bark of a tree, using his own body to shield that of the younger male. The pained howls of the wolves amongst the cacophony of growls and snarls were the only details that registered in Nico’s mind, as his sight was hindered by the son of Poseidon’s body shielding his.

“Curse them!” Lycaon snarled, retreating back against the cover of the trees as arrows dangerously grazed against his skin. With each passing second, more of his wolves were slaughtered mercilessly, falling onto the ground with loud, succeeding thuds. More of his wolves emerged in huge numbers from the dense thicket of trees, yet equally suffering the same fate as those that had fallen and stained the ground with their blood.

The ground was being bathed in that rich, crimson shade, and the repugnant stench of the fresh slaughters were slowly assaulting the son of Hades’ senses, causing him to unintentionally heave dryly. Percy grasped him tightly to his frame just as an uncharacteristic hiss parted the son of Poseidon’s lips. Lycaon spared a glance towards their direction before sharply whistling an odd tune, causing the approaching wolves to immediately fall back and disperse in all directions.

“Both of you are fools if you believe you have been saved. The moment you step past their guards, your deaths shall be in my hands,” Lycaon threatened, using his robes to shield his frame as he departed as quickly as he had come, followed by the decimated number of wolves in his pack.

The arrows did not stop falling for a few more seconds, but the sound of it being shot gradually became muted along with a series of distinguished and brisk footsteps. Neither of the heirs moved more than an inch – their breaths hitched – until the son of Poseidon groaned lowly, releasing his grip on the son of Hades as he leaned back, clutching at his left arm. Niccolò di Angelo only had a second to register a protruding wooden arrow on the older heir’s left arm before the son of Poseidon yanked it off with a muffled hiss and whimper.
“What were you even thinking, Percy?!” Nico demanded in a loud voice as he knelt before the older heir, cautiously grasping his wounded arm to assess it. The hiss that parted those pale, quivering lips did not escape from Nico’s sight. “Look what happened to you!”

“I wasn’t thinking about anything but keeping you safe,” Percy grunted as he grasped tightly onto his arm, trying to endure the pain.

Molten sea-green eyes cautiously swept through the surroundings, noting with relief that they were temporarily safe. The older heir had to repress his gagging reflexes at the multiple carcasses of black wolves on the ground, and the amount of blood that currently bathed the ground in crimson red and that metallic, yet pungent scent. His observations seemed to be the last thing on the son of Hades’ mind as those russet-brown eyes sharply focused at the bleeding wound.

“My safety is not your responsibility!” Nico snapped, his eyes burning with immense anger. “What if those arrows are poisoned? What if any of your vital nerves had been hit? What if that had hit you on the head or the heart instead? What if—“

“Nico!”

Percy grasped onto his shoulders firmly, and despite the pain coursing through his left arm, the older heir forced himself to endure it. Sea-green eyes bore directly onto raging russet-brown eyes, noting that raw, maniacal glint and wildness in them. With a certain caution and gentleness, the son of Poseidon pressed his forehead against the younger male, attempting to establish a contact between their eyes.

“I’m alive,” Percy breathed in assurance, preventing the son of Hades from pulling away as he stubbornly kept his hands on those trembling shoulders. “Look at me please. I’m alive.”

A few hushed hisses managed to escape the son of Poseidon’s lips as the younger male struggled within his grasp, with the latter’s hands desperately applying pleasure onto his arm as it continued to bleed. Percy was well-aware that he should prioritize his state, but with the current state of the son of Hades – that expression in his eyes that indicated that he was that close to hyperventilating – Percy could care less of himself. Persistently, he released the grip of his right hand and clasped it underneath Nico’s chin instead, forcing the latter to look into his eyes.

Fear. Percy registered the fear in them; a fear that Percy was all too familiar with. In those eyes, the fear of abandonment presented itself with such a crystalline clarity that for a second, an
overwhelming guilt coursed through him. Yet, that guilt underwhelmed him over the knowledge that Nico was safe.

“I’m alive,” Percy repeated, though a little more strained. A light sheen of sweat coated his freezing skin, and his lips quivered much visibly at their close proximity. He visibly relaxed when those eyes slowly dulled once more as the son of Hades struggled to regain his composure, grasping onto the repeated reassurance of Percy that he was alive – that they were both alive.

“You are a foolish and reckless man,” Nico breathed, and there was still a harsh tone to his voice. “I hate you for that.”

Percy tried to ignore the pang of hurt that pierced his chest at the last statement, forcing himself instead to offer an amused smile. Hate was a strong word, and Niccolò di Angelo rarely applied it into his statements. It was the first instance that it had been directed at Percy. His smile was unconvincing – Percy could feel the cracks of his façade – but he could easily place the blame on the prickling pain on his arm. Pulling back slowly, the son of Poseidon shifted his gaze to where the son of Hades grasped onto his arm, wincing as he realized that those hands were tinged red with his blood.

“Both of you are foolish and reckless.” An orotund yet feminine voice boldly declared.

A tall dark-haired woman lithely descended from where she had been perched, landing on her feet only a few meters from where the two heirs were kneeling. She adorned a black leather jumpsuit – the kind which Percy had seen sons and daughters of Lord Hephaestus strictly adorn as they worked on the forges – which emphasized her athletic and lean built. There was something critical and hostile about her eyes that struck familiarity to the son of Poseidon. Familiarity to who or what, Percy could not determine in that moment where his mind was in a befuddled state.

“Lycaon was foolish to declare one thing to the both of you. This is my territory,” the woman stated as she approached them with narrowed eyes, stopping short when the son of Hades growled towards her direction. Blood pooled at her feet, yet she did not seem disturbed as she spared no glance at her surroundings, those piercing eyes transfixed on them. “That is why you have to answer to me.”

“You stepped into my territory, and if I have to agree with that foolish old man regarding a matter, it is that you recklessly ventured into this region with little to no proper knowledge,” the woman continued, crossing her arms against her chest as she carefully regarded their rigid forms. “I overheard that you have come here seeking the Huntresses of Diana. Why is that?”

“My sister,” Nico answered in a cold tone, his guard not dropping as he shifted his position,
crouching defensively in front of his injured companion. There was something regarding the woman that had the son of Hades’ intuition reeling on trusting her, but with their recent encounter with a former servant of Kronos, Nico was not about to take a risk. “I am looking for my older sister. Word has it that she has joined the Huntresses of Diana.”

The woman’s eyes glinted dangerously against the few rays of light that managed to seep through the canopy. Those dark eyes were transfixed solely on the younger heir’s features, attentively taking in each and every detail that presented itself for her. Percy was half-tempted to pull the son of Hades behind him once more – to shield him from those prying eyes – but one look in the woman’s dark eyes hinted that his intrusion would be his worst mistake.

A flash of recognition briefly flashed through the woman’s eyes, and a ghost of an amused smile curled her lips as she regarded Niccolò di Angelo. Calculately, she took a few steps back, and the subtle drop of tension in Nico’s body was almost instantaneous to her.

“You seem to speak the truth,” she commented. “You are a son of Lord Hades, are you not?”

“I am,” was the firm response.

The woman nodded in acknowledgement, as if she had expected the response she received.

“I see the resemblance between you and your sister. But I shall be frank: Your eyes are much interesting than hers,” the woman stated in a monotonous voice. “The eyes of a predator – the eyes of a mortal who had slain another mortal. The eyes of a warrior whose hands are stained with the blood of mortals.”

“Your companion has the same eyes,” she continued, gesturing to Percy with a slight tilt of her head but with not a single glance at the older male. “But yours are much darker; much wilder and untamed. Your sister’s, in comparison, are still filled with certain naivety. For that, I highly believe that I would prefer you more than your dear sister, son of Hades.”

“She is alive then, serving as a huntress for Lady Artemis?” Niccolò di Angelo inquired, unable to prevent his curiosity and hope from seeping into his voice.

“Not a mere huntress, no,” the woman answered with narrowed eyes. “A poor judgement on Lady Artemis’ part, if I must say, but you would not understand until you are better informed. I shall take you to where the Huntresses of Diana are camped. You shall temporarily be under my protection
“How will we know that you are not just feeding us with what we need to hear?” Percy finally spoke up after being silent during the entire exchange. “How will we know that you can be trusted?”

“The son of Hades should know who I am. After all, the half of that twin dagger he possessed used to be mine,” the woman casually informed the son of Poseidon before redirecting her gaze to said son of Hades. “Aut vincere aut morti.”

Russet-brown eyes dilated in surprise at the uttered statement, and it did not take long for the son of Hades to piece the identity of the woman in his mind. Slowly, he unsheathed the Imperial Gold blade from his side, placing it flat against one of his palms. Aut vincere aut morti – the cursive script was elegantly carved onto its gleaming and smooth surface.

“You’re Reyna’s sister,” Nico concluded with the barest hint of hesitance, and his guard dropped by the slightest.

Immediately, Percy understood that sense of familiarity that he had upon seeing the woman. Those piercing black eyes were much intense than Reyna’s, but they held the same critical look as they appraised his entire frame – dissecting him with their eyes alone. At that moment, as those piercing black eyes shifted back and forth between him and Nico, they held the same look and possessed the same intensity as those of the youngest daughter of Bellona.

“My name is Hylla, and I am the eldest daughter of Bellona,” the woman nodded in confirmation of the son of Hades’ claim. “Queen of the Amazons.”

Chapter End Notes

The full names of most of the characters are provided at the link below. That page is subjected to change as the story progresses.
Link: HERE
Thank you for reading this chapter! Until the next chapter!
The Amazons are a peculiar tribe of female warriors who are apparently closely associated with the Huntresses of Diana. That is, according to the Queen of the Amazons – the older sister of Reyna Avila-Ramirez Arellano and the eldest daughter of Lady Bellona. Varying differences existed to separate the two distinct groups – once more according to the Queen – but the distinction was not highly pronounced to be acknowledged. For one, the Amazons tolerated the company of men whereas the Huntresses of Diana were bound to a sworn loyalty and an oath of a lifetime of maidenhood. The Huntresses were, by extension, associated with the Vestal Virgins of Lady Hestia, but the latter were priestesses. The Huntresses of Diana were, as their name implied, female hunters.

The Huntresses of Diana were less tied to the society in a sense that was far more complex than their residence on the mountains. Whereas the Amazons conducted trades of resources between numerous, unnamed clienteleles, the Huntresses were confined by their idea of possession – that their kill and possessions were their own; nothing more, nothing less. Moreover, the Huntresses of Diana were confined to one god – goddess, in their case – whereas the Amazons did not worship gods or goddesses individually; only as they deem fit.

Neither of the two groups were confined to a specific location. Though by all means, their bases always mutually exist on the same region for defense purposes. The Queen had informed of Nico that they once resided close to the district of Lord Dionysus, but eventually decided to take residence upon the mountains for the past decade. There was less attachment to the society, but there was much of that unrestricted freedom they coveted. The Huntresses shared a mutual mentality.

“Are you sure you should not be assisting your companion?” Hylla questioned of the son of Hades as he cautiously matched his pace to hers.

Russet-brown eyes casted a sideward glance to his said companion who occasionally winced under his inconspicuous scrutiny, clutching at the bandaged wound on his arm as it ached in excruciating pain with the slightest of movement. The son of Hades’ eyes were lackluster as he observed, but the Queen could not be fooled despite how strong his façade was.
“He is capable of walking. If he believes that his action earlier was wise, he should only suffer the consequences,” the son of Hades stated, loud enough for the son of Poseidon to hear.

The older heir scowled at the response, and his chapped lips parted just the slightest as if he was about to respond, but slowly closed after a few seconds as if upon contemplation. Nevertheless, Percy gritted his teeth, casting his eyes to the ground as he silently followed the two individuals before him. The Amazons offered no visible response to the exchange; their features clean of any form of emotion as they followed their Queen from a respectable and safe distance to the territory of the Huntresses.

“You remind me of my sister, Niccolò di Angelo. The manner by which both of you express your concern is equally peculiar and irksome,” Hylla breathed in a hushed voice from beside him.

“Are you not going to inquire of how she is?” Nico asked, completely directing his attention to the daughter of Bellona.

The Queen firmly shook her head in response, a ghost of a knowing smile curling her lips.

“We are daughters of Bellona, are we not? We are born female warriors – it is in our blood. I have no reason to inquire or worry of my sister. She is much capable of ensuring her welfare; far better than all my warriors combined, if I say so myself,” the Queen answered in that same low and hushed voice, her eyes fixed firmly on their path ahead.

“Rather than that, I demand to know the complete reason why you are here, with a son of Poseidon nonetheless,” Hylla continued, her voice increasing the slightest in volume as she spoke, audible enough for the said heir to perk up upon being addressed.

“How did you figure his identity?” Niccolò di Angelo questioned, eyes narrowing just the slightest in response. It was easy to deny the stated claim, but the son of Hades was not a foolish man. The woman before him was the Queen of the Amazons, and most importantly, the sole sibling of Reyna Avila-Ramirez Arellano. If they possessed the same qualities, lies could not fool the elder daughter of Bellona either.

“His resemblance to Theseus is uncanny,” Hylla stated with nonchalance, immediately garnering the attention of the heirs at the mentioned name. “Though by all means, keep the son of Poseidon’s identity a secret. My warriors are incapable of withholding judgement as I am. Your older brother does not have the best reputation with my people, especially with what he had done to the former
queen of the Amazons.”

“You should know that before I ruled the Amazons, Queen Hippolyta was the ruler and lover – the betrothed – of Theseus; at least, until he set sail for Ouranós and was bewitched by the current Lady of Krasí. Queen Hippolyta desired to exact revenge on the son of Poseidon for his betrayal and the humiliation he had caused for the former queen, but she and the Huntresses unwantedly became observers of his demise instead. The former queen ended her own life shortly,” Hylia continued, her eyes slightly distant as she stared ahead. “Your brother is a good man but if I may be frank, he is aromantic. The affection he harbored for the former queen and the Lady of Krasí was not romantic, by all means, and was misplaced by his judgement.”

“His mistakes are his to bear, and are not yours by extension,” the Queen stated, sparing a sideward glance at the son of Poseidon. “My warriors do not harbor the same sentiment. You would be wise to follow my advice.”

Both heirs nodded in response, but the gesture seemed more difficult for Percy to execute as his head bobbed rather numbly. The son of Hades silently observed his reaction, subconsciously digging his teeth against his lower lip as he forced his eyes away from the older heir. Nico was willing to bet that the son of Poseidon had numerous questions dangling at the tip of his tongue; questions regarding a portion of his deceased brother’s life that Percy was never informed of. The son of Poseidon had unspoken doubts dangling at the tip of his tongue, desiring to deny the accusations of his brother being an unfaithful man, but Percy had no basis to support what Nico perceived was slowly becoming Percy’s own belief of whom he thought his older brother was.

It was difficult – almost inconceivable – to believe that Theseus was any less of the man both Percy and Nico perceived him to be.

“Back to my inquiry, why have you both come here?” the Queen of the Amazons inquired, directing her question to the son of Hades as her piercing black eyes raked across his tense form.

Nico spared a quick glance at his companion before diverting his attention once more to the path ahead. The wind was steadily picking up as the temperature dropped simultaneously, forcing the young heir to pull his thick apparel much firmly against his frame. The coldness seeped through to his skin nonetheless, causing goosebumps to appear across the expanse of his skin.

“We have something important to inform and ask of Lady Artemis,” was the son of Hades’ response. “And perhaps of you – of the Queen – by extension. But this – where we currently are – is not ideal for such important discussions.”
“If you deem that you are capable of conducting the conversation afterwards then,” Hylla concluded, dismissing the topic with her curt response.

The Queen of the Amazons pressed no further and remained utterly silent when she deemed it unnecessary for discussions. Occasionally, those piercing black eyes would inconspicuously assess the second son of Lord Hades, her features contorting just miniscule as she mentally formulated comparisons in her mind.

Niccolò di Angelo, the young man before her presence, was the younger and sole biological brother of Bianca di Angelo. Hylla was not a stranger to the story between the siblings, having heard from countless and prying Huntresses, but she need not gather information from all perspectives to derive with the conclusion that she felt an insurmountable distaste towards the daughter of Hades. Seeing the eyes of Niccolò di Angelo now, that distaste was steadily becoming more fueled by the second. Not even Reyna’s eyes could come close to how dark the son of Hades’ were, and Hylla would be damned if Bianca di Angelo did not incur an immense portion of it.

Departing from her younger sister’s side was a decision that they mutually agreed upon, and while it was not an excellent option, it was the best option within the circumstances that they had been subjected to. The Queen of the Amazons departed from Reyna’s side at that point in her life when Hylla was certain that her sister was completely capable of standing her own ground without the need to depend on anyone. It was with that knowledge that she was capable of leaving with ease to find her fate that was, for once, not predetermined.

Niccolò di Angelo was similar to Reyna at first glance, but a better glance into those dark russet-brown irises immediately shattered that first impression for Hylla. Her sister’s eyes – They were not… damaged to such a haunting extremity.

And Hylla could not look directly onto those eyes – not without being revolted of the woman who could shatter the soul of a child within those lackluster eyes.

Selíni – The House of Artemis. Otherwise recognized as the Valley of Maidens, though the name is a contradiction as the district never permanently resided in a specific location for it to be determined. The population of the district was a staggering few hundreds, yet marginally much populated in comparison to the House of Hestia. The maidens were not restricted to an age limit, though that was easily attributed to the unique law that governed the district.

A sworn loyalty to Lady Artemis acts as a permanent binding. Once a maiden joins the Huntresses of Diana, the transition of her life – from the point of joining, to her demise – was within Selíni alone.
Renouncing the district was punishable by death, as were direct violations to the oath sworn to the suzerain. The system of the district was utterly simple, and it was with that simplicity that Lady Artemis indisputably ruled.

Where a set of pillars were set erect, a maiden stood guard, adorned in a thick silver jacket, navy blue pants and a pair of combat boots. Her ginger hair was tousled relentlessly against the cold, howling winds, but that did not obstruct her dark caramel irises from the sight of the approaching Queen of the Amazons, and questionably a pair of male companions. Hylla noticed how the huntress’ expression immediately shifted to become guarded and hostile, before the Queen halted at her tracks, turning on her heels to address her warriors.

“Return to our grounds. I will ask Lady Artemis to have one of her huntresses sent if I see the need to stay here for an indefinite period of time,” the dark-haired woman declared to her warriors whom exchanged wary glances at the prospect of leaving their Queen with unknown male companions.

“My Queen…” One of them was about to protest, but was cut off with a piercing glare.

“Do not make me repeat myself, Kinzie. You shall take charge in my absence. There is a matter I need to discuss with the Lady, and I will not accept an act of defiance for a misplaced concern,” Hylla warned, her voice dropping by an octave as those piercing black eyes silently dared for her subordinate to challenge her.

Neither of the two heirs wished to be the recipient of such cold and calculating gaze as they cautiously averted their gazes to nowhere in particular, choosing to maintain a low profile in the deafening silence that followed.

The Queen of the Amazons confidently held her ground – her upright posture and firm stance exuding an overwhelming authority of solely a queen – to such extent that Percy was almost half-tempted to kneel by her feet and offer his respects. It was solely the fact that the act of submission was directed elsewhere that either heir managed to maintain their ground.

“As you wish then, my Queen,” the female warrior conceded between gritted teeth after a full minute of silence, before she beckoned for the Amazons to follow her as they dispersed from the grounds of the district, albeit rather reluctantly.

The Amazons scattered as quickly as they had arrived, dispersing to the direction of the forest with the auburn-haired maiden leading at the front. The woman spared a brief glance at their Queen, before redirecting glaring eyes at the respective heirs, a silent promise of a world of pain reflected in them in the occasion that any harm would befall the Queen of the Amazons. Hylla silently scoffed at
the unnecessity of the gesture as her eyes trailed after her dispersing group, before she redirected her full attention to Percy and Nico.

“Let’s go. By all means, you must stay close to each other and to me especially. The Huntresses would not harm you as long as you are under my protection,” the dark-haired woman uttered in a low voice, her lips barely moving as she slowly ascended the graveled mountain path cautiously and with her eyes transfixed on the defensive stance of the huntress at the top.

The huntress had her bow drawn but lowered to the ground, the tip of a silver arrow glinting dangerously against the rays of light. The Queen of the Amazons stopped in her tracks, a few meters from where the huntress was situated. Piercing black eyes clashed directly against the intense glare on the dark caramel irises, neither yielding.

“The Queen of the Amazons should know better than to bring men into the domain of the huntresses,” the huntress stated in a low voice, addressing to the heirs but dismissing their presence as if they were nonexistent – as if their identity as males ascertained that they were mere scums.

“Lady Artemis would be interested to hear the purpose of the presence of heirs from Thálassa and Skotádi,” Hylla stated in a monotonous voice, directly getting to the point as she regarded the huntress with slight contempt. “Let us pass through, or else I will force my way in, Phoebe.”

There was no hint of amusement in the dark-haired woman’s tone of voice. It was rather sinister, to the point that the huntress flinched and coiled back in instinctive response. As her dark caramel irises darted to the heirs, the dulled glare that was formerly present in those eyes intensified briefly in a matter of a few seconds before it was forcibly subdued once more. There was speculation in those eyes, and a certain wariness in them as they critically regarded the two males with the aforementioned identities as sons of two main districts.

The contempt in those eyes was crystalline clear, yet to the son of Hades, it was more for a show of power so that the huntress would not project a weak presence. For reasons that the son of Hades could only deduce in his mind, those eyes lingered unpleasantly on his rigid frame, clouding in a fleeting instant with a mixed expression of recognition and something else that was unfathomable.

“I will escort you to Lady Artemis. But if the lady wishes not to see these so-called heirs, I will have to force you to leave,” the huntress – Phoebe – warned in a low voice, sparing a glare at all three newcomers before she turned on her heels.

Hylla offered no response but the triumphant and seemingly gloating expression that crossed her features was adequate for Percy and Nico to deduce what might be processing through her head. A
small victory, might just be what was crossing the woman’s head at that moment. Disregarding that, Hylla contradicted the claim the huntress made, for she was certain that the suzerain of the district would be far from considering on not meeting the young heirs. Beckoning Percy and Nico with a tilt of her head, the Queen of the Amazons cautiously trailed after the huntress.

The cold reception of the huntress was absolutely not for show, and it was further confirmed as they stepped into the vicinity of the district. The reaction was almost immediate, and were it not for the presence of the Queen of the Amazons amongst them, Niccolò di Angelo was certain that the maidens might have had their pack of wolves maul them where they stood. The maidens regarded them in varying degrees of scorn and indifference, as if their existence as male beings was the worst crime that they had committed in the entirety of their life. The son of Hades had to remind himself that these women held no personal grudge on him, but of the population of men in general.

The reason for their hostile reception was effortlessly discernible though; it was for that reason that these women offered their loyalty to Lady Artemis after all. Eternal maidenhood entitled them with the lack of company of men for the rest of their existence, and most of these women condemned men with extreme reasons.

The maidens were adorned in similar clothing of thick silver jacket, navy blue pants and a pair of combat boots, that it was only with their distinct and varying features that they could be distinguished from one another. Neither of the heirs allowed for their wandering eyes to linger, acknowledging the fact that the act of doing so – regardless that it was harmless – would easily provoke any of the gathered maidens present at the district’s grounds.

The district was admittedly quite populated, but it resembled more of camping grounds than what it actually was. Dozens of white silk tents were pitched in numerous columns, distributed evenly throughout the vast frosted grounds. Various treated animal hide were scattered throughout numerous tents, that the lack of a pungent odor or the smell of kill was rather questionable, but one that neither of the heirs would wish to bear into their thoughts for long. The distinct sound of a nearby flowing source of water reached the son of Poseidon’s attuned ears, and he was briefly reminded of his parched state as he slowly swallowed.

The huntress guided them to a tent that was situated at the middle of the district, easily surrounded by four others in the formation of a semi-circle. The tent was identical in appearance as with the rest that had been pitched, yet neither of the heirs could fathom why it seemed much pronounced in comparison to the rest.

A tall and well-built woman stood by the entrance of the tent, her shoulder-length raven-black locks pulled back in a tight ponytail with merely a few strands falling across her pale features. Striking silvery-grey eyes gleamed against the golden brazier of fire situated a few meters from the pitched tents, where three more huntresses were gathered around, communicating in hushed voices as they huddled close to that tantalizing warmth with their backs to the approaching group. By the woman’s
side was a seven-foot wolf of a beautiful chocolate red fur with glaring, hostile eyes that were as silver as mist.

The woman slowly raised her lackluster eyes from the low fire, a brief flash of surprise gracing her eyes as she cautiously regarded the approaching group. The perfect expression of calm that then graced her eyes had the son of Hades unintentionally raising his guard.

Niccolò di Angelo did not need to hear the woman’s name to identify who she was. The eyes that the woman possessed were too knowledgeable to the point of seeming ancient, and those eyes were identical to a rare few individuals. Being placed under the scrutiny of the woman – though only a mere second – had the son of Hades feeling as if he were a prey under the ravenous gaze of a merciless predator.

“My lady,” Phoebe breathed, kneeling on one knee before the woman, offering her utmost respect – and oddly a gesture of penance – as she kept her head lowered. “Queen Hylla of the Amazons demanded for your attention. She has brought… guests, claiming that their presence here is of utmost importance.”

The woman – Lady Artemis – lifted her silvery-grey eyes from her kneeling huntress, beckoning for her to rise from her position without averting her piercing gaze from the group. The three huntresses gathered by the fire were immediately silenced at the mention of guests, but neither heirs nor the Queen paid attention to their inquisitive gazes.

“Why have you come here, son of Poseidon and son of Hades?” Artemis questioned in a low but calm voice after a few seconds of silence, her attention focused directly on said heirs.

“You know… who we are… without us having to introduce ourselves…” Percy stated slowly, the confusion and surprise on his features becoming much pronounced with each word he uttered.

Full pale pink lips twitched in a subtle manner, a ghost of a smile playing on the corners of said lips as the suzerain regarded the son of Poseidon with amusement.

“A huntress needs to know everything of her prey in order to conquer it,” the woman responded casually, her left hand absent-mindedly brushing the reddish-brown fur of the wolf in a calming gesture.

The low growl the wolf was emitting gradually stopped before the animal laid on its stomach, raising
its eyes to warily study the son of Hades. A low whimper escaped it as its dilated eyes remained trained on the son of Hades, but Percy did not dare spare a glance at his companion whilst the suzerain was addressing to him.

“But rest assured, as long as you follow the rules that governed my district, no harm shall befall upon you,” Artemis added when the heirs tensed at being regarded as preys. “That aside, I am well-acquainted with your fathers. You are both spitting images of your respective fathers, though the son of Hades is to a lesser extent.”

“You have your father’s eyes, but your soul is much redeemable than his,” Artemis claimed as she briefly regarded the son of Hades. “Your older sister, however, seemed to have inherited much of your father’s features.”

As she stated that, Artemis lifted her left hand and gestured towards the brazier of fire where the three huntresses crowded, then attentively paying attention to the conversation that was transpiring. Percy thought the maidens were strikingly prepossessing and exotic in their distinct features, yet the son of Poseidon seemed to have his eyes only drawn to one specific huntress.

A young woman who was about his age seemed to stand out from the other two maidens, with a faint silvery aura surrounding her which Percy was certain was a mere trick of the brazier of fire. Her silky dark brown hair was pulled back in a loose braid, delicate strands of hair falling across her beautiful features that had a splash of freckles dusted across her nose. Her eyes, a dark russet-brown shade, gleamed with a hint of either madness or genius, then regarded the new group with a shocked and almost pained expression. The woman was absolutely stunning despite the drab apparel that she was clothed with, but her appearance was not what captivated the son of Poseidon.

Percy did not have to spare her a second glance to distinguish that her features greatly resembled that of the son of Hades.

“Nico…” Percy heard the huntress breath out the son of Hades’ name before the young man decided to address the suzerain’s uttered question.

“My older sister is long dead. That is what my family believes, and that is what I believe. The only blood sister that I have is my father’s daughter with the Lady Persephone.”

The response that left the son of Hades’ lips shocked Percy, to the point that a startled yet faint gasp parted his lips, his sea-green eyes regarding the son of Hades with glaring disbelief. Whatever reprimands that Percy had dangling at the tip of his tongue though failed to escape his lips as he gazed into Niccolò di Angelo’s eyes.
Those eyes that usually regarded him with warmth was then absolutely devoid of it, replaced with a coldness that had the son of Poseidon unintentionally shivering in response. His lackluster eyes reflected the disinterest that dripped on each word he had uttered that was regarding her sole biological sister. Those beautiful russet-brown eyes often lacked hardness on the edges of his eyes, but at that moment, it unsettled Percy to the extent that he questioned who was before him in that moment.

The effect of those words was instantaneous; the expression on the huntress’ features had Percy unintentionally expressing pity on her. The hurt that was reflected in her dark eyes was adequate for the son of Poseidon to be ascertained of her identity.

The woman was undoubtedly Bianca di Angelo, Lord Hades’ first daughter and first illegitimate child with the deceased Maria di Angelo. The huntress before him was the first illegitimate outside the suzerain’s espousal to Lady Persephone, and she was – is – Niccolò di Angelo’s biological sister. To hear from her brother’s lips that she was dead to him, Percy could not imagine a much harsher punishment for her actions that was eight years in the past. The lack of expression in the son of Hades’ dark eyes only proved that there was not a sliver of regret in his being for what he had just uttered.

The extent of the suzerain’s reaction was to the contemplative look that crossed her features at the uttered response. Had she detected lie or not, there was nothing in her expression that indicated so. The wolf by her feet continued to whimper, the sound gradually increasing in volume that Percy had to wonder for a second if the animal was feeling the dark emotions that were stirring within the son of Hades.

“Why have you come here then, Perseus Tzákson and Niccolò di Angelo? It’s rather peculiar that both of you – heirs of two main districts – had to come personally visit my district,” Artemis noted.

The son of Poseidon faltered, unsure of what response he was supposed to offer. The formal reason for his presence was easy to state: On behalf of Anemoi and his home district, he was hoping that the House of Artemis could extend help to the pressing matter that was regarding the actions of Pólemos. The actual answer was difficult to state: To find the son of Hades’ biological sister. He was unsure which one he was supposed to offer, not when the son of Hades himself pronounced his elder sister dead.

“On behalf of our districts, we have come here to seek aid from you, Lady Artemis,” Nico answered
in response to the query before the older heir could, subjecting himself to submissively kneel on the frosted ground as he offered his respect to the suzerain. “We beg of you to please hear us out.”

“For the son of Hades to subject himself to such a position, I gather that what you ask of me must be of high price,” Artemis deduced, gazing at the young heir who remained kneeling on the frosted ground by her feet. “If I shall agree with the condition of a price, are you willing to pay?”

“I will be willing to pay for anything,” Percy strongly intervened before Nico could response, stepping forward in a poor attempt of shielding the son of Hades from the prying eyes that bore on the younger male’s submissive form. “Whatever you ask of him, I will be willing to shoulder the price.”

Niccolò di Angelo lifted his lowered head, raising it as he intensely glared into those defiant sea-green eyes. A low growl was rumbling at the back of the younger male’s throat, which the son of Poseidon reciprocated by gritting his teeth in a stubborn gesture that he was not about to take his words back any time soon.

Lady Artemis observed the exchange with mild amusement, a ghost of a smile tugging along the corners of her lips until the Queen of the Amazons cleared her throat, those piercing black eyes transfixed on the amused smile that curled the suzerain’s full lips.

“They have stated that this matter could concern my warriors as well,” Hylla stated as she forcibly yanked the two heirs behind her. In the son of Hades’ case, he visibly stumbled as he was simultaneously dragged to his feet and yanked behind the daughter of Bellona. “I say we have an in-depth discussion of this matter before we make any demands of any of them.”

Hylla briefly casted chastising glares at them before redirecting her attention to Artemis, who at that moment, allowed for herself to flash a full-blown amused smile as she observed the exchange between the three.

“Very well,” Artemis agreed as she turned her back and sauntered towards her tent, the reddish brown wolf by her feet obediently and immediately trailing after. “We shall discuss of this after the son of Poseidon has properly rested. I do not desire to deal with Poseidon out of his son’s incompetence to handle himself. They are free to camp by the lake – away from all of my huntresses. You can bring them there on your own, Hylla.”

Lady Artemis halted just before she completely entered her tent, directing those silvery-grey eyes of hers to the embarrassed son of Poseidon.
“I assume you can tend to your own wounds.” She briefly casted a glance at the impassive son of Hades. “Or that your companion is capable as well.”

Nicolò di Angelo simply offered a curt nod in response, lowering his head in a brief bow before he cautiously raised the son of Poseidon’s uninjured arm, wrapping it across his shoulders as he steered the son of Poseidon to where Hylla was already sauntering off.

Percy had to force himself to spare a glance at the younger male, shuddering visibly as he had to gaze into those dark, lackluster eyes. The Nicolò di Angelo before him was intimidating Percy to the extent that the son of Poseidon had to repress the urge of placing distance between them. The Nicolò di Angelo before him was an entirely different individual. The eyes of the Nicolò di Angelo before him were almost completely hollow.

“Nico?”

A soft yet hesitant feminine voice weakly breathed the name of the younger male, causing Percy to halt in his tracks, which in turn affected the mentioned man as well. Percy observed intently as those russet-brown eyes closed briefly, before re-opening just as Nico turned to face the owner of that voice.

Percy was not surprised to find that it was the eldest daughter of Hades who had spoken; more so that the woman was basically ignoring his presence in favor of addressing to her younger brother, as if it was only her and Nicolò di Angelo that existed in that moment. Her eyes were glazed over with countless of unfathomable emotions that the son of Poseidon did not bother to decipher. Percy had to avert and close his eyes from the sight, swallowing the vicious words that dangled at the tip of his tongue as he subconsciously tightened his grip around his companion.

It was difficult to gaze in the eyes of the woman who had murdered the child who was once Nicolò di Angelo. The happiness that was swelling in her eyes moments ago as she basked in her freedom was a harsh slap of insult.

Percy hated the sight of her happiness, just as equally as he hated the dark thoughts that plagued his mind of her.

“You must be mistaken, my lady,” the son of Hades responded in a monotonous voice as he grasped firmly onto the son of Poseidon’s hand that dangled close to his heart. “My name is Nicolò.”
“Nico is the name that you insisted to be called upon. When we were but children, in that home near the precipice.” When the young heir offered no response, the huntress continued, a hint of desperation leaking in her voice. “Don’t you remember me? I am your sister, Bianca.”

The following words that parted the son of Hades’ lips shattered a fragment of Percy’s heart, for it was a response that Nico always refused to vocalize and accept. To hear the son of Hades utter it so casually, Percy briefly felt that he could not breathe.

“You are not my sister. While you may have the same name as my older sister, she is dead to my family, and therefore dead to me. Please do not insult the dead by trying to bring them back to life.”

With those harsh words uttered, the son of Hades simply turned his back on his elder sister, tugging insistently on the son of Poseidon who could only bite his tongue in response.

As they silently followed the daughter of Bellona, Percy briefly wished that he had been capable of sympathizing with the daughter of Hades as the parting sound of the hushed sob that escaped her lips plagued his mind.

It was peculiar how the lake managed to remain unfrozen despite the harsh climate, its water absolutely crystalline clear and reflecting that kaleidoscopic shades of blue, green and immaculate white that was of the sky. A weeping willow tree was situated by the middle of the lake, its leaves touching the water as tender as a lover’s caress. The slightly frosted ground prevented any plants from blooming, leaving the area barren of anything but clusters of towering trees.

The view offered such a sweet and serene sight, but to the eyes of the son of Hades, it was merely a picturesque view that depicted in his mind what a peaceful death could possibly be in form. It was such a sweet and serene sight, but the beauty of it was left unappreciated in eyes that were far too lackluster to properly see.

The small group was utterly silent in the presence of one another, unceremoniously settling down on their temporary camping grounds as per stated by the suzerain of the district. The son of Hades cautiously guided the son of Poseidon to sit on the frosted ground, but the latter stubbornly refused to relinquish his grip on his companion. Russet-brown eyes strayed to the sides the whole time, avoiding the intense gaze of those sea-green eyes that were transfixed on his features.
“Let me go, Percy. I have to set up camp,” Nico grunted, the frown on his features deepening as he attempted to carefully pry the arm that was wrapped across his shoulders, but to no avail.

“No, you don’t. The stupid camp can wait,” Percy grunted in response, throwing caution to the wind as he cupped the son of Hades’ cheeks with both of his hands, disregarding his injury. The subtle wince the gesture induced did not escape from Hylla’s eyes as she silently observed their interaction. “Nico, look at me.”

“And what?” the son of Hades snapped, directing his eyes to meet those prying eyes, before averting once more to the side.

“And what?” Nico repeated once more, closing his eyes as he turned his face to the side, the long locks of silken dark hair partially covering his features from view. “Why should I look, only to see the fear in your eyes?”

Percy heaved an exasperated sigh in response to that before firmly cupping those pale cheeks once more, gently guiding for the son of Hades to face his direction. Both hands tentatively slid upwards against the expanse of the cold and pale skin, thumbs gently caressing the closed eyelids repetitively.

“Nico, look at me. I need you to look at me,” Percy murmured, bringing their foreheads gently together. In their close proximity, their lips were but inches apart. “I wasn’t afraid of you. Please believe that.”

“You could have fooled me with what I saw in your eyes,” the son of Hades responded, a sliver of pain dripping from his accusatory tone of voice as he cautiously allowed for his eyes to open, though only partially. “You were – are – afraid of me. Just like everyone else. And just like everyone else, you will leave because of that fear.”

“I promised you: I would never leave you. Nico, I’m not Bianca. You can’t assume everyone you meet will be identical to her,” Percy whispered, bringing the son of Poseidon closer as the younger male indignantly shook his head. “I was afraid – I would admit that. But I was not afraid of you. I was afraid of how I lost you in those few minutes when I looked into your eyes and saw nothing.”

“I failed you. I was foolish to allow us to go. In that foolish decision, I allowed you to get hurt.”

The whispered response was deeply pained, but Niccolò di Angelo was not permitted the opportunity to spare a glance at his companion as the son of Poseidon silently pressed his face
against the younger male’s disheveled locks, concealing his expression from view. It was Percy who
would not meet his eyes at that point.

“I’m sorry, Nico. I’m really sorry.”

Percy breathed shakily against his hair, uttering it like his personal mantra as he firmly grasped onto
the son of Hades with a desperation that was almost unbearable to watch. Nico had all the reasons to
pull back – to rebuke the son of Poseidon that the foolish decision was his own and not Percy’s.
Percy had no reason to apologize, had no reason to claim the fault solely on his own.

At that moment, as the Queen of the Amazons silently witnessed the scene that unfolded before her
eyes, she had to force herself to look away as the hushed apologies continued to spill from the son of
Poseidon’s lips, becoming much broken and pained with each passing second. Hylla could not
comprehend their interaction, or why the son of Hades seemed to accept the situation so nonchalantly
as he wordlessly fisted the apparel of the older male, returning the desperate gesture just as equally.

In her confusion, she had to question in her mind who it was of the three whom desperately needed
forgiveness most.

Chapter End Notes

The full names of most of the characters are provided at the link below. That page is
subjected to change as the story progresses.
Link: HERE
Thank you for reading this chapter! Until the next chapter!
See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I won’t beat about the bush,” the huntress stated after a few moments of utter silence. At the back of his mind, Percy briefly thought of how her pale features seemed to make her ethereal against the intense glow of the blazing flame. “The only explanation I could think of for you two to find this place is because of my brother, am I correct?”

The son of Poseidon lifted the cup to his lips, momentarily ignoring the question that was directed at him in favor of ensuring his warmth. He barely held back a wince as the bitter liquid slid down the expanse of his throat.

“You’re Thalia then.” It was a statement, not a question. “Thalia Grace.”

A low growl escaped the huntress’ pale lips, startling the third heir whom instinctively shifted close to the frame of his sleeping companion. The huntress did not seem to notice the gesture as her glaring eyes were transfixed on the blazing fire.

“It has been years since someone had addressed to me by that name,” Thalia answered in a low and cold voice, malice dripping with every word that was uttered. “I am simply Thalia now. If you did find about this place from my brother, then by right, you must know why I condemn to be addressed in that name which you addressed me with.”
Percy lowered his head in shame, his eyes straying to the crackling firewood as they were consumed; lapped delicately by the tongues of fire. His lips quivered as they parted, and his breath hitched as he attempted to speak but no words escaped his mouth.

“Jason did not seem bothered of it,” Percy stated after a while, his voice low. “I assumed…”

“Of course he would not be,” Thalia answered, and there was a brokenness in her voice that could not be mistaken for anything but pain. “Jason was so young – so, so young – when we lost our mo— … when we lost her. His memories of her are so… limited.”

Thalia paused before lifting her eyes to meet those of Percy’s sympathetic ones. The sight sickened her – she did not desire to be the recipient of pity.

“I raised him all on my own,” Thalia continued, redirecting her attention to the fire. “She was… addicted to her lavish lifestyle. The social gatherings; the “crown jewel amongst the crowd.” The huntress made quotation marks at that, heaving a bitter chuckle before she continued. “The wine. Especially the wine. She was consumed by it all, and the fact that she had managed to garner the interest of the self-proclaimed King of Pangaea served only to consume her further.”

“There were nights I had to drag Jason’s cot in my room, crooning shaky lullabies close to his ears just so that he would not hear of the sinful acts being committed in her room every single time she brought a man home into our household,” Thalia briefly closed her eyes in remembrance of the past, but she opened them instantly as if seeing the memory behind closed eyelids scalded her. “Those were so many sleepless nights lived in fear for my brother’s safety. I learned how to wield a knife at such a young age.”

Percy wondered if he had the right to be listening to such a private detail of the huntress’ life. Sure, she is Jason’s biological sister, but they were practically strangers. Looking at the woman, Percy could clearly see the worn out expression on her features. Years of fatigue was evident in her features, and there was something in her eyes that almost seemed ancient. It was, to an extent, almost similar to the eyes of Hylla, but just the slightest bit brighter in comparison.

“Leaving him might be the worst decision you might think I have made in my entire life. While it is not the best, it was at that time,” Thalia stated as she raised her eyes once more to meet those vibrant sea-green eyes. “It was Hera’s condition for taking Jason in, and I did not have a future in my father’s district in the first place. But Jason has. He has an opportunity. I left because of that, and because I was not sure I could keep Jason alive if I were to take him with me. The world… it is filled with spawns of the devil. I could not risk Jason’s safety – I would never do so.”

“Why are you sharing this with me?” the son of Poseidon questioned, keeping his gaze firmly fixed on the daughter of Zeus.

In response, the huntress cocked her head to the direction of the unconscious son of Hades who was curled up close to the fire. The circles underneath his eyes seemed more prominent against his almost sickly pale skin, causing Percy to frown in concern of his deteriorated health.

“Nightshade – our first heir – detest men as many of our huntresses do, so you cannot expect her to welcome you, so to speak.” Thalia said, looking pointedly and quite amusedly at the measly cup she had handed earlier to Percy. “Bianca, on the other hand, could not bring herself to do so.”

“He can pretend that he does not know her, but the eyes are the mirror to the soul. It never speaks the lies the mouth does,” the huntress stated, sparing no glance in the direction of either heir as her gaze was transfixed on the fire once more. “But I have never seen such cold and lifeless eyes before. I think that is why Bianca could not bring herself to approach him. There was no forgiveness in his
eyes at that moment. She is dead to his eyes, and it was as if being proven wrong might actually push him to commit a deed that would make his statement true.”

“Nico would not do that to his sister,” Percy growled, glaring at the huntress with an immense hatred in his eyes at the harsh accusation that was directed to his companion.

“Does Bianca know that?” Thalia countered, unfazed of the son of Poseidon’s reaction. “The young man before her is but a mere stranger to her now.”

“You should know why that was the case,” Percy answered, trying to keep the anger and bitterness off of his voice but unable to do so. “Can you blame him? The only blood relative he had decided to leave him one day, and he was left to assume for years that she was dead. There was no letter, no news to indicate that she was alive otherwise. Now, he finds her well and happy, and in his mind, the only thing he could think of was that his sister is happier without his existence in her world. Tell me, if the same circumstance happened with Jason, would you blame him for possibly hating you as well?”

“Do not bring Jason into this,” Thalia snapped, glaring at the son of Poseidon. “The choices I was given, and the one I made was for his best.”

“It did not seem like the case now, since he is unhappily betrothed to a woman he can’t love, just to ensure an alliance with two districts,” Percy snapped back, slightly crushing the cup in his hand as his grip on it tightened.

“Jason is different from the son of Hades!”

“The only difference I see here is that Jason has not killed a single soul in order to defend his district!” Percy seethed. “Bianca does not recognize her brother? Good. She deserves to know what years’ worth of killing people could do to a person.”

The huntress recoiled at the harsh words that were uttered, surprise evident in her features as the implication of the son of Poseidon’s statement eventually sank into her mind. Stunned electric blue eyes shifted back and forth between the two heirs, before focusing solely on Percy. Her voice was but a whisper, but in the silence, it was deafening.

“Bianca could not have known. None of us could have known.”

Percy had to restrain himself immensely at verbally expressing his anger at the response. He had expected that, if he were to be honest. Isolated in the mountains, none of these huntresses would have had the knowledge of how grave the situation was. Was it safe to assume that the suzerain possessed no knowledge of the situation as well?

No, Percy mentally shook his head. It was unwise to make an immediate assumption of Lady Artemis.

“How can any of you have known?” Percy questioned in a rhetorical manner, whispering it in a low voice as he placed the cup by his side before drawing his knees up against his chest. His eyes were casted to the side, staring at the son of Hades’ frame with an unfathomable expression.

“He deserves so much more than the half-hearted apology Bianca could possibly have to offer at this moment,” Percy continued, watching Nico the whole time as he spoke. “Would you blame me if I were to be hostile to her at this point?”

“No, and I can understand where you are coming from,” Thalia murmured, glancing at the son of Hades briefly.
“No, you don’t. None of you were ever there to understand where I am exactly coming from,” Percy answered in the same hushed tone before lifting his eyes to stare directly onto the huntress’ eyes. “I think there is nothing more for us to discuss here. How the siblings wish to put a closure to their conflict is for them alone to decide.”

The huntress briefly laughed, but the smile that curled her lips seemed strained in the eyes of the son of Poseidon. With a practiced grace, she lifted herself off of the ground, brushing the dirt off her apparel before addressing Percy once more.

“That was never my intention for coming here to begin with. I was the “welcoming party”, and I needed to be sure of who has led you here,” Thalia corrected, tending to the fire once more before rising to her full height.

“Wait. Why are you not questioning why your brother led us here?” Percy asked, calling out to the woman as she sauntered back to her fellow maidens.

Thalia halted mid-step, turning her head to the side just enough for Percy to register a knowing and amused glimmer in her eyes at the question that was directed to her. A gentle breeze passed by, caressing her dishevelled locks and almost completely shielding her eyes from Percy’s view. The son of Poseidon was grateful of it rather, as her piercing gaze seemed to see his bare soul, leaving him to feel rather disturbed.

“Questioning his motives would mean having to question yours as well,” the huntress declared with utmost confidence. “Besides, I already know the reason why.”

“I think that is enough teasing of the young lord, Thalia.”

The suzerain of the district stepped forth all of a sudden, startling the son of Poseidon as he was caught off guard of her sudden presence. The huntress did not seem fazed at all as she merely lowered her head in a respectful bow before sauntering back the direction where she came from.

Thalia spared a knowing glance at both heirs for a few seconds, her lips curling ever the more out of amusement before she resumed walking. Percy frowned at her earlier vague response, but tried to dismiss it as he grasped the then cold cup in his hand, observing his reflection in that nauseating shade of green liquid. But tried as he might, it was difficult to dismiss how those electric blue eyes looked in that split second – observing him with such a knowing expression which unsettled him greatly.

Without a second thought, he crushed the cup in his hand, unfazed as the liquid splashed and cascaded down the expanse of his hand, and pooled by his feet. Her retreating figure was the sole thing that preoccupied his mind as he tossed the crushed object into the fire, watching as it was consumed slowly by the unforgiving flames.

“I do hope you don’t have such expectations that my huntresses would address you in the same manner women usually would address men in your society,” Artemis stated once her huntress was out of hearing distance, approaching Percy with utmost caution.

“It would be wrong to think that, Lady Artemis,” the son of Poseidon answered, shaking his hand to rid himself of the liquid that was dripping down its expanse. “I don’t think our position in the society matters here, either way.”

“It doesn’t,” the suzerain confirmed, a ghost of an amused smile playing on her lips as she offered sets of faded gray apparel to the third heir. “Courtesy of the Queen of the Amazons. Apologies on our part; we don’t really keep anything in the case of male guests. We rarely have visitors coming to
us – more so male for that matter.”

Percy curtly lowered his head to silently express his gratitude as he clutched firmly onto the apparel, feeling the thick padding that was underneath the lightweight material.

“I don’t want to come across as rude, my lady, but why are you here?” Percy questioned after a long moment of silence, with neither of them seemed to be willing to break the uncomfortable silence that settled between them. “Are the huntresses even aware that you are here on your own?”

“Thalia does,” the suzerain answered, humor glinting in her eyes. “Even so, I do think that it would be foolish if any of them assume that I cannot handle my own visitors, wouldn’t you agree?”

Percy had to bite his tongue to prevent himself from voicing out his agreement, lest his agreement might somehow – to some extent – offend the suzerain, despite that the woman had stated it herself. He merely lowered his head in response, hoping that the woman might take his silence as an indicator of his discomfort. Fortunately, Lady Artemis did.

“You should be aware of the reason for why I am here, Perseus. I have yet to encounter any children of the Big Three that would sink to their knees without being prompted, just to request for my district’s assistance,” Artemis stated as she seated herself across the son of Poseidon, where her huntress was seated mere moments ago. “For your companion, a son of Hades himself, to subject himself to such position, I can only assume the worst of the news you bring.”

“When has a messenger brought forth good news?” Percy asked, a humorless smile curling his lips. “Though, my lady should be surprised that we illegitimate children possess less pride than that of the true heirs. Especially, Nico— Niccolò, I mean. The value he places over his people is immense.”

“So I have heard,” the woman murmured, preoccupying herself as she tended to the fire. “I know the state of this world through the Queen of the Amazons. I know that blood is being shed continuously, and that countless of lives have been pointlessly sacrificed.”

The suzerain paused for a moment, before resuming once more.

“It is why I distanced my huntresses – to ensure of their safety. I care for my huntresses dearly, almost as if they were my own children. This war – it is not for us to fight. If the news you bear seeks for our support in this war, I ask you to leave us be,” Artemis stated firmly, raising her eyes to gaze directly onto Percy’s unfathomable sea-green eyes.

“Perhaps, this war might be yours without knowing,” Percy answered, lowering his eyes to the fire before he resumed speaking. “Pólemos is on the move. As of this moment, dozens of their fleets might be heading to this direction.”

“They have no knowledge that the Huntresses of Diana or the Amazons reside in this area. But that would not stop them from killing anything – anyone – in their path just to take control over the districts of Gi and Krasí, and perhaps the district of Ílios eventually,” Percy murmured, sparing no glance to the suzerain as he continued to speak. “It would take days before any allying districts could send their help. Even then, it would not be surprising if other districts would be attacked simultaneously. But you have to agree that losing the agricultural districts might as well would mean losing this war.”

“I am not asking for you to partake in this war. But please – if I have to beg, I will – grant us the permission to station some of our men at the borders facing Vóreio Eirinikó Okeanó,” Percy requested, slowly lifting his eyes to the suzerain who was silently observing him with those unfathomable silvery-gray eyes.
Lady Artemis raised one of her hands before the son of Poseidon could protest, her eyes casting to the ground as she resumed speaking once more.

“This is our territory. I will not permit strangers – men for that matter – to come close to my huntresses. Not when it is within my power. However,” Artemis paused, raising her eyes to meet the third heir’s. “I swear to you, if what you say is true, we will ensure that the districts are informed.”

Artemis glanced briefly at the unconscious son of Hades before continuing.

“I shall discuss the arrangements with him tomorrow. Right now, I think both of you are in dire need of rest,” the suzerain stated pointedly, noting the evident fatigue in said heir’s features, before she addressed Percy directly as she was lifting herself to her full height. “And a bath as well. Feel free to use the lake to clean yourselves up. The water should not be that chilling. You’d be surprised how the water is much preferable once you’ve submerged yourself in it.”

“At what price? At what price does your cooperation come?” the son of Poseidon elaborated upon receiving a confused expression from the suzerain.

“The price I request for is quite low. In my standards, that is,” Artemis stated, a ghost of a smile curling her lips as the son of Poseidon stiffened in response to her statement. “The price I require…”

“I want the matter between the offsprings of Hades to be resolved before you have to depart.”

Percy frowned at the request, and had to restrain himself from immediately opposing Lady Artemis. True to the woman’s words, the price was so low to the woman’s standards, but that price from the son of Hades might be too high. With the young heir’s present state, it was a price that was almost impossible to pay.

“Why?” Percy had to ask. “Of all the price you could ask, why do you want one that neither of us can offer with certainty?”

Lady Artemis heaved a sigh in response, her arms crossing against her chest as her silvery-gray eyes fleetly towards the willow tree at the middle of the lake. From Percy’s position, he could neither fathom the subtle twist in her features nor decipher the emotions that crossed her eyes as she contemplated how to respond to the inquiry. Percy was certain that the same question existed in the suzerain’s mind.

Why ask a price that was too low and had no guarantees of being fulfilled? Why ask of a price that Artemis herself had nothing to benefit from?

There was a hint of nostalgia in those silvery-gray eyes that Percy registered only for a few seconds before they were masked by indifference.

“I understand where his hatred is coming from,” Artemis answered, voice almost as low as a mere whisper. “If my brother, Apollo, had abandoned me as well upon the death of our mother, I might harbor the same intense animosity as the son of Hades. Perhaps more, since Apollo and I only had each other at that time. We were so young – younger than Thalia had been when she found the Huntresses of Diana.”

“He,” she gestured to Nico but her gaze was directed at Percy. “is blessed for having people that treat him so preciously. I can only imagine how difficult it must be for illegitimate children such as you to be accepted within your parents’ household.”
Percy tried not to wince in response to being addressed as an illegitimate child. It was an inescapable fact branded onto them upon being recognized, but the reality did not sting him any less. There were instances wherein he wished that his father wedded his mother instead, or that his father was not the lord of a district, just so that he did not have to be branded as illegitimate – a bastard child – but they were simply that: wishful thinking.

“But the young di Angelo should know that though Bianca has left, nothing – not even death – could alter the fact that she is his sister, as he is her brother,” Artemis continued, not seeming to notice that the son of Poseidon was having his own train of thoughts at that moment. “It is easier to live in hatred, but difficult to relieve yourself from it. The same is applied to my huntress.”

“While it is easier for her to express an increasing hatred to herself and to their father, that has never been the best option,” Artemis stated, turning her back to the son of Poseidon as she began to walk away.

“For their sakes, have them fix this. Don’t let them be convinced that the only way to exist is on their own.”

The whispered “Please” did not escape from Percy’s hearing, and it only proved to elevate his indecision regarding the matter.

The purpose of sleeping was to elevate one’s exhaustion, but in the case of Niccolò di Angelo, that was hardly ever the case. Sleeping was a getaway, considerably a luxury, from the horror that was of reality, but even his subconsciousness barely spared him from the nightmares that assaulted him equally in reality. The only difference of his reality and the world his subconsciousness built was that the latter was much distorted, influenced by mere fabrications that existed in his mind. But, as it was, the latter was equally unforgiving of him.

It was in the dreamless sleeps that he permitted himself to completely bask into, submerging deeper into the abyss that was of the darkness. It was cold – such unforgiving cold – but it cradled him much tenderly than reality ever could. The darkness was now primarily his home, and he had come to accept that in frequent moments of isolation.

But the darkness at that moment could not soothe him; could not cradle him completely for him to fully succumb onto it. In the darkness, the image of his sister was too prominent at times that it jolted him occasionally in his supposed restful sleep. The voice of his sister was too deafening to the point that he could faintly hear a shrill ringing in his ears.

Nico.

The son of Hades desperately needed for her beckoning voice to stop calling out to his name. The saccharinely sweet and almost crooning tone of her voice was clouding his judgement, coaxing him slowly to forget what she had done to him in a moment gone by.

Nico.

Bianca was his family no more. Only his half-siblings, his father, Reyna… and Percy existed in his family now. There was no room for Bianca – Nico could spare no room for her once more in his heart. The space she used to occupy was now nothing but a wide gaping hole that could be filled by no one. So why… why was it responding to her voice as if it was forcing itself to squeeze back into his heart once more?

Bianca, Nico. Never forget, my children, that you have a home in each other’s heart. No matter
what life brings in your way, always remember that you would never lose the home that you have with each other.

The soothing and alluring voice of their mother, whispering to them in the gentlest of voice as she rested upon her death bed, resurfaced in the son of Hades’ subconsciousness. With crystalline clarity, he remembered her disheveled locks splayed across the immaculate white sheets, her curled lips holding a gentle smile even in her state of absolute discomfort as she addressed her children with each dying breath that parted her quivering lips.

Nico remembered thinking at that moment, that even in her death, she was the most beautiful and ethereal being he had laid his eyes upon.

**You have a home in each other’s heart.**

That was a lie. All of it was a lie.

Niccolò di Angelo forced himself to awaken from his slumber, his body jolting in response to the suddenness of him sitting up. His vision swayed for seconds as a nauseating feeling settled at the pit of his stomach, before he was able to regain his bearings. His right hand rested limply against his stomach, while the other haphazardly pushed his damp locks off of his features before the flat of his palm rested completely against the chilled skin of his forehead. His breathing was coming out in heavy pants, and his senses were still in a disarray to the point that he barely registered that soothing hand that rubbed against his lower back in a poor attempt to put him at ease.

“Are you okay, Nico?” Percy questioned from behind him, rubbing small circles along his back still while the son of Hades struggled to compose himself. “Do you need me to get you anything?”

**No, I’m not. I never was.**

The son of Hades shook his head in response to both inquiry, knowing that it was futile to lie to his companion when his distress was clearly written across his pale features.

“Was it another nightmare?” Percy murmured.

Nico wished that that had been the case instead.

The son of Hades heaved a laugh at the question, unintentionally choking as he repressed the sobs that threatened to escape his lips. He need not open his eyes to acknowledge the unshed tears that pooled in his eyes. He need not expose his bare weakness to the son of Poseidon.

“I dreamt of her. I dreamt of Mama,” Nico corrected, and for a second, he was tempted to stop there and leave the son of Poseidon to ponder wrongly why he was fazed of the memory of his deceased mother. “I always thought I’d forgotten how she looks like.”

Niccolò di Angelo opened his eyes, straying them to his side where the son of Poseidon now hunched over his frame. Those russet-brown eyes, glistening with unshed tears, were transfixed onto concerned sea-green eyes as the young man breathed:

“She was so beautiful. The most beautiful being I have ever seen, and has ever existed.”

Percy’s breath hitched as he gazed back onto those eyes, and the emotions that were swirling in them were so raw that the son of Poseidon could not help but be captivated in them.

“I’m sure she was,” Percy could not help but murmur, observing the broken smile that faintly and unintentionally lifted the corners of the son of Hades’ lips.
In truth, Percy did believe Nico’s words. He had seen how the son of Hades possessed almost little to no resemblance to his father – that resemblance distinctively evident in how his eyes bordered with either a genius or a maniacal glint. Personality wise, the father and child were contradictory to each other greatly, to the point that Percy often had to ponder if Lord Hades was truly the biological father of the young man.

Niccolò di Angelo was a stark contrast to his father, and the only logical explanation the son of Poseidon could deduce was that Nico inherited more from the side of his mother. Whether it be his features, or his personality, the son of Hades was likely more the spitting image of his beloved mother.

“She was so beautiful. The most beautiful being I have ever seen, and has ever existed.”

Percy could only contest half of what the young man stated.

“I don’t think you ever came close to forgetting,” Percy continued as the son of Hades lowered his head, resting his chin atop of his knees as he raised them to his chest.

“No, I didn’t,” was the uttered agreement. “But it faded so often when I try to recall it that it was easier to assume that I have forgotten.”

The son of Hades had his attention elsewhere, transfixed on the weeping willow tree as it swayed against the light breeze that passed by. It was chilling, seeping through his pale skin, but it was oddly comforting as his eyes fluttered close, relishing at the sensation coursing through his veins.

“Lady Artemis stopped by earlier,” the son of Poseidon breathed from beside the younger heir, garnering the latter’s attention as he opened his eyes. But Percy’s eyes were transfixed as well at the swaying willow tree, a nostalgic expression crossing his features as he admired it from afar. “We briefly discussed about the issue, and she agrees to help but would prefer if she could discuss her terms more in detail with you.”

“I should be going then,” Nico answered, slowly pushing himself to stand up but was pushed back down immediately by the son of Poseidon.

“Gods, no. It’s already late anyway. She wants us both to rest for today. We can deal with all of that tomorrow,” Percy said, offering a cheeky grin as he cocked his head towards the lake. “Besides, we were given permission to use the lake as we pleased.”

Nico frowned at the words of his companion, not seeming to process the information immediately. One of his brows arched, silently demanding for the third heir to explain further, but the smile on the latter’s lips only broadened in return. Silently, the son of Poseidon lifted himself from the ground, patting his apparel briefly to rid it of the excessive dirt that clung onto it before he began undressing before the other’s shocked eyes.

“What in Tartarus do you think you are doing?!” the son of Hades hissed, straying his gaze to the side out of decency for his companion’s lack thereof.

“… Stripping?” Percy answered slowly, his statement sounding more as a question rather than a clarification. “We were told that we can use the lake.”

The son of Hades frowned in response, only lifting his head when his ears registered a distinct slosh a few meters from where he was situated.

“Have you gone insane? The water should be chilling in this weather!” Nico nearly shouted as Percy submerged himself deeper in the dark waters, hissing as the water continued to envelop his skin.
“You could suffer from hypothermia!”

“Wow, Lady Artemis was right. It is cold, but I think I actually prefer this than being out of the water,” Percy noted as he cupped the water in his hands before bringing it over his head, drenching his hair partially with it before he addressed the son of Hades who was still seated, looking at him as if he had grown another head. “Come to the water, Nico. You must want to get cleaned as well after travelling for days.”

“… We don’t have any change of clothes,” Nico stated after a while, still eyeing the water warily.

“We have, courtesy of Reyna’s sister,” Percy said, stepping closer to the bank when the son of Hades did not move from his position.

“I don’t think Lady Artemis would appreciate it if any of her huntresses sees us naked.”

“I’m still wearing my undergarments. We’re not going to be completely naked.”

“What if someone suddenly attacks us and all of our belongings are here?”

“I think Lady Artemis has set up a perimeter for her district, and since the lake is part of it, we’re actually quite guarded.”

“What if we suffer from hypothermia?”

“Nico, I—“

“What if—“

“Nico!” Percy interjected before the son of Hades could possibly ask more questions, possibly to stall from getting into the water. “Trust me on this, all right? When have I ever done something that would risk your safety?”

There was a long list forming on Niccolò di Angelo’s head at the inquiry – so long that it could easily challenge his companion’s claim. But those vibrant sea-green eyes were gazing into his, expectant and pleading at the same time, that the son of Hades found that he could not possibly voice out whatever he had in mind to negate Percy’s claim. Neither could he refuse the offer that was being offered to him.

“If either of us catch any sickness, you are responsible,” Nico grunted before standing up, rigidly giving his back to the son of Poseidon as he slowly shed his clothes.

He was gradually regretting his submission as the chilling air caressed his bare skin, inducing goosebumps at the entire expanse of it. It was a discomforting feeling, to be that bare in public and before those wandering eyes that he could feel was bearing into mind every inch of his exposed skin. It was not grotesque sensation, but one that had him experiencing a certain sense of vulnerability.

Nico slowly turned to face the son of Poseidon once again, but the latter was already a few feet from him and facing the other direction, poorly offering the privacy he clearly lacked when the younger heir was stripping himself of his apparel.

“Let’s go to that willow tree. What do you say, Nico?” Percy questioned, offering a small smile as he turned to face the said male.

“I’d prefer not to. The water looks deep,” was the curt response as the son of Hades still paused from entering into the water.
“Still can’t swim?” The silence Percy received in response confirmed it. Chuckling low to himself, the son of Poseidon glided towards the bank and walked towards the son before kneeling in front of the latter. “Like when we were younger then. Hop on my back.”

“What?” was the dumbfounded response that escaped Niccolò di Angelo’s lips.

Percy did not give the younger male an option to protest, grabbing one of his arms and yanking him to his back, causing Nico to gasp as he clutched tightly onto the broad shoulders of his companion. The son of Poseidon did not stop from there, clutching firmly onto the younger’s legs as he lifted them both up with a grunt, with the son of Hades clinging onto his back.

“There. That wasn’t so hard, was it?” Percy rhetorically asked, a wide grin plastered across his features despite that Nico was digging his nails painfully onto his shoulders.

“I swear I would punch you right now, if it was not for the fact that you might drop me by accident,” Nico cursed, growling low and instinctively hitching his legs higher as his bare skin got closer to the water as Percy walked forward.

The instant the water hits his bare skin, the son of Hades hissed loudly, a string of unintelligible curses parting his trembling lips as the coldness enveloped his skin. The coldness of the water was definitely not better in comparison to when they were simply sitting by the banks, but with how the water now reached the son of Poseidon’s chest, it was clearly too late for the son of Hades to demand to be taken back. Not that Percy would allow him as the man simply glided himself deeper into the water while keeping a firm hold on the younger male.

“Nico, ease up on my shoulders, please? It’s like you want to tear them off,” Percy chuckled, but there was a hint of pain in his voice that caused Nico to release his grip immediately. Percy rectified by releasing his grip on one of his legs, reaching back to guide those pale arms to wrap around his neck instead.

There was a familiarity in the contact of their skins – a familiarity in the gesture as Percy carried him across the dark waters so naturally, as if it was something that he had done countless of times. Percy did, Nico corrected himself as he subconsciously tightened his arms against the older male’s neck. In a time gone by, Percy had accommodated for him countless of times when teaching the son of Hades how to swim was deemed an impossible task. It was the sole thing he was incapable of, and it was almost ironic since he possessed an affinity for any bodies of water; mostly since his former residence was situated where he had an unobstructed view of the ocean.

Niccolò di Angelo could vaguely remember memories of it – memories including and excluding Jason – in his numerous visitations. He could remember the clearness of the water, and that almost ticklish sensation of sand against his bare feet. He could remember the crisp ocean scent, and the seeping coldness of the water against his bare skin. And he could remember the son of Poseidon carrying him in the same manner as he did at that moment, dragging them further and further from the sandy shore as far as was permitted. Similar to those moments, Nico could feel no sense of trepidation as if his body instinctively acknowledged that no harm was to befall upon him as long as he was in the presence of Percy.

To say that that realization disturbed him was an understatement.

“The water’s not cold now, is it?” Percy questioned, interrupting his train of thoughts.

“You’ve yet to know that. Wait until we get out of the water,” the son of Hades grumbled, but he had to silently admit that the coldness of the water did not bother him so much then.
“Well… We’re not in a hurry to get out,” Percy said, unable to repress a sigh of relief as his feet brushed once more against the ground.

Niccolò di Angelo immediately relinquished his grip on the son of Poseidon as soon as the water lowered past the latter’s upper chest, as did Percy as he released the younger male’s toned legs from around his waist. Nico glanced up towards his companion, but said companion had his attention directed elsewhere.

“It brings back memories, doesn’t it?” Percy murmured once the son of Hades was standing by his side, gazing up at the massive willow tree. A curtain of leaves were partially submerged in the water, and there was almost a secretive appeal to it as the son of Poseidon pushed the leaves aside before gesturing for the son of Hades to step inside. “I mean, it’s a whole lot bigger than what we have in Thálassa but…”

“You don’t have to explain, Percy. I get what you mean,” Nico sighed, treading the waters carefully as he entered the shade offered by the curtain of leaves.

Barely any light streamed through, and despite finding comfort in darkness, being submerged in the dark waters disturbed the son of Hades immensely. A hand slipped through his, and Nico immediately grasped it as Percy pulled him further out of the water until only their lower halves remained submerged. True to Nico’s words, the chilled air against their bare skin was almost intolerable. Almost.

“You haven’t shared to me how you have gotten that,” Percy started after a few moments of silence, dragging the son of Hades to sit beside him where the water barely grazed past their midsections. “Those tattoos on your back.”

Almost instinctively, Nico slightly turned to his side, exposing the mark on his back more to those sea-green eyes. The light that streamed past the curtain of leaves partially illuminated the black markings against the expanse of that pale olive skin. It was beautiful; absolutely entrancing in Percy’s eyes. But the circumstances by which they were attained may not be.

Judging by the expression on Niccolò di Angelo’s features, it was anything but pleasant.

“You don’t know of the traditions of my district, do you?” When silence was the response he received, Nico continued. “At the age of sixteen, the male heirs to the House of Hades are branded upon their backs as a form of symbolism that they belong solely to their home district. You can consider it as an eternal oath of loyalty, so to speak.”

“The tattoos consist of two elements: the symbol of the district and the animal representation of the child. In Thanatos’ case, his is a raven. Mine, on the other hand, is a serpent.” As soon as he finished that statement, nimble fingers dipped along his spine, caressing the tattooed animal at the base of it.

“These wings though…” The fingers trailed upwards, caressing the outline of the dark wings that were situated at the left and right side of the younger male’s back, folded in their appearance.

“I asked for them. In remembrance of my family’s name,” was the hushed response. “di Angelo. Of the angels. Angels were believed to possess wings – immaculate white wings.”

“As are yours,” Percy murmured, leaning closer to examine the detail in each feather of the inked wings.

“The black ink defeats the purpose. It’s nothing but a poor imitation,” the son of Hades murmured, casting his eyes down to the dark waters as his features twisted to an expression he himself could not
determine.

“But your skin is pale and unblemished. Well, your back is,” the son of Poseidon corrected before the younger male could protest, tracing the outline of the wings with utmost care. “These wings look natural on you. Almost as if they are a part of you. Did it hurt to have them?”

“Oh, it was absolutely a pleasurable experience,” Nico answered in a very sarcastic tone, before turning his head to the side adequately just to see the annoyed, yet amused expression on his companion’s features. “You want any? I could have it arranged.”

“Maybe. In the future. We can both get one that matches with the other,” was the light and amused response, but there was a hint of seriousness in them that had Nico turning around to properly face Percy.

“You meant that.” It was a statement, not a question.

“I meant that,” was the confirmation, and nothing more.

The silence that followed was not discomforting, but neither was it comforting in the slightest. The waters lapped greedily against their skins, caressing every inch of the expanse that was within their reach. The coldness was seeping through their skins – through their bones – yet neither seemed to mind enough for either of them to move. Or perhaps, it was simply their stubbornness at that moment that was acting out.

Within the shade of the curtain of the willow tree, there was a privacy that not even their temporary camping ground could offer. Both of them was clearly aware of that, as they were aware of the slight tension that hung in the air as both anticipated for the other to break the silence.

A silence that neither was certain that they should break.

“Have you decided on what you needed to do?” Percy inquired after a while in a light tone. But the question was anything but light, and it was rather personal to the point that Percy had to wonder if he had asked the appropriate question.

“What do you think I should do?” Nico surprised the son of Poseidon by answering back, his voice devoid of everything but sheer curiosity.

The son of Hades was equally at a loss; that was the only conclusion Percy could derive. But Percy would be a fool if he were to completely believe that. Subconsciously…

“You know the answer to that question, Nico. In your heart, you have always known what you should do,” Percy answered after a while, bringing one of his knees to his chest as he spoke. “It’s what you know would give you the happiness and closure you need.”

The younger male chuckled bitterly in response to that, shaking his head as if to challenge what the third heir had said.

“Happiness is attained, not given. Though that’s quite ironic for you to say, for someone who struggles to find his happiness just because he decides that he couldn’t take what he wants.”

“But I’m happy,” Percy said curtly, flashing a smile before earning an eye roll from the son of Hades who did not seem convinced with the response.

“That’s not what I mean, Percy,” Nico sighed before looking ahead at the curtain of leaves that shielded them from the view of prying eyes. “The happiness you have in mind is fleeting. I’m
referring to one that lasts.”

“Who said that it couldn’t?”

That was the last response Niccolò di Angelo received before the son of Poseidon blocked his sight completely.

Lips. Chapped and salty, yet warm lips pressed against his in a tender caress that had his breath hitch with the amount of gentleness that was placed in that intimate contact. They remained pressed against his, as unmoving as the hand that then cradled the back of his head delicately, handling him with utmost care as if he the slightest of force would break him. In that close proximity, his dilated russet-brown eyes gazed directly onto lidded molten sea-green irises, and there was a foreign expression in them that was so raw that Nico had to take a shuddering breath as he was pinned under its piercing gaze.

Was this a dream? Nico had to question as those lips pulled back an inch from his, only to press once more with a subtle increase in pressure and urgency in them. The intoxicating scent of the ocean was filling his head, clouding his mind from doubts and judgement.

After what seemed like an eternity, those warm lips pulled back – then trembling – but only by a mere few inches as Percy pressed his forehead against that of the stunned son of Hades. Those sea-green eyes were still transfixed onto russet-brown eyes, and vice versa, but there was an emotion budding in those sea-green eyes that startled Nico from his daze.

“Ah… by the gods. My jaw aches,” Percy heaved a chuckle, and Nico could only watch in stunned silence as those lips were stretched out in the widest smile that he had never seen the son of Poseidon to ever adorn.

“What…?” was the sole unintelligible response that the son of Hades could muster as he stared dazedly at his companion, his mind still processing what had just occurred.

Was this a dream? He had to ask himself once more. But his lips still tingled, reminiscing the kiss that had been pressed against them. As did the rest of his body.

“You asked me what it is that I want and what would give me happiness,” Percy murmured, the smile on his lips dropping significantly, but the raw and overwhelming happiness in his eyes was still clearly present. “And I showed it to you.”

Percy slowly wrapped his arms around the younger heir before burying his face against the junction between the latter’s neck and left shoulder. Nico simply could not react; not when his mind was in a state of utter chaos – a jumbled mess – as the scent of his home, the ocean scent that Percy embodied, assaulted his senses. Not when his mind could only process how natural of a sensation it was that their bodies fitted so perfectly against each other as if they were crafted to belong solely to the other.

“So please surrender and give me my happiness,” Percy murmured against his chilled skin, tightening his grip as he pulled the younger male closer and dispelling the rest of Nico’s self-fabricated that what was transpiring was surreal. The warmth of Percy’s skin was real. “Surrender your happiness to me, and I’ll surrender mine to you.”

“… So take it.”

The sensation of warm liquid drops cascading along his skin had the son of Poseidon raising his head to the sight of tears seeping from the corners of those conflicted and befuddled russet-brown eyes.

Tears.
The words on Percy’s lips died at the tip of his tongue, and the happiness he experienced mere moments ago was immediately replaced with immense worry as those precious tears continued to cascade down the younger male’s pale cheeks, mixing with the dark waters that embraced their naked frames. But the son of Hades did not seem to notice the tears he was shedding, not at that moment, as his lips parted once more. Quivering.

“Prove that you want it just as desperately as I do,” the son of Hades breathed, determinedly holding the older male’s gaze even in his blurred vision. “Surrender your happiness to me, and I’ll surrender mine to you.”

Nico barely had the opportunity to register the understanding that gradually dawned on the son of Poseidon’s eyes before his face was cradled once more and warm, feverish lips pressed against his, moving against his quivering ones as he struggled to return the kiss with the same repressed urgency. It held no sensuality; no seductive quality to it. It was a chaotic clash of lips, fueled by years of repressed longing and presumed unrequited devotion. It possessed no sense of order, but it was a reciprocation of years’ worth of desperation. It was a silent exchange of apologies; a broken dam releasing of accumulated years of insecurities. It was a hushed cry of frustration and a mutual agreement that finally – finally – this was an exception to what society could dictate of them.

It’s perfect , Niccolò di Angelo thought amidst the feverish exchange as Percy pulled him back once more, pressing their lips with an urgency that was slowly being satiated.

It was perfect in its unique appeal, and it was perfect in that it was not half-hearted. It was perfect because it was an equivalent exchange of emotions, and in the shared inexperienced movement of their lips, they were free to assume that the other’s lips were reserved for their own taking.

“Surrender your happiness to me, and I’ll surrender mine to you.”

And they did, withholding nothing from the other. Neither their soul, nor their heart.

By the time they finally released each other’s lips, both heirs were struggling to catch their breathing, and Nico was suddenly wracked with the fear of meeting those eyes and seeing his own immense happiness being reflected back. He did not want – in his mind – for this illusion to shatter, despite that his heart was convinced that this, this, was reality.

Was this a dream? Nico had to believe that it was not. The mere possibility of it being a joke was beyond cruel.

“It hurts to be devoted to you. I have forgotten what it was like to not risk my own happiness for your own,” the son of Hades murmured after a long while, pulling himself closer to the older male while keeping his eyes casted to the side, incapable of meeting those eyes for once. “Is this the price of giving my heart to you? This exquisite pain?”

Percy offered a fragile smile, his hands around the younger male tightening; grasping him close until his chapped lips pressed delicately against pale olive skin. Nico shuddered at the contact, his grip on Percy’s shoulder tightening just the barest bit. Every kiss raced blood coursing through his veins, and an almost euphoric sensation against the skin that was delicately caressed. Every kiss was too intimate, and the fact that such light kisses had an enormous effect on him scared him to a great extent.

In the silence, their hearts palpitated in that crazy 12/8 beat, beating in sync of each other as if they were one and the same. Perhaps, they were one and the same – each the other half of the other. A perfect fit. The only existing fit.
“If that’s the case, let me feel it too,” Percy breathed against his bare chest as he fondly traced the damp skin with his lips. “I wouldn’t mind licking each other’s wounds. All we have to do is surrender.”

“Take it,” Nico repeated his former response, and allowed for his eyes to close – wanting to feel, and only feel. “My happiness is yours.”

Percy lifted his head once more, and pressed their lips in a gentle kiss. But in comparison to the dozens they have exchanged, it held more meaning. It held an understanding, and it established a bond that both mutually agreed upon.

“I surrender,” Percy breathed against Nico’s lips, keeping his eyes fixed onto the latter’s delicate features as he caressed his lips with each word that he uttered. “My heart is yours.”

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“Reason lost the battle, and all I could do was surrender and accept I was in love.”

— “The Witch Of Portobello” by Paulo Coelho

Chapter End Notes

... do not expect smut or them to be all lovey-dovey now in this fic. Nay, I won't give you all too much fluff doses and what-not. That's not how this story will work after this chapter. And I think, most would also prefer if I don't overdose this story with too much fluff.

The full names of most of the characters are provided at the link below. That page is subjected to change as the story progresses.

Link: [HERE](#)

Thank you for reading this chapter! Until the next chapter!

NEXT CHAPTER WILL THE BE LAST BEFORE I GO OFF IN A TWO-MONTH HIATUS---
For once in his life, Niccolò di Angelo feared of waking up.

Facing reality – for once – plagued him with an almost insurmountable dread as memories of the previous night gradually resurfaced from the back of his mind. A small belief remained – lingered – that the Moirai were simply pulling a cruel joke on him once more; that the events from the previous night were just a fragment of years’ worth of hopeless pining. That, or the possibility that he would awake to Percy expressing regret of what transpired the previous night – if it was not a fragment of his pathetic fantasies. Nico was not sure which one was much painful to bear.

Nico did not permit for himself to be disillusioned by the firm, calloused hand that weaved through his dishevelled tresses. The warmth was too real to be perceived as a product of his imagination. The son of Hades was well-aware that his companion had long noticed that he had awaken, but it seemed that Percy saw no reason to dispel the comforting silence that settled between them. Either that, or he wanted the son of Hades to be the one to break it.

The question was if Nico could afford to do so. The question was if Nico was prepared to lose Percy’s warmth if his doubts proved to be true.
“What happened last night?” the son of Hades questioned in a hushed voice after a few more minutes of silence.

That was not the question Nico desired to ask, but it was one which he deemed… safe.

“We kissed. And I hope that it wasn’t a moment brought on by impulse, because I really want to kiss you again,” Percy answered with no hint of hesitation as a thumb cautiously brushed against the son of Hades’ closed eyelids in a silent plea for the latter to open his eyes.

Such was granted seconds later as Niccolò di Angelo gradually opened his eyes, albeit with much hesitance. Those russet-brown eyes still avoided Percy’s, but the fact that they were visible was much preferable to having them closed.

“But I want to know what just happened, Nico. For a long time, I was sure that you…” Percy trailed off, unsure how he was supposed to continue. For a long time, I was sure that you did not return my feelings? No matter how innocent that question might seem, it sounded inconsiderate and judgemental in his mind.

Fortunately, the son of Hades seemed to understand his train of thoughts as the younger male pressed his forehead against the older male’s chest, obstructing the latter’s view of Nico’s face – of the expressions that fleeted past his features. Percy secured his grasp on him, the palm of his right hand cradling the back of Nico’s head as his fingers weaved through the dark locks within their reach.

“I should be the one to question that,” the son of Hades replied in an almost monotonous tone. “You gave no indication that you were attracted to the same gender. And when discussions of your possible betrothal to the daughter of Athena…”

Percy sighed in response to the latter statement, his grip tightening briefly around Nico as he positioned them to lie on their sides. Never had he been so certain that he had a lot to clear up with the son of Hades. Both of them deserved answers from each other, and withholding information could possibly just result to further complications in the future.

Nico deserved his honesty. Both of them deserved each other's honesty.

“I wouldn’t say that I’m attracted to the same gender. I’ve only ever been attracted to you,” Percy admitted, his tone sounding distant. “And for years, I've tried my hardest for you not to notice it. Not
because I found it appropriate, but because I was certain that it may drive you away.”

Percy paused for a few seconds before continuing.

“That was the last thing I wanted to do. Drive you away, I mean. And because I didn't want to entertain the possibility of losing you, I kept it all hushed. Funny how you ended up leaving, regardless. I would admit: I entertained the possibility of redirecting all that affection to Annabeth instead.”

It did not go unnoticed to the son of Poseidon how the younger male stiffened in his grasp. Truth be told, Percy felt disgusted of himself as he recalled that foolish decision he made once upon a time. He felt disgusted of himself as he recalled that foolish decision he almost committed himself to.

“It was when you left. I wanted to forget the sad story of my “unrequited” love.” That was stated with sarcasm. “With Annabeth, it seemed like an easy escape. From our families’ expectations, and the society's as well,” Percy admitted with a bitter chuckle. “But it was a heartless decision. In truth, the opinion of others never mattered to me. I only realized after awhile that I was just trying to convince myself that it would be easy to transfer all of which you have of me to her. It was a foolish thought – one which we mutually shared.”

“You see, she also pinned for someone else,” Percy continued when the son of Hades offered him silence. “As pathetic as it was for us to share the same sob story, it was more pathetic to be with each other just to lick on the other's wounds. She is a good person – a friend, even – but that was the extent of our relationship.”

“And then… almost three years later, you came back,” Percy finished in a lame fashion.

“I came back,” Nico agreed, nodding slightly against the older male's chest.

“And I promised myself I would set things right. I told myself that if I do, you wouldn't leave again like you did years ago. So I kept it all in. That is, until last night.” Percy murmured, repressing the urge to sigh. “Though given, I was supposed to tell you everything on the day you left. I guess you could say that this is overdue by three years.”

Percy continued to speak, but Nico’s mind had long stopped registering his words as it was fixated solely on one statement that Percy said.
“Though given, I was supposed to tell you everything on the day you left.”

Nico disliked reminiscing of that day, and for reasons that were mostly fuelled by the sheer agony that it inflicted, regardless that it was his own thoughts and “realizations” that determined how excruciating the experience had been.

You will remain alone. It had always been that way, and it will remain that way for the rest of your mundane life.

His mind played those words as if they were his mantra, until he unwittingly convinced himself that it was rather a truth. It was with that conceived “truth” that he decided not to turn back – even if only for a glimpse – at all that he left behind. It was an act of cowardice – he subjected himself to breaking a promise just so that he could see his actions through – but it was a clean break on his part. All that occurred were within his terms; it hurt less.

“The day I left,” Nico interjected, interrupting the son of Poseidon’s ramblings as he spoke in a hushed voice. “It was because I assumed that I was going to be alone once more.”

“Jason—” Nico did not miss how Percy flinched at the mentioned name. “—left. And you… You were to be betrothed to your potential consort – your future wife. I was convinced I would not have a place in your lives anymore. So I left. I left before you could have the chance to turn your back on me as well.”

The son of Hades heaved a humorless laugh, hiding his features against his companion’s chest as he resumed speaking.

“If I had stayed longer – if I had decided to listen to your words then – perhaps the past three years might be nonexistent,” Nico concluded, closing his eyes.

“Maybe it’s a way of the Fates to imply that neither of us were prepared at that moment,” Percy murmured after a few long minutes of utter silence, his fingers running along the silky black locks in a comforting gesture. “Now, maybe we are.”

“We’re not children anymore, Nico. As much as I wish to go back to that time where there’s a lack of responsibilities and complications, I would have to be a fool to trade this—” Percy gestured at the two of them. “—for what we had before. Those three years had been really painful, but in truth, it helped us to mature. We’re now adults.”
“You say that as if the three years were well worth it,” Nico stated, pulling back to properly meet the older male’s gaze.

“If it meant committing to lesser mistakes, then yes, I believe that it’s worth it,” Percy answered with surety. “Besides, it gives you all the more reason to cherish it, right?”

The son of Poseidon flashed a knowing grin as he cautiously released the son of Hades from his grasp before pulling himself up to a proper seating position.

“I want to do this properly,” Percy declared firmly, looking down at his own hands as he continued. “The opinion of the people – mine, yours, and everyone else – matter little. I know my father would approve of us, and our acquaintances would as well, and that’s enough. I want your family’s approval as well. Lord Hades, Thanatos, Hazel…”

Percy trailed off for a few seconds before raising his head to look into those emotionless russet-brown eyes. Though even with that almost indistinguishable facade, the son of Poseidon was certain that the younger male was aware of his following words.

“... Even of your biological sister, Bianca,” Percy murmured in a mere whisper.

The son of Hades tore his gaze from the older male, yet did nothing to mask his features from those clear and searching eyes. There was a conflicted expression in those eyes that was easily fathomable, and Percy did not dare to press for its presence when he knew what caused it in the first place.

“I want to hate her,” Nico admitted without returning his gaze to his companion. “When I think of our circumstances, she’s much fortunate than I am. She has that air of innocence that I want to crush; I look at her skin, all I can see is purity – stain-free of human blood. I ask myself, “Why is she much fortunate with her fate?” I want to believe that she sucked all fortune that was to happen in my life and claimed it as hers.”

Percy did not miss how the younger male’s hands clasped tightly onto fists, causing for his knuckles to painfully protrude against his pale skin. Every word that the son of Hades was uttering was filled with a certain amount of hatred, yet there was a much overpowering sense of sadness in them.

“Even this moment–” Nico gestured weakly at the two of them. “–it might be just a fluke; a fleeting granted mercy on my fate. “One day, you will take your words back and everything will cease to
exist…” that is what my mind is trying to convince me.”

“You know that will never happen,” Percy protested, his expression contorting to pain immediately at the lack of trust that Nico has in him. “The last thing I want to do is cause you hurt.”

“I stopped believing in promises a long time ago, Percy. We’re not children anymore. Promises, as we age, hold so little meaning. I stopped hoping for their fulfillment.” Nico cut him off before he could say anything else, coldness hardening his expression. “And that distrust manifested throughout the years, to the point that I could not even trust my own promises. I trust no promises; not even my own.”

Offering trust to another had caused him so much pain in the past – a pain that lingered still in the present. It was nearly impossible to offer his trust to people whom he had little to no association with; not when his own kin had betrayed his trust in a time gone by. To some extent, Percy and Jason had betrayed his trust in the past as well – not that he would mention it to either. So why should Percy, or anyone for that matter, expect that he offer the trust he once offered carelessly?

“I’ll trust enough for both of us then,” was the son of Poseidon’s casual response, lifting a hand and placing it atop of the younger male’s crown. “Until you come to that point that you can offer trust on your own, I’ll trust enough for both of us.”

Russet-brown eyes casted to the side, avoiding the piercing gaze of his companion as that calloused hand caressed his dishevelled locks in a gesture of reassurance. But he needed no reassurance; had no reason to need reassurance.

Rather than reassurance… it was a bitter trickle of unwanted sympathy.

The golden brazier of fire was ablaze at high noon, yet none gathered by its warmth as there had been the night before. Dark caramel irises seemed to flicker along with the flames as the huntress’ body was bathed in its light, even at the distance she had situated himself at. The son of Poseidon belatedly noted that it was the first huntress they had encountered the day before, as if the contempt in her expression did not present a sense of familiarity Percy would rather not be acquainted with once more. Yet, the third heir was not foolish enough to redirect his attention elsewhere, knowing that the same expression of contempt would be spared to their direction regardless.

“Lady Artemis is expecting you inside,” the huntress - Phoebe - curtly responded, backing a few
steps from the entrance to the tent, establishing in that distance that she did not want to associate by all means with either of the heirs. Percy was well fine with that fact, the second heir of Hades just as much, as Nico casually slipped past his companion, sparing no glance at the huntress.

The audible click of her tongue did not go unnoticed by either male, but was dismissed in favor of not inadvertently provoking any of the huntresses. It would be foolish to do so, in a territory that barely recognized the boundary between allies and enemies. Neither could expect the same voice of reason that their suzerain and second heir offered.

“Perseus and Niccolò,” Lady Artemis curtly greeted the young heirs, those attentive silvery-grey eyes of hers staring at the men, taking in how they were instinctively gravitating towards each other before her. She did not arose from where she was seated, her presence establishing authority without her having to demand for it. And it was granted by her huntresses who knelt by her side, heads casted down in an expression of reverence. There was a certain dignity and pride in their posture that Percy could not verbally describe; an aura which they questionably projected regardless of their current positions.

“We have come to a decision regarding the… current situation of the entirety of Pangaea,” the suzerain said, direct to the point. That garnered the attention of the son of Poseidon immediately, though the fact that his attention was divided to begin with did not escape Artemis’ knowledge. There was a glint of amusement in her eyes as she basked in the young man’s obvious shame. “It would be… preposterous to assume that my huntresses will escape from this situation unscathed. They are prepared to fight their way through any situation, if it means coming out alive.”

“Selíni... will extend its support to Thálassa and its allies.”

The son of Poseidon was about to speak up, to express the extent of his gratitude, but the response died in his throat as the suzerain’s lips parted once more, indicating that she was not done with her speech.

“Under one condition.”

A sense of dread filled Percy at that. Of course, there had to be a condition; there always was. The world was not structured such that satisfaction was achievable through sustainability. Humans were born and made to be greedy. Selíni, or at least what they have established, should not be any different to other countries. But what could a travelling band of huntresses want?

“I have always distanced my huntresses from civilisation for the sake of their safety. It is what enabled our survival; we thrive in a peaceful and isolated environment, and I don’t intend to change
“Once this is all over, I want no one to seek for us in the future regardless of any situation that may befall Pangaea. It will be as if Selíni never existed.”

Percy knew that his face was like an open book. It was what his father had been trying to ‘improve’ of him, concluding that it was a weakness of his that needed to be ‘fixed’. *This world is full of monsters, Perseus. And these monsters are us. It is humanity. Most of which surrounds and will surround you, and the most despicable ones are wolves in sheeps’ clothing.* his father continuously expressed his thoughts to him, to the point that it had become a mantra to the third son. Through the years, he had come to realize the extent of his father’s words, but that did not mean he lost faith in humanity. He saw humanity as something that could be salvaged. Given time and circumstances. But he knew the extent of that belief. There were those who could be salvaged, and then there were those eternally damned.

Looking at the suzerain of Selíni, he wondered under which category did the woman fall onto—No, not woman. *Women.* For despite what Artemis declared, the huntresses remained in their respective positions, unmoving. The only one who had dared to move – and Percy believed that it was more of a slip of her emotions – was Bianca di Angelo herself. Her head had bowed low, though now it was almost to the point that her forehead was almost touching the ground. A gesture of submission. A gesture of resignation of her fate. Percy wondered what expression she had at that moment, but his attention was more directed to his companion whom remained silent and unmoving with the ultimatum spoken.

“I have inconvenienced you about what I said, Perseus,” Lady Artemis stated as she redirected her attention to said male who could only gaze back with confusion, and an expression which he himself could not fathom. “I stand by what I said yesterday, but know that before this decision was made, I had discussed it with my huntresses.”

“This is not a war for us to fight, and yet we must. If your families hold their end of the arrangement, it shall be our last to fight,” the suzerain declared, the surety in her statement evident in the knowing glimmer in her eyes. “This should be acceptable for your fathers. What we ask is not more than what you are demanding.”

There was that evident conflict in the eyes of the son of Poseidon as his mind struggled to process what should be a simple condition. He struggled to give his affirmation. He had nothing to lose, thus his belief that that decision was not his to decide. He had none to lose, but Nico had all to lose all over again—

“All right,” the son of Hades assented with that same look of indifference plastered across his
features. At the moment Percy was to refuse, Nico had to agree. And he would have fought against that decision given his stubborn nature, and belief that the younger male was making a huge mistake, but the resignation in those russet-brown eyes and... that tinge of relief in them had him pressing his lips into a thin line. “As a representative of the House of Hades, I, Niccolò di Angelo, second heir to the throne, agree to the condition. So it shall be known.”

The suzerain smiled faintly at the assent, yet there was a ghost of sadness in those knowing eyes before she gestured a hand towards the son of Poseidon.

“I assume that assent extends to the House of Poseidon as well?” Lady Artemis questioned, to which Percy could only nod once in a moment of being absolutely powerless. The decision was not his to make, it was Nico’s, and yet he wished he had the right to make that decision. He wished he did not have to shoulder any responsibilities towards his people for him to make that decision. He wished. If only the reality did not present so much complexities.

“As a representative of the House of Poseidon, I, Perseus Tzákson, third heir to the throne... agree to the condition. So it shall be known,” Percy repeated the same words, though they lacked the same conviction. That was insignificant though.

His conviction did not matter.

It should not matter to Percy how Nico almost hastily departed from the tent, the expression on his features morphing from indifference to relief in the second that he had turned away; that split second which – had the son of Poseidon not paid too close of an attention to – might have been missed. It should not matter, yet it did. More so, it hurt. It hurt, even though the one the damage was intended for was not him. And he wanted to chase after the young heir, to question the absurd decision made without a moment of hesitation, yet he stood rooted in place under the suzerain’s request. He did not wish to remain, yet should he chase after the son of Hades, what was he to do?

For once, he was at a loss, and it was a position that he did not want to remain in for so long.

“Eve, you can go, child,” Lady Artemis breathed in dismissal, the instruction directed towards the other huntress from yesterday; a huntress whom Percy had not been introduced to. And while he, for a fact, intended to be a faithful partner, he would not deny that the woman was beautiful.

He never had a concrete conceptualization of it. When thinking of the word, Nico would – obviously
– come to mind. Nico is beautiful. But as was – is – Annabeth when he last saw her. Piper also define beauty in her own way, as well as dozens of women Percy had encountered throughout the years. Eve defined beauty in a different way. The graceful way she carried herself as if she was an heir herself... and maybe she was with that silver circlet braided into the top of her long dark hair. The woman carried herself with pride and dignity; a leader and a ruler.

As if sensing his attention lingering on her face, those deep dark brown eyes gazed back onto his, and he had to force himself not to step back at the raw malice in them.

“Nightshade – our first heir – detest men as many of our huntresses do, so you cannot expect her to welcome you, so to speak.” He was suddenly reminded of what Thalia mentioned the day before.

“Eve, go. I wish to speak with Perseus in privacy. Thalia and Bianca will be here with me, since this situation will affect them both as well,” Lady Artemis added when the huntress made no move to leave. And it was only then when Artemis mentioned the other two huntresses that the son of Poseidon acknowledged their presence as well.

He wished he had not. Seeing the pain and resignation in their eyes made his chest ache.

“You’re confused. I would not blame you; not after our conversation the night before.” The suzerain started in a low voice once her – in Percy’s understanding – head huntress left. Not without a warning glare to the son of Poseidon, which Percy wisely chose to ignore. “But what I asked for was wrong. Bianca... convinced me.”

“You convinced Lady Artemis to ban anyone from contacting Selíni just so you could escape from your brother?” Percy demanded, trying to keep his voice controlled. But it was with difficulty, evident with how his frame gradually trembled with rage at the implication of the woman’s words. It was evident with how... untamed his emotions were behind those sea-green eyes as they stared at the said huntress.

“You assumptions are wrong, Perseus,” Lady Artemis intervened before either of her huntresses could offer a response. “The decision was mine to make, and I made it in consideration of my huntresses and the son of Hades.”

The suzerain gestured for the young heir to be at ease – to seat himself before her – but whether it was stubbornness or resolution, Percy stood his ground and silently beckoned for Lady Artemis to continue, regardless that his actions earned him a look of displeasure.
“We all have our responsibilities, young Perseus. You have a responsibility towards your people, and the young son of Lord Hades is very much aware of his responsibilities as well – to your people and his. Illegitimate children you may both be–” Percy tried hard not to wince at that vile term that was uttered in nonchalance. “–everything which you do and will do would be in consideration of the greater good of your people. Regardless of what you have to give; regardless of what you have to lose.”

“I know I may lose some of my huntresses when I push for this decision, but it is a decision I have to make to protect them. At least, those who choose to remain,” the suzerain continued, lips then pressed firmly to a thin line to express her discontent with the thought. “And Thalia and Bianca has accepted my decision. Just as much, they chose to stay.”

Percy looked on at the huntresses in disbelief, more so at the daughter of Lord Zeus. She did not hesitate to return the gaze, though the brokenness in her eyes – as if they were reflecting her soul – were ever so present.

“If my brother… if Jason were to be a part of our fath–… that man’s cause, I would have no choice either way in the end to ki–… end him,” the huntress breathed, her fists clenching by her side as she struggled to even utter the words she immensely despised.

“His life is mine to take if that happens, Thalia.” Lady Artemis breathed in reassurance, and Percy doubted it had its supposed intended effect. “I will bear the weight of my decisions. Again, it was a decision I had to make to protect my people.”

“What about reconciling them?” Percy demanded, crudely gesturing at the other huntress who tried to stand her ground despite the animosity that was all directed to her. “She has to atone for what she did!” His voice was rising but he did not care. Nico did not deserve this. “Do you even know how much he suffered for years when you left?” He growled, directing his attention – all of his anger in Nico’s position – to the huntress then. “Did you even care–”

“Arketá!” The suzerain’s voice resounded within the small space, and it was then that Percy knew he had crossed a thin line. This was not his territory, and he was reminded in that moment that Artemis could have him – them – killed and none would be the wiser to their whereabouts. Those silvery-grey eyes were cold as they stared him down, and there was pure malice in them in return for the lack of respect which the young heir presented. “I advise you and your companion leave while you still have my support. Or else.”

I will retract it, and you would have wasted all your efforts for nothing , was the unspoken threat.
“I can live with Nico hating me, Lord Perseus,” Bianca uttered with conviction before either her mistress or Percy could sever the agreement established. There was no hiding the sadness in those equally russet-brown eyes. There was not only sadness, but loss… grief. It was the expression of someone who had lost something invaluable that they did not acknowledge having until they had completely lost it. “If it meant for us finding our respective places in this world.”

“Nico… he understands. Everyone you see here—” the huntress continued, lightly gesturing a hand to the side. In Percy’s mind, he belatedly recognized that she was pertaining to their community. “– none of us belong anywhere in this world. So we roam free from land to land, not seeking for permanence, knowing that it was never intended for us…”

“In a sense, we are like the people of Spíti. There is no place for us in this world. But unlike them, we venture… still searching. Regardless that it is futile,” the huntress murmured in a soft voice, and in Percy’s perspective, she looked aged. There was exhaustion in her eyes, as well as a fire that was slowly burning out. It was as if he was staring at a brazier that with its flames extinguished, bits of amber glowing within, stubbornly refusing to completely die out. “I know that my brother is aware why I made my decisions, and he knows that I will not apologise for them. I have wronged him, and I shall live the remainder of my days with that plaguing my mind. But I will never take back my actions if I had a chance.”

“Nico found a place in this world.” Bianca said with utmost confidence, and it was the first time that the son of Poseidon saw her smile. It was simple, almost unnoticeable, but it reminded him of Nico’s. It was the kind of smile that was not strained; a genuine smile. “He found a place in this world – in Skotádi, and in you. And I can tell he found a place in this world with Thalia’s brother as well–” If Bianca noticed Percy grimace at that, she did not comment on it. “–and he found a place in this world with Hylla’s sister. And he found dozens of places in this world with a lot of people. And he would not have done that if I had been there. I would have held him back.”

“You do not know that,” Percy breathed, but the surety in his statement was lacking.

The huntress merely offered that small smile in return. Though the son of Poseidon was doubting, there was an unspoken mutual agreement that the huntress’ claim was true. “And we never will. But I can see how he has become. He is content. With you.”

Again, there was that resignation in her eyes, and Percy had to wonder if the decision made was really within the best interest of the community and the siblings. As those eyes gazed directly onto his, he was certain that the huntress had more to say, and he encouraged it with his silence.

“I want his forgiveness. But I know he cannot give it to me. Not now. Or in a week, a month, a year... maybe years.” Percy had to reconsider his thoughts with that claim. Not of his perception towards the huntress, but at where her resignation was stemming from. “I want to reconcile with him.
I want to hold my brother in my arms again and smother him once more with kisses until he gets annoyed of me,” Bianca spoke of fondly, a distant expression crossing her features for a second. “But if I force forgiveness from him, it would just… break him. I do not want him to feel obligated to forgive; that the act of not forgiving me would mean that he is on the wrong. And I know you would say that he is not on the wrong on this, but forcing forgiveness from him… he might interpret it as that.” Bianca cut off Percy before he could intervene.

“I can live with his hatred if it meant him being able to live a life surrounded by people whom have come to treasure him, and whom he has come to treasure.”

Percy had to wonder, in a different time, what would have been different if Bianca di Angelo decided to stay when he first met Nico. In a different time… a time that was nonexistent. And as her lips parted once more, he already knew the words that she was about to say. In the way her lips quivered… in the strain of the smile on her lips… And in how her eyes then reflected wan “ambers”.

“Take care of my brother, Lord Perseus. Take care of him for me.”

Chapter End Notes

“When did you last update?” Too long. Far too long. And I am very sorry for that. I had been busy, and to be honest with those who may still be sticking with this story, I had a period wherein I just lost interest in Percy Jackson series altogether. I still am in that period, but I do want to finish this story and I’m just trying to get back into it. A lot of things happened for me – I have officially graduated and just waiting for my graduation in two months’ time – and these ‘things’ held me back as well from really just having the will to write this chapter. There’s actually a couple of things I want to discuss with the readers.

Eve
I’ll start off with using Eve instead of Zoe. The name Zoe is adopted as a translation of Eve, but as to why I am using Eve instead of Zoe though the character is essentially Zoe Nightshade, well… I will discuss that in the next chapter. I’m still thinking how to do the next chapter because in my drafts, it is really a long chapter.

Next Chapter
So the next chapter’s premise changes again. We’re going back to Thálassa, and this chapter will actually be a shift in the timeline as well because it would be Percy’s birthday. And as I mentioned, it will be a long chapter. So I may extend it to two parts. Like 18.1 and 18.2 or something. And I have been looking to writing this chapter… years ago (because I haven’t updated in that long) and it would be difficult for me to get it out anytime soon after this. My reason? Please refer to the next point.

Updates
As I mentioned, I have graduated. And will be officially that in two months’ time. But I am already looking for a job, so that will obviously affect my availability to write
updates. I cannot make any promises now when the next update will be.

Regarding this chapter…
The original draft was different. They were supposed to reconcile here. And I think many would have wanted that: give the siblings their closure and all. “Things” have happened to me for the past years, and these things influenced me to throw away the original draft. And I want to explain why I did what I did. I was in that situation where I was given the choice to forgive. I was in Nico’s position before, basically. And I was forced to forgive someone due to circumstances, and that ruined me even now. I was forced to forgive at a time where I could not offer forgiveness, and looking back at it now, even though I know I was not in the wrong, to be forced to forgive or make the move to reconcile - in my head - transfers the blame from the other person to me. It made me see myself as worthless. So yeah… I did not want for my character - though fictional - to have that emotional experience. Because it was - is - painful. It drags you down. There was two options in that situation, and I gave my character the option I would have wanted for myself back then. I wanted to walk away from that situation, and I know that it is cowardly but if I had that option, it would have been easier to fix severed ties. In my case now, I have forgiven the other person, but it became to that point that I have distanced myself because I’m now associating that person to the pain and the emotional, psychological and mental damage of that process of being forced to forgive. I want the readers to see the decision made for this chapter as not “to drag on the angst” but to see it in a realistic situation. If that makes sense and all.

Anyway, see you all in the next chapter!

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